

SIREN

SUICIDES

MY SISTERS IN DEATH

BOOK 2 OF THE SIREN SUICIDES TRILOGY

KSENIA ANSKE

SIREN SUICIDES

**MY SISTERS
IN DEATH**

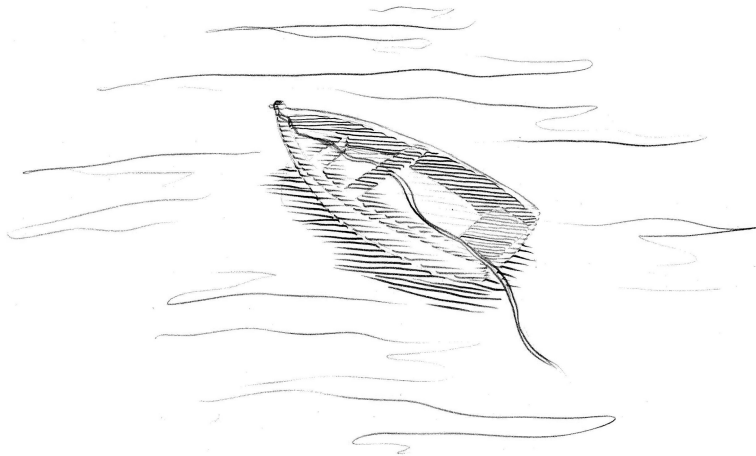
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I Chose to Die (Siren Suicides, Book 1)

SIREN SUICIDES

**MY SISTERS
IN DEATH**



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, 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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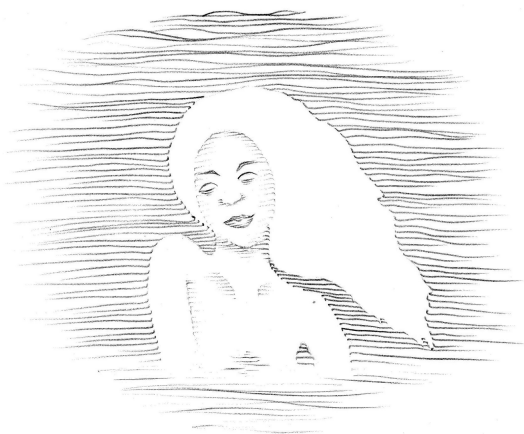
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“[Kirke (Circe) warns Odysseus of the dangers of the journey ahead:] ‘You will come to the Seirenes (Sirens) first of all; they bewitch any mortal who approaches them. If a man in ignorance draws too close and catches their music, he will never return to fine wife and little children near him and to see their joy at his homecoming; the high clear tones of the Seirenes will bewitch him. They sit in a meadow; men’s corpses lie heaped up all round them, mouldering upon the bones as the skin decays. You must row past there; you must stop the ears of all your crew with sweet wax that you have kneaded, so that none of the rest may hear the song. But if you yourself are bent on hearing, then give them orders to bind you both hand and foot as you stand upright against the mast-stay, with the rope-ends tied to the mast itself; thus you may hear the two Seirenes’ voices and be enraptured.’”

—Homer, *Odyssey* 12. 39 ff (trans. Shewring)
(Greek epic C8th B.C.)

Chapter 1



Portage Bay

I hear the sirens answer, humming something from below. Through the layers of water, the sound pulls me in and I want to join it. I miss their tepid faces, cold arms, long hair. My sisters in death. You can't love a siren, yet she'll lure you in with her song and make you believe you're in love. That's how we kill.

Their song expands into a choral. It rises from the bottom, up and up, like a wake of unending bliss, a promise of glittery happiness, always and forever. To my horror and fascination, I recognize verses from *Let Me Be*, one of my favorite Siren Suicides' songs. The one I sang to Papa when I tried to kill him.

*"Let me be happy, let me be happy.
And I will be, I will be.
Why can't I leave you."*

The chorus gains strength. Canosa veers to the right and I don't understand why; the song comes from the left, so it's where I swim.

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“Girls? I’m coming! I’m coming!” I shout.

I detect a separate current behind me a second too late. Canosa’s hand clasps my mouth. On instinct, I thrust back my elbows but she pulls me into a headlock. I thrash my legs but hers hold me still; her hard calf muscles press on my shins, and my back folds into the outline of her body. We drift away from the song. No matter what I do, I can’t shake her off me. She’s stronger.

“But the girls...” I mumble into her hand. It comes out as, “Bbb...dddd...gggg...”

“Shhhhh!” she hisses into my ear. I attempt to wrestle away, twisting my body, but she tightens her grip. Close to the bottom now, our feet kick up a cloud of sand, its silica grains sparkling silver in the glow of our bodies. She pulls me away in the opposite direction and, slowly, the song fizzles out to a distant murmur.

“Don’t talk,” she breathes into my ear. She turns me to face her, her forefinger on her lips. I spread my arms and gesture *why?* Her hands stay on my shoulders as she shakes her head *no*.

We face each other like two bottom-dwelling sea devils, glowing and glowering, unsure whom will eat whom and why.

“Zip it, Ailen Bright. Follow me, I’ll explain.” Canosa mouths it so quietly that I have to read her lips to understand. She offers me her hand, and I take it. It’s soft and cold, her long, slender fingers entwining with mine. Holding her hand gives me a strange sense of calm.

I accept the fact that there must be a valid reason why we’re swimming away from the other sirens, and my tired mind is grateful. It seems like I can’t think anything anymore, nor do I want to. I want to be empty.

For the first time since this morning, I’m truly tranquil; drifting in the quiet water, I’m at peace. I see Canosa the way sirens are supposed to be seen, the way they’re portrayed in books;

Portage Bay

she's even let me try on this siren skin. Perhaps it fits after all; perhaps it's the right choice. I look down at my legs and arms and torso and try to imagine myself as a devious femme fatale who lures sailors to wreck their ships with her enchanting song and stunning looks. Ailen Bright, a magical deity. A sea maiden.

Hmm, I think I rather like it. I just have to grow myself some long hair, and that should do it.

Water ripples Canosa's hair away from her body. I float behind her admiring it, and her goddess-like shape. It's as if she'd been carved by a Greek sculptor who happened to prophesize Marilyn Monroe some three thousand years ago. Poor schmuck, he didn't know what he was missing. Her face has an alabaster sheen to it, pearly. She glances back at me and I notice her profile—straight nose, slightly upturned nostrils, soft mouth with just enough of a curl to make every man's heart skip a beat, and large oval eyes made to drown inside. She squeezes my hand.

What does it mean; do I need to squeeze it back? Can I trust her? Do I have a choice?

"Come on," she mouths as she continues to pull me behind her. She flips her head forward and her hair swirls in a beautiful cloud that makes me think, *I'm not made to have a mane like that.*

I touch my short hair and look over myself once more. I see a torn rain jacket, newly enlarged breasts that feel awkward against my boyish chest, square hips, bony ass, and toes peeking from beneath ripped jeans. Ailen Bright, a femme fatale? Yeah, like that's going to happen.

Canosa pulls, oblivious to my trepidation. I let her. What's left to lose? Everything I had, or pretended to, is gone now.

My father wants to kill me. I never visited my distant family on his side, and I'm sure they don't care. My mother's parents are long gone, and so is she. My friends? I don't have any.

Chapter 1

Hunter's face swims up in my memory and I quickly push it down. It needs to be blocked, torn out, burned.

Canosa smiles and I nod to her.

We swim into Lake Union, then further east into the ship canal, retracing mine and Hunter's journey this morning. I shake Hunter from my head and focus on what I can see: the bloom of Canosa's hair, murky water, flecks of rare fish, broken rocks hiding the lake's floor, and a passing harbor seal whose soul is a crooked snort of an animal. Can I feed on animal souls instead of people? I hold the question behind my lips before it escapes, remembering that I'm supposed to be quiet. It dawns on me why, of course. My father is hunting us, and our voices carry. I want to burrow my head in the sand, furious at my stupidity.

The dark green expanse of the Montlake Bridge looms overhead and Canosa shoots up, with me tagging along. As we breach the lake's surface, I lift my head to an overwhelming noise; gulping air in deep breaths, I wince and cover my ears.

Hoooooom! Eeeeeeeek... Chata-chata-chata-chata...

I close my lips to arrest a yelp of pain and my aching cry from sensory overload. The road above us is full of cars, full of people, and full of souls in constant murmurs and tinkles and whistles and chatter. Their trivial talk and mechanical rings jam the afternoon air. The difference between the tranquility of the lake and the cacophony of human life above makes me want to dive back underwater, but Canosa grabs me by the hood.

I duck, automatically expecting a blow.

"Do we—" I begin.

"Shhhhh!" With that finger again, she shushes me.

Right. I forgot. Hunger pains tap on my ribs and I realize I'm starving. I would eat just about anything to silence the growing agony. All it takes is to flex, jump up onto the bridge, crawl over its lattice work, pry open the nearest car, and sing. It

Portage Bay

pins me with needles of horror to find that my new thoughts of killing people seem as mundane as making a sandwich for lunch. Am I losing my humanity, is that it?

Canosa pulls me to shore, and I'm grateful. Movement makes my mind shut up. We wait a few minutes for pedestrians to clear from the walking path underneath the bridge; we scale the bank, slink over railing, and climb up the complex pattern of dark green steel support columns and beams and trusses that hide the bridge's underbelly in a funky gigantic grid. Way up, and directly under the road itself, we squeeze inside a dead-end space nestled between two of the steel beams; a concrete cornice and wall is at the back of our little half cave. We sit on its edge, legs dangling down, pedestrians walking about fifty feet below us. People stroll leisurely back and forth; some are couples, some are elderly folks with leashed dogs, and a few bikers pass, too. None of them look up. I glance at Canosa, she grins back. And I get that this is perhaps one of her favorite hunting spots. The fact that she's showing it to me must mean I've been truly accepted into the siren family.

I grin back, but the rattling thunder above us shakes me to the bones, and I wince. It's a great hunting place, all right; but it's loud as hell.

Canosa leans close to me. Her wet hair brushes my left cheek as her cold lips touch my ear. "You look like scum." She purses her mouth and proceeds to rip open the hole in my jacket.

"Stop!" I shout. She clasps her hand over my mouth and cautiously looks down. The pedestrian walk is empty, but it won't be for long. This is a popular place for afternoon strolls, even on a Tuesday after lunch. Although with the air dimming into early darkness, not as many people are here today.

"Hush! Talk quietly, okay? Your voice carries too well, silly girl," Canosa whispers in my ear.

Chapter 1

She must trust me, then, if she brought me here in broad daylight. I'm floored, my poor dead heart full of hope.

"Sorry!" I whisper loudly, before I catch myself. "Wait, does this mean I belong? The siren family...am I a part of it now?"

"We need to find you some decent clothes. This won't do." She traces her hand along my jacket and jeans. "You're supposed to be sixteen, and you look like a five year old who crawled in dirt for a whole week. No sense of fashion," she hisses, and shakes her head. I let her rip my jacket off me, grabbing my shoulders and twisting me this way and that, as if appraising a horse.

I'm momentarily stumped, not sure how to respond. Talking about clothes must be the least important topic on my mind, but I'm afraid to anger Canosa and lose this feeble beginning of a connection I'm feeling.

"What about Ligeia and Teles? And Raidne? Are they okay?" I finally manage, while Canosa scrunches my cheeks and turns my head this way and that. "Were they the ones singing?"

"They're fine, don't worry. We've set up a trap for your dear Papa, even learned how to sing your song. Clever, don't you think? They'll distract him, and I'll finally teach you."

A dozen questions crowd in my head. *How did you guys manage to escape from the restroom? Did you chew through those layers of concrete? Why did you come for me? Can a siren kill herself with a sonic gun?* But I keep my mouth shut, remembering how Canosa doesn't like to be questioned, especially when they're stupid questions as mine usually end up sounding. Instead, I ask, "Teach me what?"

"Now use your brain and ask again." She folds her arms across her chest in that stubborn demeanor that tells me she's not moving until I answer correctly.

I glance down, flex my toes, and wiggle them for a while as I watch people walk beneath us. Then I look back at Canosa, and

ask, "Teach me how to hunt?"

"Finally! That didn't take too long to figure out, did it? Ailen Bright, I'm proud of you for once." She grabs my chin and pulls me closer, her decaying breath right in my face. "You've got talent, silly girl. But you're young, naïve, and rude. I want to help you. Help you grow and mature. I'll teach you how to use your voice at will, to kill. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I manage through scrunched lips.

"Marvelous!" She exclaims in a loud whisper, letting go of my face.

I want to ask her about our deal. If I kill my father, will she still tell me what happened to my mom? I'm terrified to even mention this, so I stay quiet.

"First things first: People are food. We kill them to eat their souls. I want you to remember this and to never question it. Yes?" There is such finality to her words, it makes me ache. I nod. "Second thing, a siren hunter has no soul." She looks me straight in the eyes and it seems as if she's reading my mind with those piercingly pale blue, almost silver, irises of hers. "We can only kill a siren hunter by making him hear our song. He's an empty husk, a container, the living dead. Strangling or drowning or shooting him will only injure him; it won't kill him. Death delivered at the hands of a siren has no power over a siren hunter. Are you following me?"

"Is that why—" I begin, comprehension dawning on me.

"Yes. We tried. I tried. There is," she hesitates, twirling a lock of her hair on her finger and looking past me into the distance, "a certain history between us. Don't ask." I close my mouth, barely having opened it. "This is all you need to know for now."

She continues to stare into nothing; and I remember asking her, when I was first converted, how she got turned into a

Chapter 1

siren. Pisinoe had pinched my arm. Though it happened just this morning, it seems like a whole year has passed. I wonder what Canosa's been through, how old she is, and when and where she met my father; I realize I have no idea.

"How *does* one become a siren hunter?" I say, my hand on my mouth a second too late.

I can't help it; this question has been burning my tongue. Surprisingly, Canosa doesn't scold me. It looks like she didn't hear me at all. Just when I'm about to apologize, she opens her mouth and responds.

"When one falls in love with a siren. That is our curse." She glances briefly at me, and I think I see her eyes mist up. Then she blinks her long sweeping eyelashes several times, and it's gone. She's back to staring into the distance.

A horrible idea pierces my gut, yet I'm afraid to ask. Could it be that Papa fell in love with Canosa? Did he marry my mom to forget her? Perhaps he tried to bury his pain in a living girl, but he couldn't really do it. Is this what's tearing him apart?

Then another idea shakes me to the bones. Hunter. Did Hunter fall in love with me this morning when I jumped out of lake and landed on the rowboat? Or was he in love with me before I turned? Is it my fault that we can never be together? I dare to risk another question.

"So, how is it that a siren hunter doesn't have a soul?" I prepare to duck. Nothing happens. Luck seems to be on my side, because Canosa keeps staring at one point in the distance as if I don't exist.

"The soul?" She speaks slowly and quietly. I hold my breath, afraid to move, afraid to interrupt her. "It gets ignited by this cursed love, like a pile of feathers. It slowly burns, little by little, until one day it's gone completely. It just vanishes into a barely visible smoke."

Portage Bay

I open my mouth to talk, when Canosa speaks again. “It hardens the siren hunter, makes him immune to siren songs; there is no soul left to sing to, nothing left to ignite.”

“Does the siren love him back? The siren hunter?” I push my luck, needing to know. When Canosa doesn’t answer, I drop the topic, terrified I went too far. “How can I kill my father then, if he has no soul?”

“With love.” She looks at me. “Pure love can revive a burned out soul; can raise it back to life from its embers.”

“What if I don’t love him?” I ask, knowing it’s a lie; deep inside I know I do, and that Canosa knows it, too. I told her this before, back in the bathroom, while I was locked up for hours and hours as punishment. I imagine Papa, his huge eyes, his overwhelming reach into my guts. I think of my fear and how I freeze at the tone of his voice like a trained animal, and I give in. “I hate it! I do; I love him still. Sometimes, I wish I could just rip it out of me. Make it gone! I *want* to kill him, but I don’t know if I can do it. I’m sorry. Every time I try, it’s just...” I bite my lip.

“You will.” The sternness is back in her voice. She shakes her head. “And you’re welcome. Where are your manners, girl? No manners, no manners at all. Simply dreadful.” She sneers, her sensual beauty gone.

“Oh! Sorry. Thank you. Thank you for getting me out,” I say quietly. Shame floods me for forgetting yet again.

She studies my body and I feel utterly exposed and naked. I pull up my legs and hug my knees to cover my bare chest, wondering what she’ll do now, drowning in the deafening noise from above.

Her face and body change back to those of a predator, almost shining with desire. “Are you excited? I’m excited,” she exclaims with burning eyes. My terror is punctured by a fleeting surprise at her sudden change and childish hope. She wants to

Chapter 1

teach me how to hunt, because she actually cares? I fight the urge to reach out for her hand. It won't be warm like my mother's, yet it's so tempting.

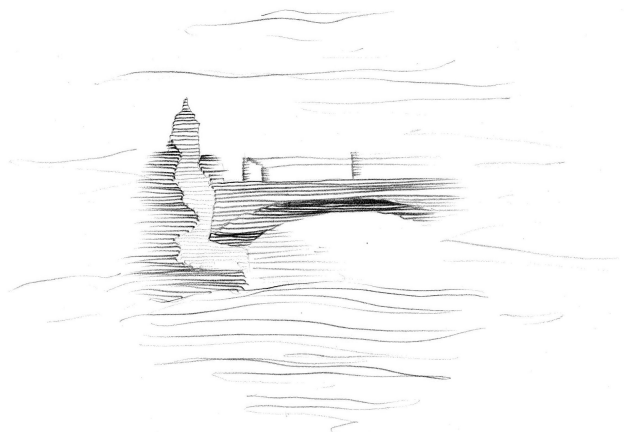
Traffic slows down just enough to create a pocket of silence. Canosa looks down. I hear it too. A young couple strolls along the pedestrian walkway on the canal bank, both in hooded rain jackets. Another minute and they'll be directly underneath us. We can see them, but they can't see us—concealed in darkness like eagles over prey, hidden in a place where no human would ever think to venture. Their souls are in sync, two distinct piano solos wafting up, overlapping into a medley reminiscent of a classical sonata, similar to those Hunter likes to listen to when stoned. I shake my head to chase away the image of Hunter; I focus on the souls. They promise to taste...lemony. My chest grumbles with hunger. We glance at each other and swallow.

"I think they're in love. Do you hear how their souls are all over each other? Like two radio stations falling in sync. It's so beautiful, it's..." I whisper.

Canosa puts her finger on my lips. "Watch and learn."

I know she's going for the kill. "No!" I mouth and grab her shoulder, but she pushes me back with such force that I roll deeper into the cave and smack my skull on the concrete wall with a sickening crunch.

Chapter 2



Montlake Bridge

Everything happens in seconds. Canosa perches on the edge of the cornice like a wingless bird, her arms spread wide for balance. She sits on her haunches, her hair hanging in loose strands, and her mouth opened wide. She hums a single low, droning belly note. It shifts the air down in a freezing shaft of wind. I crawl back toward the edge to look down, not daring to touch her. The couple has stopped. They turn their heads left and right, puzzled, looking at each other before glancing up. Other people pass them, unaware. Canosa's singing is focused directly on them, trailing down in an obscure column of fog. The whole scene reminds me of a frog catching a fly in mid-air, as if Canosa was about to shoot out her tongue and retract it with great speed, swallowing her prey in one go. Except Canosa's tongue is her song, in some weird language that's definitely not English, and the steam of two whisked-up souls is her fly.

"Why them? They didn't do anything wrong!" I whisper. I cringe, remembering my first accidental kill—that fishmonger in the public restroom. How am I better? I touch Canosa's shoulder

Chapter 2

again, but she shakes me off and snarls. I shrink away.

She sucks in their souls, her mouth gulping; her greedy eyes are rolled back to their white, and her neck veins bulge as her chest protrudes forward. I could tip her over and send her crashing fifty feet down, but it wouldn't kill her so I wonder why I even think this. Didn't she show me her hunting spot; shouldn't I be grateful? Or is it the siren in me, wanting to be mean for no reason at all?

Part of me admires how quickly she's snuffing out not one soul, but two, and in broad daylight! She's obviously a pro.

Her song pours from her mouth in one misty shaft, sounding like an ancient lullaby. I think perhaps she sings in Greek, her native language. I find myself listening with my mouth open. Fog thickens, rolling from her skin pores in coils and plumes, as the temperature drops ten degrees. The guy and girl below us stare up, their lips parted, their eyes glassy, their souls whooshing toward Canosa like intertwined ribbons.

Plop!

Both souls are gone. I can see their misty ends disappear into Canosa. She slurps them up, licks her lips, and leans over the edge to look. I lean with her.

The couple drops to the ground, still shrouded in fog. The girl's knee-length rain jacket opens up and spreads about her like a dusty cloud; her face is framed by blond hair, her eyes unmoving. She's gone. The guy is, too; his rain jacket is crumpled, his hand over hers, even in death. It looks as if they decided to lie flat on their backs and gaze up at the drifting clouds, guessing at their shapes and seeing if their guesses match.

"You...You killed them!" I hiss.

"Did you see it? Did you see how fast I was?" Canosa asks with obvious pride.

"I don't give a *fuck* how long it took you!" I curl my

Montlake Bridge

fingers, cutting them hard into my palms. “Why them? Why did you do that?”

“Hush!” she hisses in my face. “It’s what sirens do. It’s about time you learned, Ailen Bright.” She pinches my cheek hard and it hurts.

Below us, a woman runs up to the dead couple and shrieks. Someone else runs up and calls for help. I ignore them, my attention on Canosa.

“You killed them. Some random people; you just went ahead and killed them,” I keep repeating, as if to confirm the fact.

“Yes, I did,” Canosa says calmly.

“You’re not even sorry!”

“I’m not. I savor it, and you will too. They were looking way too happy for my taste,” she hisses. “Why can they have what I can’t? Tell me how that’s fair. Besides, they were my favorite flavor...lemony.” She licks her lips and smiles at me.

I gape at her, horror struck. “I...I’ll never do this. I’d rather cease to exist in some forgotten corner of the ocean. Forget it!” I dash to escape, but she pins me down with a knee to my chest, her hands on my wrists. My bruised skull smacks the concrete again, and I yelp in pain.

“Oh, yes, you will. You’ve already killed, and you *will* kill again. And you *will* finish your part of the deal. After you’re done, I might let you go.” She smiles, her beauty melting from delicate to terrible. “I say I might, because I like your feistiness, silly girl. You’ll make a marvelous siren.” She says marvelous in a singing manner, so that it sounds more like *maaaaaahvelous*.

“What if I don’t want to? What if I’ve changed my mind? I don’t have to kill people. I can go look for my mother on my own. I don’t need you. I don’t—”

“Shut up!” She slaps my face. Tears spring in my eyes, but I hold them back, angry. “You...will...kill!” Her thighs hold me in

Chapter 2

a cocoon, her hair hanging on both sides of my face like a torn, dirty curtain. “You want to do it, and you know it. I can hear the hunger tearing you apart.” She places her right ear on my naked chest and listens. I hear an audible rumble coming from the void behind my ribs, sparked by a sudden urge driven by the souls under the bridge. I hate it.

The chaos of human unrest reaches us from fifty feet below. There are shuffles and a scuffle, cries and gasping, and people talking on their phones. One more noise reaches me through this jumble: the smooth motor revolutions of a Pershing 64, a luxurious water machine made by Ferretti, designed and engineered in Italy. Papa’s yacht. Canosa, hearing it too, reads my fear and jeers.

“Your father’s never late, is he? He always knows when to show up at just the right moment,” she growls. Hatred oozes from her eyes and she clamps harder on my wrists, as if it’s my fault.

“Does that mean that the girls failed to distract him?” Immediately, I see that it was the wrong thing for me to say. Wrath fills Canosa’s face and I quickly scrunch my eyes closed, waiting for another blow.

I feel her breath on my ear. “First, you will kill your father. Then, you will kill your boyfriend before he becomes a full-fledged siren hunter, while he still has his poor little soul.”

My eyes snap open.

“I left him alive for you so that you can have your fun, you ungrateful girl.” She sits back up, still smiling while she holds me in her clutches.

I forget my fear. Rage boils up inside my throat, grinds against my teeth, and rolls out in a low hiss. “Leave Hunter out of this.”

“Oh, look who’s in love. Ailen Bright, an innocent little
—”

"Shut up!" My voice cuts through the buzz of traffic and carries all the way across the canal. I don't care if Papa hears, or if his fancy Panerai watch detects our location. My heart thumps in my chest, my head pulsing with fury.

"Hush! Be quiet," Canosa snaps.

"That wasn't our deal. Hunter was *not* in our deal, so leave him alone." I visibly shake now. "Why are you doing this to me? What do you want? What?"

"I thought I told you. Don't you remember?" She taps my forehead. "I want your father dead."

"But what does Hunter have to do with it?" I'm nearly screaming as the image of his soul burning inside his chest pops into my mind. I know it's my doing. Pain twists my gut for having dragged him into this mess. "Please, leave him out of this." My concentration breaks under the pressure of intense grief and I begin wailing. Tears roll down both sides of my face, but I don't care. There's only one thing I can do now. One thing I have to do to make this process stop. Somehow, I must make Hunter hate me, convince him that he's no longer in love.

"I don't want him to end up like Papa, please. I want to stop it. I don't want him to become a siren hunter..." I trail off, sniffing like a baby.

"Then kill him. Kill him before it's too late. It's the only choice you've got. There is nothing else you can do; his soul has already ignited. I saw it," Canosa says in a dead voice. She's sitting over me like she did when she was her previous bronze self back in my bathroom—unmoving, uncaring, and immobile. "Back on the beach, I saw it. Faint smoke was coming out of his mouth when he looked at you. I heard it, too. His soul is wounded, it's burning. You know it is; you heard it. You must have."

And she's right. I remember running up the harbor steps when Papa was chasing me in his car. Hunter's Vivaldi soul

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sounded wrong then, as if it lost its luster and warmth. It felt like it was no longer sweet, as if the pain had started turning his soul... sour.

"Why do you care?" I manage through sobs.

"Because I don't want to see another siren go through my hell!" The pain from her outburst turns her face ashen.

"You couldn't kill him, could you? You let it go on for too long because you loved him. You...loved my father?" I say the last phrase under my breath, realizing that I can feel Canosa's pain and want to comfort her. Immediately after that, I hate her very guts. She's the reason my father married my mother; the reason why she's dead. No, I realize. It goes further; she's the reason he started looking for another woman in the first place. She's the reason he hates women and why he wanted a son and not a daughter.

"Yes," she says simply and quietly.

"Then finish the job and kill him yourself!" I yell, clinging to my anger like a crutch before it evaporates, before my courage leaves me. For the first time, a hint of fear crosses her face. It's quickly replaced with fury.

Canosa presses her knees into my chest so hard my ribs groan. She twists her hands and I hear my wrist bones crack. Excruciating pain shoots down my arms and through my ribcage. Just when I'm about to cry out, she lets go of my arms and presses both hands over my mouth. My bruised skull wraps the agony around my head in a steel belt that tightens and burns me.

"Let's be clear about who's the boss here, Ailen Bright, the girl who never listens; the stubborn, naïve, rude girl who thinks she knows better. So stubborn, she deserves to be tortured by 'sitting in the tub' to drive the message home," she bristles, snapping her teeth an inch away from my nose.

Dread prickles my skin. Somehow the simple expression of *sitting in the tub* sounds ominous. I wonder what she refers to.

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Perhaps seeing confusion in my eyes, Canosa leans into my face so close that every word is followed by the stink of her cold breath.

“It’s an ancient torture,” she explains. “You’d be placed in a wooden tub with milk and honey painted onto your face, to be devoured by flies, then maggots and worms; you’d be swimming in your own excrement, decaying alive. It’s what they used to do to girls like you. It’s how they used to try to kill sirens, only we didn’t die. It’s why humans deserve to die, for committing atrocities such as these. Do you understand?” She lets go of my mouth and sits back up, but I can’t utter a sound.

Disgust fills me as heinous images flash through my head like snapshots of a camera. The gray expanse of Canosa’s pleading eyes; the chockfull of hair spread around her head, matted and greasy; her sleek white arms tucked into the wooden tub; her face covered in honey, flies crowding around her eyes and nostrils. I shake my head and gag. There is no food in my stomach, but something stinky and bitter comes up anyway.

The siren in me wakes up and that sinister voice talks again. *Get her off you*, it says. *Don’t listen to her, get away from her!* I try to wiggle free and, miraculously, Canosa lets me go. She stands and brushes off her hands on her hair as if she’s touched something nasty, her lips pouting like an upset child.

“Who are you, really?” I ask. I prop myself on my elbows and sit up, ready to leave, yet held back by curiosity.

“I’m the Siren of Canosa. The real one, the killer kind. The psychopomp.” She waves down to her kills on the pedestrian walkway that’s now quiet, cordoned off by police. Only their professional chatter reaches us, the red and blue glare from police lights reflecting on the bridge’s green latticework. Canosa emits a fake cackle, pitched a bit too high, and points at herself with her forefinger. “I guide the dead on their after-life journey, that’s my job.”

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"Then aren't you supposed to go and guide those two?" I ask, motioning down.

She exhales a chill that crawls up my spine and leaves a sense of imminent dread. She steps closer to me, so cold that I shiver. "I like herding them in packs, so that I have more time for fun on this side, for my own pleasure." I realize there is so much I don't know about her; she must be ancient, even though she looks like a voluptuous twenty-something-year-old, forever young and pretty.

"How old are you?" I ask.

"Why don't you guess?" Her silvery blue eyes shimmer, but there's nothing there. I'm cold, but she's colder. I'm strong, but she's stronger. I shiver under her stare, thinking back to *The Odyssey* and trying to remember when Homer had written it. Something like 8th Century B.C., so that means...

"Three thousand years?" I ask.

"Do I really look *that* old?" She smirks, but it's bitter and I feel as though it's not funny to her.

I decide to try another angle. "No-no-no, it's not what I meant. You don't look old at all. You look young and beautiful, actually." I swallow. "I'm just curious, when did you turn into a siren?"

She simply looks at me.

"Who turned you?" I try, instead.

She doesn't answer, her arms crossed in front of her in a gesture that says, *I will wait until you ask the right question or you will have to figure it out yourself*. I pause and think really hard. A sense of dread wafts through me, filling my guts with icicles.

"Is it because you failed to save Persephone from Hades, and she became the queen of the underworld? He abducted her when you were supposed to protect her, and you were punished, right?" I rack my brain for all the Greek mythology I can

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remember. "Or is it because of Odysseus, because he didn't die from your song? He tricked you, so you threw yourself into the sea. At least, that's what I've read." I wait for some answer, but Canosa doesn't even bother to look at me. "You'll never tell me, will you?"

Silence.

"Whoever turned you," I say in a quiet voice, "you didn't want them to, did you?"

"Took you a while, Ailen Bright. I thought you were faster than this." Darkness oozes out of Canosa's eyes and drenches terror all over me.

Suddenly, it's not funny anymore. I want to hide again, forgetting everything that's happened. I feel weak, small, and helpless, sitting next to a monster that didn't want to be monster at first but has gotten used to it. Does this mean I'll turn out like this, mean and bitter? Goose bumps prickle my skin and my limbs feel numb. I hug my knees tighter and rest my head on them, turned, so that I can see Canosa. She stands straight as a ramrod with her arms still crossed in front of her, one foot slightly forward, and her floor-length hair draping her curvy figure. Her skin glistens slightly in the dimness of our recluse.

"Canosa? Want to know something? I didn't want to die," I whisper, more to myself than to her. "Now that I think about it, I wish I could take it all back."

Canosa looks at me silently, expressionless, as if waiting for me to continue.

I glance into the distance at nothing in particular; I focus on trusses and beams, on blue water, and the tree-lined bank. I smell fall and its dry, crinkling leaves. Cars cross the bridge above us. I hear a multitude of human souls, waiting to be eaten; one note in particular is akin to the sweet, sugary syrup of a living melody. It fills me with mad desire, trickling down the bridge's

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grate, drop by drop. I bite my lips until it feels as though they will burst, hunger rumbling and beating against my chest, my hands and feet tingling. I know who this soul belongs to. A baby. I hear the baby's babble in a stroller above us, her mother cooing as only mothers do, stern and loving at the same time. I understand with disgust that I want to suck it out, right this second, until the baby is dead.

I clasp my knees tighter, rocking from side to side to silence the pain.

Understanding flashes across Canosa's face. "Hungry?"

"Yes," I manage quietly, knowing that she won.

"I know you want dessert, it's tempting. But like a proper girl, you'll have to have your dinner first, yes?" She smiles, and I find myself smiling a little in return. "Any siren can snuff out a baby, but it takes practice to kill grown men. I'll teach you how to do it, and then we can have dessert. Yes?"

"Yeah, sure," I manage.

"Splendid! I know just the place." She grins. "Come on."

She stretches out her hand and I take it. Her fingers are freezing, almost brittle; if I squeeze them, they feel as if they'll crack. At the same time, holding her hand gives me comfort. It's so easy to trust her, so easy to let go and just fall into her words, to stop thinking, to be led, to rely on somebody else. To forget everything and give in.

Ailen Bright, a siren. That's who I am now.

She pulls me to my feet.

It's quiet, eerily quiet. I notice that it's dusk already. The sky grows darker by the minute, obscured with heavy gray clouds. I remember about my father, yet I no longer hear a trace of his boat's motor. I almost want to hear it, because it's what I expect. The unexpected silence makes me nervous, making me question whether he's planning something more sophisticated than a simple

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chase this time; deep inside, that sinister voice tells me I'm right. He must be planning some sort of a trap. No, I think, I'm just paranoid. What kind of a trap could it be? I put the thought out of my mind.

"Can I ask one more question?" I say.

"Yes?"

"Can a siren kill herself? You know, with a sonic gun?"

"You think I haven't tried?" The momentary sadness in her voice quickly turns to bitterness, almost toxic.

"So what, the gun only works in the hands of a siren hunter, is that it?" I feel my hope sink.

"Why do you think your dear friend, Hunter Crossby, has no gun?"

"Because his soul is still intact," I say slowly. "I get it now. So a siren can only die if her song has no effect on somebody?"

"Yes. But I don't want you to." Canosa looks at the sky as she says it and the setting sun breaks through the clouds, coloring her hair golden with its evening rays. She gazes at me, and I feel her eyes burrow into my head, into my chest, into all of me, pinning me, holding me on a hook. A waft of sea salt reaches us on a light breeze. It's evening. "You won't die, if that's what you're thinking. I know you won't. Not with your talent, no way. I won't allow it."

I'm just a revenge tool for you, just another way to get back at my father, I want to say, but I bite my tongue. She doesn't really care about me, after all. She cares about my talent, my potential ability to get rid of the siren hunter. So what? This is the best I've ever had. At least she cares about *something* of mine. It's not like I have much time left to find new friends, do I?

Because I now have a plan. I'll play along with Canosa to learn everything I can, and then I'm going to find a way to evaporate myself to stop Hunter from turning out like my father

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—soulless. I need to die. I will die at my own hands. I know who won't hear my song, who has never heard me, who will never hear me. It always works like a charm. Only, this time, I have to go all the way, have to mean it so that it works; I'll have to finish my song.

"What the hell, I'll do it. I'll kill for food. People *are* food, you're right." I force myself to smile in a sinister way, completing my lie. I look Canosa straight in the eyes, hoping she'll believe me, hoping I can suppress my hunger, or learn to outright ignore it. At the same time, I'm tempted to give in, to really be a siren. Tempted to sing and suck in souls and revel in their juicy substance, filling myself with warmth, sensing it travel through me, all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes, tingling. "You had to do this too, didn't you? Accept it?" I say, really meaning it.

She doesn't answer. Our eyes lock and, for a moment, a fleeting understanding hangs between us in a stroke of grief. She nods like she knows what I mean; I nod like I found a true friend. This is as close as I will ever have to a family. This is one of my sisters. Maybe I don't really love her, maybe she doesn't really love me, but we belong. At least for the time being.

Ailen Bright, you're a siren, admit it.

Perhaps because she can read my thoughts, or because I'm doing such a poor job of hiding them, Canosa's beautiful face suddenly alights with mischief and that bad girl aura, innocent and soft on the outside, hard as a rock and deadly inside. I grin back at her, oblivious to my nakedness from the waist up, hoping with all of my dead heart that I look exactly the same way, like a perfect bad girl. A true siren. A femme fatale, as Hunter said. A small part of me, tucked deeply inside my soulless chest, wishes he could see me now. Because I'm sure he'd give me a thumbs up and say, *Dude, you look awesome!* Or, *What's up, brat, where you going?* Or, *Say hello to monkey boy!* And he'd make his obnoxious gorilla

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noises. I smile through fresh tears, knowing that it's all I have left, and it won't give me pain for long—only as long as it takes me to find an end to this existence. In the meantime, I want to really try to feel what's it like to be a predator, to be a hunter.

"Happy Birthday, Ailen," Canosa says, and flashes me two rows of perfect teeth.

"Thank you," I respond, surprised.

This is the first time she calls me by my first name only, and it must mean a lot to her. It certainly means a lot to me. On top of it, she remembered it's my birthday today. Blood pulses in my veins; whatever is left of my trepidation and doubts vanishes in an instant.

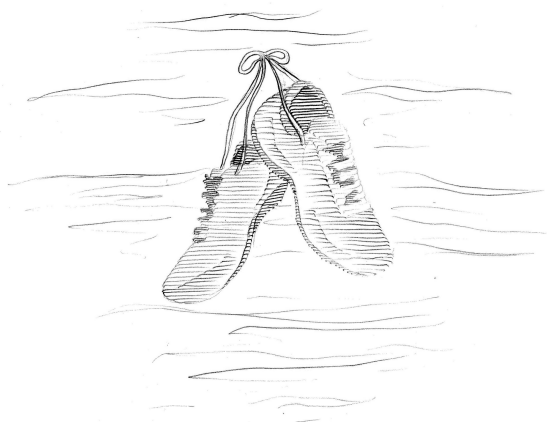
I tip. I let go. It's such a relief not to fight myself anymore. I feel the hunger. It's strong, it overwhelms me. It makes me hear every single human soul that passes overhead in their cars, and every single one walking underneath us. A sweet orchestra of life. My mouth goes dry, my hands shake, and my chest grumbles.

"It's party time," she says, and squeezes my hand.

"Let's do it." I squeeze her hand back and banish all thoughts from my head except for one: If I die today, I'll die having fun.

We hold hands, step closer to the edge of the cornice, and leap into the air, twenty feet above the water.

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Mist fills my lungs. The moment our feet detach from the concrete, streetlights come to life and glimmer faintly, buzzing with their slow electricity, warming up for yet for another cloudy evening. We look like two lucid ghosts, one framed by a mane of white hair, the other in jeans and nothing else. Arms stretched out and plummeting into the cold evening air, we hit the water head first, then dive deeply under the bridge into a numbing liquid darkness. I can hear the water as it gurgles in my ears; I take a gulp, extracting oxygen and squirting out the rest through my gills. A faint glow from Canosa's body shimmers to my left. We kick our legs in dolphin strokes, propelling us forward, our hands still clasped. The distant drone of living souls echoes in a hushed gibberish from each bank as we swim east, toward Lake Washington. I'm high, high on being a siren. High on adrenaline wrapped in anxiety, encapsulated by some insane giddiness that's supposed to be wrong. But I don't care, this feels divine, this feels like happiness.

I look to my left and think that I have the best sister I

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could ever dream of. My big sister, the one who understands me, the one I can rely on, the one who can bitch out anyone who dares to hurt me. And I mean, bitch them out *big time*.

An image of my father's boat flashes in my mind. I'm worried. I want to ask about Ligeia and Teles and Pisinoe, about where they are and when I can see them again; but I'm afraid to break the silence, afraid to disturb this feeling of serenity. So, I keep quiet and decide to ask later. We swim for only a few minutes but it feels like an eternity, and I don't want it to end. Canosa glances at me briefly, then points up and to the right. I follow her gaze and notice darkness increasing around us; the water's becoming cold and murky, green algae hanging in big, uneven clumps. We seem to be passing between islands. We turn right and swim into the thicket of...a marsh? The water tastes acidic and its surface is covered with reeds that look like a torn, uneven blanket from underneath, barely discernible in the diminishing light. I know where we're going.

Once, my father took my mom and me on a long boat ride, rowing all the way from our marina, across Lake Union, by Portage Bay, and finally into the maze of the Arboretum wetlands. Papa's muscles bulged under his lavender polo shirt in rhythm to his steady movement; I was maybe five or six, and I remember feeling very proud of his strength. My hair was pulled into two pigtails and I was wearing a sundress mom made for me from one of Papa's old dress shirts. It was light blue with tiny sailboats printed on it, original pearl buttons running along its full length. I was dipping my hand into the water, watching with fascination as ducks herded their ducklings, oblivious to an argument that erupted on the other side of the boat. I turned only at the sound of a slap, and watched as my father calmly sat back down. I grabbed the boat's side, afraid it would overturn and I'd drown because it bobbed so hard. Mom held her face while Papa docked

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on the muddy bank, making us get out and walk all the way to the bus station.

I swallow at this memory, trying to chase it away. It's all in the past, and I'm a siren now. All I care about is food. There seems to be a lack of it, probably just a few evening dog walkers or joggers who favor this part of the park for their daily exercise. I can hear a distant echo of their souls coming at me, amplified by all this water. My chest screams at me with hunger, sending shivers up and down my spine.

Canosa pulls on my hand and we swim up, breaching the lake's surface right by one of the wooden boardwalks; its beams are dark with age and covered with moss, nearly black in the dusk. I inhale the sweet smell of water lilies. A startled blackbird shrieks and flies off into a lush thicket of willows, rousing a few more birds that scatter and disappear into the darkness, squawking. Cattails rustle from the breeze. The constant hum of Highway 520 bridge traffic invades my ears like the annoying buzz of bees. Turning my head to look at Canosa, I see her face pulse in rhythm to my urge to eat.

"I know you're hungry. Just hold on a little more, come on," she whispers urgently.

"Right," I say, feeling my lips tremble.

We scale up the boardwalk fence, two bleached women, and jog along the path that runs into the heart of the park, our bare feet skidding on the wet wooden boards.

"Best place to hunt on Monday nights. Not too many people, and those who venture out are not very cautious, still in their weekend daze," Canosa says under her breath.

"Uh-huh," I say, listening intently to about a dozen trickling melodies within a mile radius. I can distinguish each by its timbre and sound waves and tone, imagining what they would taste like while conjuring up an image of each soul's owner. My

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mouth goes dry and I can barely move my tongue to talk.

The wooden path ends and turns into a muddy bog trail. Sludge oozes between my toes as I slink and duck behind Canosa, deeper into the overgrown darkness; the only light comes from the faint glow of mine and Canosa's skin, and illuminates the thick high canopy of trees around us. We jog faster, quietly, scaring a pack of raccoons as we close in on a few hikers who don't know what's about to hit them on this fine Monday night.

The trail continues into an open meadow devoid of trees.

About forty feet ahead, a jogger sprints toward us, a man with a flashlight strapped to his head and clothed in a bright neon yellow vest for visibility. Sheer desire to jump at him blinds me with a wash of predatory fever. But before I even have time to react, Canosa lets go of my hand and charges at him with a venomous cry, covering the distance between them in a matter of seconds. Flocks of birds flee from the surrounding trees, and small animals scatter into their holes and hide. I stand, my mouth open, enthralled by her speed.

Arrested by her voice, and without a single peep, the jogger falls to his knees, his arms stretched out in front of him as if he's about to worship some otherworldly deity—which Canosa is, I suppose. She spreads her arms and hovers over him, her eyes emitting a blue light that reflects in his pupils. She ignites his soul. I gulp, shaking. I yearn to be a part of this feast, but I hold back due to some hunting instinct. This is not my kill; I need to wait for my alpha to satisfy her hunger, to allow me to follow suit.

The man's soul melody pierces my ears with its beauty, a combination of a violin and bird calls. Perhaps he's a musician who likes to watch birds. Fresh and minty, that's how he'd taste. Oh, it sounds incredibly delicious. Hunger burns me, scratching at my ribs from the inside. I wheeze and cough, my gut retching from emptiness. Canosa sings a few verses of her song that I don't

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understand. I watch her disappear into a pocket of fog, with a barely visible line of smoke trailing at the top of it in one long ribbon. A musician's soul. I can't help it, I begin walking. By the time I reach them, it's done. He'd dead, sprawled on the ground. When I lean over his face to see if I know him, Canosa snatches my hand and pulls me away.

"That is how it's done. See? You have to be fast, so that they're yours before they know it," she says.

"Uh-huh," I manage, turning back, still feeling the soul's lingering sound penetrate me; it's like the left-over smell from a freshly baked pie that's been eaten before I got a chance to taste it.

"Come on, there's no time for this. I hear a couple more ahead. They're yours, I insist," she whispers in my ear, her eyes ablaze with ravenous fervor, her hand warm from newly acquired life. I inhale the evening air, fragrant with that smell of early autumn, and nod.

"Can't...wait," my own voice comes out as a hiss.

The trilling melody of a couple souls, several hundred feet away, blocks out the rest of my thinking. A curtain of primitive instinct shrouds my brain and my body takes over. Time seems to stop. My vision sharpens, as if someone focused the lens. I see every single leaf in the oncoming darkness, etched into the receding dimness of the park; I hear every branch creak, every little mouse scurry.

I stalk off behind Canosa in an agitated daze; I'm reeling with hunger, salivating, pulsing with agony. Then I find myself ahead of her, running, abandoning the trail and breaking through azalea bushes, faster, aiming at my two victims—a man and a woman, and what sounds like a large dog—probably out for a late night stroll. I thrash through a cluster of dwarf maples and the dog starts barking a low, rasping sound. I hear the man hush it as I break out into the relative light, recognizing the location at once.

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Azalea Way, a dog walker's favorite destination.

They stare at me, ignorant of their dog thrashing at the end of its leash, three figures against the rapidly darkening sky.

"Freeze!" I shout, spewing saliva.

It's the first thing that comes to mind, perhaps because I've heard cops use it, and because I used it once before. Hey, maybe this will become my signature siren call! I emit a noise that's half grunt, half chuckle.

All three of them freeze, completely still. The flashlight in the man's right hand slips and rolls softly into the grass. I charge at him, attracted by the lure of his soul; it's the whizzing of a motor, repeated dog barks, and some other soft warble I can't identify. It promises to taste fruity, almost melon-like. I stop a few inches away from his face and ignite his soul with a powerful gaze that's akin to your eyes bulging out of their sockets while glaring, unblinking. Blue light reflects in his pupils as a trail of faint smoke escapes through his lips. I begin singing. The song streams effortlessly from my lips, as if it was meant to be, as if I'd done it a thousand times before and know it by heart.

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

*I realize that this is the song the sirens used to convert me.
How do I know the words?* Canosa comes up from behind me and ignites the woman's soul—a divine concoction of clanking pots and puppy whining. Savory. Canosa joins me and we sing the next verse together.

"Give us your pain,

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*Dip in our song.
Notes afloat,
Listen and love.
Listen and love.
Listen and love.”*

The woman whimpers and falls to her knees, her dog whines next to her, the man follows. Steamy plumes of their warmth trail into our mouths. I imagine sucking on the best joint of my life, the strongest weed you could ever find, minty flavored for added pleasure.

Within a minute, we're done. There are only two bodies left, surrounded by the fog; the dog is licking both of its owners' faces, now oblivious to his yelps. I watch everything with a sick fascination, not fully believing what I've done; without thought or feeling, I've unleashed a growing hunger that's driving me to feed even more.

I raise my head to a new tune, belonging to another jogger. I glance at Canosa for approval, then charge again. I emerge from the pocket of fog we created and nearly knock my next victim off her feet. The rest happens in a mad daze—I'm singing and gulping up her soul, while Canosa strips her and says, "Gotta look decent for the party, right?"

She makes me peel off my torn jeans and pull on the girl's leggings with reflective stripes on each side; her silver rain jacket, made of soft waterproof fabric that allows your skin to breathe when running.

"That's Seattle fashion for you," Canosa mutters, zipping it up for me and turning me this way and that. "It's called, hiking emergency. Well, it looks new, so it's okay. It'll do for now. Put on her shoes." So I do. I pull them off the girl's feet and step into them, still warm; they're the latest in running sneakers, the kind

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with barely any weight to them. And they're silver.

I'm drunk from my feeding frenzy, hot and reeling. I grip Canosa's hand and we dash across the boulevard, empty of traffic on a Monday night. We skirt the Japanese garden and emerge into a parking lot that's mostly empty. We startle a group of people walking back to their cars from soccer practice.

Canosa jeers at them and yells, "BOO!" Then she cackles her mad lunatic laughter, and kills some more. I join her. We're on a spree.

Souls whisk out of each person in rapid succession, turning the parking lot into a pool of fog with grotesquely smiling corpses on its bottom. They all look their happiest, like they've been struck by something utterly divine in the last minute of their lives.

I've lost count now. Still singing, I feel my throat turn hoarse; I move forward in a morbid determination to eat as much as I can. My saliva is acid syrup. My blood is concentrated seawater pumped through my veins by a dead heart. My power is my voice, and I'm using it—using it plenty. Eating my dinner, humans served live, their souls draped over the garnish of a soulless siren. It's supposed to satisfy me, but makes me hungrier still, as if it's the last meal I'll ever eat.

In the meantime, Canosa made herself an outfit of soccer knee socks on top of leggings, bright pink rain boots, a large soccer sweatshirt that's definitely too big for her but makes her look even sexier, and a yellow rain poncho to top it off. I didn't even notice when she did it or whom she stripped. All in all, she looks cute, even adorable. Pink lipstick would complete the picture, passing her off as a twenty-something Seattleite; the only strange thing about her is her really long white hair, which she tucks into the hood of the poncho.

"Well, what do you think?" she asks, twirling in front of me under a streetlight. I realize I have no memory of how we got

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here. We're now standing on Madison Street, devoid of pedestrians, glistening with old puddles. I blink. A few cars rush by us in both directions.

"You look great," I say, enthralled by the warmth that spreads through me, making me feel alive and almost human again. "How many..." I trail off, scared to ask.

"How many what?" Canosa asks, and chews on her hair absentmindedly.

"How many did I kill?" I say, not wanting to believe that what just happened was real, hoping maybe it was a bad dream and I didn't really go on a murdering spree.

"It doesn't matter now, does it? What matters is you were great! You kicked some serious ass, girl." I notice that she doesn't say *silly girl*. "Come on. Let's get out of here before the cops decide to join our party," Canosa says and pulls me by the hand again. I follow, trying to retrace our journey, from the moment we emerged by the boardwalk to the last moment I remember—the parking lot between the Japanese garden and the bottom of a soccer field. Faces flash in my memory like quick snapshots. I bend my fingers, horrified.

"Nine," I say.

"Are you counting?" Canosa is cheery; her lips actually have a lively color and her cheeks are almost pink. She giggles. "Stop it, silly girl, you'll make yourself ill. Come on. I have a surprise for you." I notice that she calls me *silly girl* again and sigh.

"Nine," I repeat under my breath, unable to believe it. Here I am, a sixteen-year-old murderer, an innocent-looking girl on the outside, and a ruthless predator on the inside. How does this make me any better than my father?

High on our recent feeding, I don't notice when we walk from the right side of the road and into yet another parking lot. I'm swimming in a glare of streetlights, oblivious to the white

noise of constant traffic and the increasing number of pedestrians and their mouthwatering souls. I'm full to the point of gagging. I don't want to eat anymore. Where did my promise go, the one that said, *I won't kill, no-no-no!* Turns out, I'm full of shit.

"Look," Canosa says into my ear.

I raise my head. We stand between two parked cars, shadowed by an oak tree. Across the street, a long line of people snake into a squat brick building the color of a dirty pond; its huge black windows look like eyes that are alarmed. The white noise is not simply white noise. The ground ripples under our feet with loud music, cheering, and buoyant souls. It's night, and our faces diffuse a faint brilliance, the fancy, non-electric kind. Our skin doesn't glow as strongly as it does in dark water but, still, it shimmers, emitting a soft siren halo. Great. On top of everything else, I'm a glow-in-the-dark freak now.

"Wait!" I say, suddenly aware of time and space. "It's Chop Suey!" I look at Canosa. She raises her eyebrows, as if to say, *I told you.*

"Siren Suicides! The concert! Hunter bought me two tickets for my birthday. He was supposed to..." I trail off. Terror floods me. "Is this another hunting ground for you, this night club? Night clubs in general?"

"Marvelous, Ailen, you got it right again. And looks like we're just in time for the show," Canosa whispers. "Oh, this will be juicy, I can tell." She smacks her lips, and straightens in her stolen poncho. A girl's face flashes in my mind, the one she took it from, and I shudder.

"Hunter was supposed to bring me here tonight. To the Siren Suicides concert; it's my favorite band. For my birthday," I repeat again, unable to believe it's not happening. Hunter needs to be gone from my life, which means that I have to extinguish myself by singing to my father.

Chapter 3

Crossing my arms, I hug myself. I hide my chin deeply inside the creases of my brand new silver rain jacket, still smelling of synthetic coating—its unlucky owner now bare-skinned under some Japanese maples. The thought of my first successful hunt is supposed to cheer me up, but it chills me instead. Whatever warmth I acquired from those nine souls I sucked in, it diminishes by the minute. I feel my body cool off and demand more.

“This sucks,” I suddenly exclaim. “I lost the tickets Hunter gave me on the beach. I was really looking forward to seeing them, too. They’ve never toured in the U.S. before, you know.”

Canosa presses into the small of my back, nudging me forward. “Who says you can’t?”

Her cheek slightly brushes mine and I fail to detect her usual pond odor. I furrow my eyebrows; does this mean I smell rotten too?

“Are you suggesting...”

“Who says we need tickets?” Canosa giggles. “I say, let’s go taste those guards by the door. What do you say?”

I turn my head to look. The line of people trickling in is next to nothing now. There are three guys checking everyone’s IDs at the door.

Canosa pushes me harder. I stumble forward, my feet numb, stuck in my squeaky new silver sneakers. The September night throws a tint of periwinkle over the passing cars, oblivious to the impending massacre. A police car shrills past, perhaps on its way to the Washington Park Arboretum to retrieve some bodies. My knees lock and then buckle.

“I can’t do this.” I lick my lips nervously.

“But you just did!” Canosa says impatiently. “Silly girl, will you make up your mind already?” She stomps her foot for added effect.

“I don’t...I don’t want to anymore.”

“Oh, really? Well, I have news for you. A surprise that will make you change your mind.” She grins, and I can see a monstrosity showing through her beautiful innocence. “He’s waiting for you. He’s here, I can feel him,” she whispers.

“Who? Hunter?” My heart drops.

“Uh-huh. Hunter Crosby, lover boy.”

“Oh, God, then I’m not going in for sure.” I dog-shake my head, my breathing shallow and tepid.

“Oh, but you have to! Why, I insist, Ailen Bright. I promise you, you’ll enjoy it. Trust me.” The glint in her eyes is part streetlights and part curiosity as to how long I will last, when will I break down, and whether I can withstand the pull of Hunter’s soul. She called me by my full name again, which means she’s getting angry.

“What about the others?” I try to change the subject.

“Don’t you worry about the others, they’re big girls; they can take care of themselves. We’re talking about you right now, yes? So go ahead, eat your boy. Kill him before it’s too late, before you begin to suffer.” So much anger flashes in her eyes that I recoil and take a step back.

“I’m...I’m not sure I can do it here. Too many people,” I say, backtracking, hoping she’ll buy my lie.

“Why? A night club is a perfect siren feeding ground. Loud music. People are mostly drunk or high. Some poor schmuck sliding to the ground is no big deal, especially when it happens in the restrooms. But even on the dance floor, general chaos plays to our advantage. This is siren fun! You see what I mean, Ailen?” she giggles. She called me by my first name only again. Good.

I exhale, understanding what she’s doing. She’s having a ball, and I’m her new entertainment. Yet I’m too reluctant to give up on the whole big sister idea. Sisters fight and use each other

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too, right? So this is real family stuff.

I smile. "But those people in the park—"

"What about them?" She cocks her head to the side, tapping her foot lightly. From the corner of my eye, I see that the line of people waiting to get into the club has disappeared. The concert is about to start.

"You weren't even hungry. You killed them for clothes, for fun."

"For you." She stops chewing on her hair and peers at me. "I killed them for you, to show you how it's done, remember? I promised to teach you. And I want you to get it." She taps her finger on my forehead several times. "You're a *siren*, so you'd better get used to it; you'd better learn to enjoy it. Do you understand?"

My chest rumbles, empty again, and I nod.

"Yeah, I do." An irresistible urge to see Hunter takes over me. It will be just this one last time, and then I'll be gone, forever. I'll go find my father, sing to him with the full intent of killing him, and die.

"All right, then. Don't back off now. Come on, let's go!" She tugs at my sleeve.

"What if I'm not able to?" I retort, one last time.

"Ailen, sometimes I think you're crazier than me, girl. I explained this to you already, didn't I?"

I stare blankly at her. I hate when I'm under pressure and seem to forget the simplest things. Turning into a siren sure didn't cure my shitty memory, not one bit.

"I forgot. Sorry." I wince, almost expecting a blow.

Canosa moves closer to my ear, her lips brushing my skin. "Here is what will happen, silly girl. I will watch you squirm, for years, tethering on the brink of dying but not quite dying yet. This is what will happen. Would you like to know how that feels?"

She stares me in the eyes.

Arboretum Park

"Is this how you felt? How you still feel?" I manage.

A man walks up to us and complains that we're blocking his car and need to move. He's obviously drunk. Canosa's expression changes before I can read it, and the moment is lost. Will I ever dare ask her straight out if she still loves my father? I glance at the man, furious, ready to snuff him out; but I catch my impulse and suppress it, horrified at how fast I got blinded. He opens the door to his Jeep, and then slams it as he starts the car. Exhaust floods my nostrils and makes me cough.

Canosa grabs my chin and turns my face to hers. "Would you like *me* to kill your dear Hunter? I can do that for you. You're family now, and that's what family does for each other." I can see in her eyes that she's serious and she fully means it.

"No, no, it's okay. I'll do it."

"Good! Do you think he'll look good in an open-lid coffin, or should we have his face eaten off first, by deep-water fish?" She pokes me with her finger, topping off her hideous laugh. I stand, dumbstruck. This must be siren humor.

Canosa continues, oblivious to my raised eyebrows. "You know what he did? He got drunk and then he got high, all because of you. He loves you that much," she sneers.

I hear the Jeep screech and veer into the road, but pay no attention.

"No, he didn't."

"Oh, yes, he did. Maybe he even picked up a new girl. Want to go see?" She tugs at me again, like an impatient little girl.

"No, he didn't, he couldn't...He'd never." I wring my hands.

"Well, you know him, don't you? I know him a little bit, too, from all those nights he spent smoking in your bathroom. He'd hate for a perfectly good ticket go to waste, wouldn't he? I saw him pick them up after you dropped them on the beach."

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My eyes widen.

"You don't believe me? Go on then. Run along and see for yourself," she says, pouting her lips. "Or would you rather *me* send him to the bottom of the lake? My offer still stands. He'll make the girls happy...a delectable surprise at the end of the day."

I become aware of the security guards staring at us from across the street; they're sucking on their smokes by the club's entrance, a disjointed duo of cheap guitars. Bitter. They drop their cigarette butts and saunter inside, shutting the double doors behind them.

I tremble from indecision, hating this paralysis that overcomes me when I have to decide on something important.

Canosa looks at me strangely, cocking her head to the side. "So attached to him, aren't you? Want to know something about siren hunters?"

"What?" I hug myself tighter, to hold on to something. Cars come and go, and another one pulls into the spot next to us that the Jeep abandoned.

"Their job is to hunt sirens. *Hunt. Sirens.* You know what that means, right? They kill them. They explode them into nothing. Do you understand?" She pauses and reaches out for my hand. "I didn't want to tell you, but..." She drops her gaze. "I trust you'll do what I asked you to do, so I'll go ahead and tell you. Maybe it'll help you decide."

I hold my breath, feeling that, somehow, I don't want to hear what's coming next.

"Your mother didn't jump. She had a fight on the bridge, with your father. He ran after her, you know that, right?" Canosa traces circles on the asphalt with the tip of her pink rain boot.

I nod, afraid to say a thing.

"Well, he pushed her. I saw it."

I forget how to breathe. Reality turns me inside out and I

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die some more. I'm double-dead. Yet, somehow, I'm still standing.

"What?" I exhale, feeling my legs give out from under me.

Canosa looks up. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, no, no!" Each no drips with regret. I study her face for a hint of a lie, or something. But she just looks at me, sad.

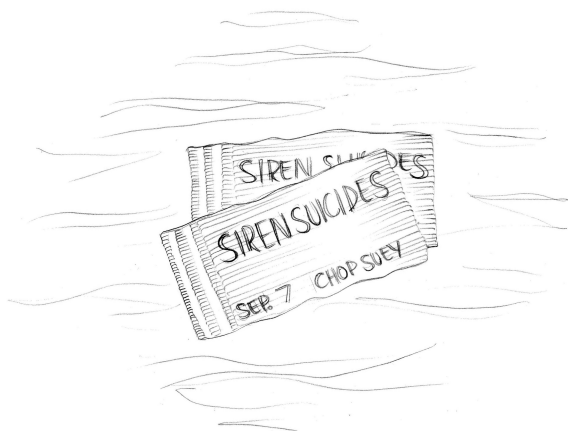
Like millions have before me, I learn what happens when you cross that line, when you take that step, when you still breathe, but you know it won't last for much longer. When you want to die so badly you can't wait. When every single minute of your existence is beyond pure pain; it's thorny agony. I want to go on a trip with no ticket back. I want to shed my skin, to cease to exist. Like those three seconds I experienced before I hit the water under the Aurora Bridge—this is my moment of no return.

"Well? Which one will it be?" Canosa says.

I don't answer.

I grab her hand and pull her across the street, not bothering to look as we cross. I ignore the curses and honks, the screeching of tires and the slamming of breaks. The smell of burnt rubber fills the air. I march to the club's entrance, stop a couple of feet in front of its double glass doors, raise my right leg, and kick squarely in the center of one of them.

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Chop Suey

A tinkling of broken glass follows the splintering crack. Large shards land amidst the dusty cloud that's roused from the floor, showering it with shattered crystal. The scent of a thick soul-soup hits me in the face as I inhale a waft of blasting music mixed with the stench of sweaty bodies. I step over the wooden bottom rail of the door frame, pulling Canosa behind me into the ten feet of dark corridor that separates the entrance from the dance floor. Behind the ticketing stand, illuminated by the glow of a red light, three guards gape at us, still in shock by what they just saw. Obviously, they never imagined needing to deal with a break in during the middle of a concert. I meet their gaze and a maddening rage envelops me—a rage aimed at them, at my father, and at all men in general. I want to kill every single one of them, as if their gender itself is somehow at fault for my mother's death. And, for a split second, I think I understand my father's hate for women. A woman must've hurt him, *really* badly.

Chaos erupts. A few people at the edge of the dancing crowd turn to see what's going on, not because they heard

anything, but probably because they felt the cold air oozing in from the street, cooling their sweaty skin. A girl shrieks and drops her drink on the floor, then another one joins her. One of the guards shakes off his slumber and swears loudly, taking a step toward us on unsure legs.

“Quiet!” I yell, silencing them, their mouths open mid-shout.

Mist rolls from my lips, dropping the temperature down and obscuring the entrance. The sound of my voice shakes the walls once, and then gets swallowed by the beat of music. The loud drone of the band’s singing and electric guitars assault my eardrums, and I don’t understand how it’s possible to concentrate on feeding at a nightclub. Then, a fanatic yearning to see my favorite band nearly makes my knees buckle. I recognize the song and their voices. It’s Siren Suicides.

Canosa hooks her chin on my left shoulder and whispers loudly in my ear, “Who would’ve thought that you possess such passion, Ailen Bright, a girl full of surprises. I’m impressed. Shall we continue?”

I barely hear her over the thump-thump of the band’s performance, wanting to see them and eat them at the same time. Canosa measures me in new light through her snowflake eyelashes, her pupils dilated in anticipation of a meal, her nose wrinkled.

“Life is disgusting, wouldn’t you agree?” she says.

We lock eyes as if we’re allies, and I nod, unable to explain just how much her words resonate in this very moment.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” I reply.

More people notice our faintly glowing faces, some point at the broken glass on the floor. Apparently, my shout didn’t have as much of an effect due to the loud music, because the first guard begins swearing again, taking small, swaying steps, cautiously edging toward us, his fists at the ready. I glance down at myself

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and at Canosa.

“Do we really look that scary?” I say over the noise.

“You’d be surprised,” she says, emitting her mad cackle. “I’ll take this one, he sounds juicy. Those two are yours.” She points at the other two guards, one of whom is dialing something on his phone, probably 911; the other edges into the crowd, scared.

I’m enraged at their cowardice. Instead of directing my anger inward, as usual, I let it out. It’s the second time today, after having killed nine souls on our way here. It feels so good to give in to my siren instincts.

“Freeze!” I shout at the top of my lungs. This time my voice is stronger, and it cuts over the cacophony of the jeering crowd that’s still mostly oblivious to our presence. A visible sound wave rolls over their heads, rippling their hair, and arresting their bodies, as if someone put a music video on pause. Yet, the middle of the mass is still moving, and the lead singer is still blaring into the microphone, her song blasting through the loud speakers in a deafening crescendo.

I snarl and take a step forward, crushing glass shards with my stolen silver sneakers. Some semblance of morality tries poking holes into my gut, telling me that I shouldn’t do this. *You should stop and kill no more*, it says. *You promised*. I shout back inside my head, *Go fuck yourself!* and send it rallying down into the depths of my soulless being. But it’s relentless. It worms beneath my skin and turns into guilt; it pulses behind my eyelids in rhythm to the music. *Something bad is about to happen*, it warns. Fear seizes my heart. *Shut up!* I think back at it, angry at my doubts. Violently, I shake my head and take another step toward my future victims, seeing from the corner of my eye as Canosa lunges at the fat guard who keeps swearing non-stop.

Killing will ease my pain. Why the fuck am I always so

worried about others? How about, for once, I have an angry fit and let them worry about me? Huh? How about that, bitches? And with that, I charge.

I leap two large steps, squat, and jump onto the ticketing booth, knocking the phone out of the guard's hand with my right foot and landing on the floor inches from him. His soul promptly shrouds me in a concoction of amateur guitar strumming, knuckle cracking, and snoring. Salty. Well, it could've been worse. Salty is not so bad.

"Hey! How are you doing? I'm starving," I say as I watch his face turn ashen, his lips quivering, waiting for that one minute of happiness promised by my singing, divine in its splendor.

Hunger drives me mad. I can't remember why I'm here in the first place; nothing matters except for the food standing right in front of me—the poor image of a man with feeble features and a wisp of red hair, too thin for his age. He's no more than a high school graduate who got lucky; perhaps a relative of his is friends with the owner, because the kid has no muscles for a security job. His slender white fingers are only fit for trembling, his shallow frame dressed in black.

I hate him.

"I hate you all," I hiss, and I want to kill him.

He stands stupefied, puppet-like. Alternating red and green lights flash across his face. There are shrieks from the crowd now. Perhaps Canosa is making her way in; perhaps people are finally noticing that something is wrong.

Then the song ends, and the lead singer breaks the empty ambiance, saying into the microphone, "What's happening, people...The door is—"

The interruption annoys me and I bark at her, "Sing!"

She grabs the microphone and lets out a note, her eyes bulging with fear, her long blond hair glistening under the red

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light. She's...she's Tara Patterson! My breath catches, I can't believe I just yelled at her. I feel strangely evil and giddy at the same time. I decide to apologize and try to explain everything to her afterward, so that she understands.

I peer into the frozen faces of the crowd and yell, "Dance!"

Immediately, people unfreeze and begin moving. I stretch my neck and look back at my victim, blinded by desire. I lock my eyes with his and ignite his soul; sucking in air, I let anger open my throat. I sing in sync with Tara to my favorite song, *Let Me Be*.

Her voice blares from the stage in her typical low timbre. My voice joins hers, resonating with it, and sends shivers up my spine.

*"Why can't you let go of me?
Whispering in my ear,
Pulling on my skin.
Let me be happy, let me be happy.
And I will be, I will be."*

Fog consumes me and the guard. In the back of my mind a thought about Hunter surfaces, making me wonder where he is and if he's figured out by now that I'm here. But the thought gets trampled by my immediate need to feed. Tendrils of dense vapor roll off my skin, fitting the atmosphere perfectly, looking like one of those nightclub fog machines at work.

My voice sounds shrilly, thick with alternating high-pitched and throaty notes, matching the song on stage. I wonder if I can command a whole stadium of people. Now that would be something.

*"Why don't you believe in me?
Cradling my hopes,*

Strangling my dreams.

Let me be happy, let me be happy..."

As the guard falls to his knees, his boots hit the floor in rhythm to the song. His eyes graze my face, and his mouth hangs open. His whimpering soul hangs between us like a pendulum of delicate energy. I know he's done for and I don't feel sorry. He's food. I gulp up the rest of his soul and he drops dead.

"Bon appetite," Canosa says in my ear and slinks back into the club's shadows. I lick my lips, tasting salt, and feel his warmth spread though my empty chest. I burp with satisfaction. Suddenly, I remember why I'm here.

I step into a sea of moving limbs and listen intently for that gentle Vivaldi soul; I don't hear it. I keep moving through the tangle of dancing bodies, debating whether to make them all drop to the floor. I decide against it, reeling at my power and the knowledge that I'm the one who made them move. This is my birthday party, these people are dancing because of me, and they'll dance as long as I like it. And Siren Suicides are singing for me, *for me*. A wide grin spreads across my face. This is the best party ever, and it's only missing one person.

Hunter.

I grab men by their necks and turn them, searching for his crooked grin, his choke of curly black hair on his scrunched up forehead. His blue eyes that have no bottom.

But none are him. I hiss into their frightened faces, "It's my sixteenth birthday today. You're at my party. My party, my rules. Dance!" They continue, listening like puppets.

I stumble on this one tall guy who suddenly erupts and shrieks, "Get your hands off me, bitch!"

"What did you call me?" I say, and then, without a moment's hesitation, "You're dead."

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I ignite his soul with barely a stare. His full-lipped mouth falls open under an upturned boyish nose, only the whites of his eyes are visible on his dark-skinned face. His soul is a mismatched trombone solo pierced by an occasional whistle against a guitar background. Spicy. He folds to his knees, and I crash him to the floor with my foot, stepping on his chest and leaning over him. The dancing crowd shifts aside to give us room, pretending like it's none of their business.

The song weaves out of my mouth, strong and beautiful, in tune with Tara bellowing from the stage. He's mesmerized, mumbling, "Man, you've got beautiful eyes, girl." I know it's a lie; it all is. It's my siren voice at work. To him, I'm the ultimate dream.

His soul escapes through his lips and into mine; it's warm, sharp and tasty, so spicy it burns my tongue and fills me with hot energy. His dark, empty shape is sprawled on the floor, gone.

Tara finishes her song. There is an awkward pause, and I stick my head up and over the crowd, yelling, "Stop!"

People stop dancing and look at me expectantly.

"Sing *The Rain*, please! Say it's for Ailen. It's my birthday today." My request sounds so childish that I cringe, but I couldn't help myself.

"Alright, lovely Seattle people! We have a birthday girl. Happy Birthday, Ailen. This song is for you. *The Rain*," Tara says into the mike with her raspy British accent.

I pretend to believe that she really means it. It's all for me, for my party. There is another awkward silence, so I command them again, "Clap!"

The crowd erupts with applause, and then quiets down.

A single clear note breaks through the momentary silence, blocking out the rest of the soul-discord. There he is, a few feet away from the stage and twenty feet away from me, hidden behind

a pack of bodies. But I can hear him clearly.

“Hunter!” I yell. No response. Ravenous and exalted, I kick the bodies apart in my stroll. My appetite has barely awoken. I want desert now. That whipped, heavenly sweetness on a warm crust, topped with the sound of birds, slippers on a parquet floor, and the clanking of dishes in preparation for a family dinner on a warm summer’s night; all against the background of Vivaldi, the ultimate sweetness.

Tara begins singing.

*“I’m lonely,
Watching the rain.”*

People are rooted in their positions, awaiting my next command. “Get out of my way, you fucking appetizers,” I swear under my breath as I move through the crowd.

“Keep dancing!” I shout. They begin moving, their sweaty faces glistening under kitsch Chinese lanterns hung from the black ceiling.

For a second, a sense of complete power grips me. I stop and look around at this rave-gone-wrong. All of these people are crammed into a fifty by fifty feet dance hall; they converge under the low black ceiling, showered in the dim red light coming from the stage, interspersed with shafts of green for effect. They remind me of a can of sardines, packed so tightly that you have to fish them out with a fork, one by one, carefully, so as not to break off heads or fracture spines. Forget the fork. I want to sink my teeth and eat them all in one mouthful. Canosa was right, this is the perfect siren feeding ground. People are so high or drunk they don’t know they’re being killed.

I can kill them all if I want.

Then I hear Hunter’s soul again and plow forward.

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*“Drop by drop,
Falling,
Into my heart.”*

I’m in a thicket of the cacophony of people’s souls mingled with the blaring music; the closeness of the subwoofers loud oomphing sound waves crashes against my body like gusts of wind. People dance like robots, parting to give me way, their eyes a mix of terror and dazed ecstasy.

Ignoring them, I listen intently for Hunter’s melody only. It sinks into the noise and then resurfaces again. I close my eyes to hear it better. Compared to the other souls, his is close to perfection, but it’s out of tune; that’s why I didn’t recognize it at first, amidst this racket.

It’s burning.

Two more people part like jellyfish in warm water, and suddenly, he’s in front of me. I stop in shock and admiration, biting my lip.

His face is young and happy. His hair is curled and sweaty, nose covered with freckles, eyes closed. He wears the same tattered gray hoodie, now damp from sweat; it hangs loosely over his sagging jeans. He’s a horrible dancer, moving in a series of jerky steps. There is a bottle of beer in his left hand and...a girl on his right arm, sipping on something frothy. She opens her eyes, and before I can stop myself, my arm flies out in front of me and knocks her drink from her grip. It splashes in her face and the glass breaks when it meets the ground.

“Watch where you’re going, bitch!” she yells at me, wiping her face and smearing her heavy mascara into long black streaks.

“Shut up and get out of my way,” I tell her with grim satisfaction, knowing that she’ll do as I say. She stumbles into the

crowd, her face gaping back at me like a doll that can't close its plastic mouth. I notice the lovely lines of her diamond-shaped face, the curves under her skin-tight dress. I add, "Call me bitch one more time, and I'll kill you." She squeals and disappears into the crowd.

"I see my father let you out after all. Not wasting any time, are you? Nice girlfriend," I say into Hunter's ear, to make sure he hears me over the noise.

"Huh?" He blinks his eyes open. Without a hint of recognition, he resumes his dance, closing his eyes again. He's not only drunk, he's high as fuck. The faint odor of weed on his breath washes over me, followed by that sour reek of too much cheap beer. I want to slap him, to make him see me. But I can't bring myself to touch him; I'm trembling with disgust, then hate, and then an overpowering, blinding fury.

"I really loved you, you know? I really did. But you're just like any other guy, aren't you?" Tears spring from my eyes and roll down my cheeks. I flick at them angrily. "All of you—you're all the same. I hate your guts. I hate men. I hate you, I hate you, *I hate you.*"

Uncontrollable spasms shake my body. I pass my tongue over my lips and inhale, going in for the kill. I'm oblivious to any rational thinking and forget the promises I made to myself to leave Hunter alone and kill myself instead. Instead, the siren in me fully takes over.

My focus sharpens; my senses awaken to their fullest. Something tells me that this feeding will be different and difficult. His soul is burning, and it might be too late. I need something else to help me, something extra. Vaguely, I remember the feeling of humming to the lake to make it move the boat, and humming to the rain to make it part. Holding on to that feeling, and guided by siren instinct, I exhale and produce a dense mist that descends

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onto the crowd like a giant tongue, licking people into oblivion. I breathe out more and it thickens, drowning out everybody except Hunter who still dances in front of me. The thumping rhythm of moving bodies and loud music fades to a mere echo.

"I tried this twice before, better not fail now. They say three times is a charm," I mutter under my breath and pull open Hunter's eyelids.

"Look at me! *Look at me!*" I snap my fingers in front of his face. He focuses on me with some difficulty, until I feel our gazes lock. This is my ignition point, but it's feeble, like that of a lighter that's almost out of fluid.

There is a shimmering bridge of staring between us, yet it seems weak and it's hard for me to hold it.

I begin singing.

"There you are."

My first notes tremble and then descend between his parted lips into the warmth of his throat. He appears to be glazed, mesmerized, moaning. I catch myself inhaling his scent—pine with musk undertones beneath the vapor of beer and weed. His soul is louder now, as it responds to my call and rises, still sweet, but sour in places, burning. Hunter sighs. I add a couple more verses, echoing the song coming from the stage.

"Without me you cry."

My song streams effortlessly and strikes him with hypnotic force. He moans louder. I inch closer, infusing lethal tones into my voice to awaken more of his wounded soul, begging it to join me. There it comes, a thin coil of smoke, yet it feels like pulling a heavy rope that's slipping through my fingers. I lurch at it, greedy.

*"I surround you,
Love me or I die.
I adore you,
See me or I fly."*

Hunter begins humming to my tune, his dark eyes drowsy, his pupils dilated.

"Ailen?" he says, suddenly recognizing me.

He must have already started turning into a siren hunter and my voice doesn't have as much effect on him. My concentration breaks and I scowl, watching whatever I managed to inhale trail back into his mouth. Before there is time to react, his face turns sinister and bitter.

"You left me," he says with such finality and accusation that my rage evaporates in an instant.

"I...I didn't..." Words escape me.

"Your dad said you'd come for me anyway, because I taste good. Because I'm food for you. I didn't believe him, you know? I told him he's full of shit. But here you are, trying to suck my soul out." He laughs mechanically, his eyes cold; he's still reeling from booze and weed, but is clear enough to be mean.

"This is not why..." I begin, not knowing how to voice my rage. My knees want to give out from the guilt and shame and pain from what I almost did.

"No need to explain, I get it. Go ahead, finish me. I'm pathetic, see? Normal people fall in love with normal girls, *living* girls, just as you said. Well, not me. No-no-no, I picked a monster." His blue eyes turn greenish in the disco light; there is no promise of warmth in them anymore. In fact, his soul no longer even sounds sweet anymore; it's sour and I can barely hear it.

Hearing the word *monster*, I want to collapse and die.

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The fog disintegrates around us, giving way to dancing people and the pounding music. They converge on me and stare me down, as if the power of my voice has left them enraged and they want their revenge. Adding to this, the blond girl, who was hanging on Hunter, returns with two fresh bottles of beer.

I get a better look at her. She's a perfect blonde with a silky cascade of hair, oval slanted eyes, full lips, and a good-sized butt that I never had, wrapped tightly in a sequin dress that shoots off obnoxious sparkles.

"Is that bitch bothering you again, babe?" she says, handing Hunter his beer.

"She's already calling you *babe*?" I say and hiccup.

"Are you jealous?" Hunter says through his teeth, and takes a swig from his bottle.

"I told you not to call me a bitch," I begin, feeling no power in my voice. "I said—"

"I don't give a fuck what you said, girl," she says. Behind her, angry faces of the crowd nod. I feel surrounded by them and take a step back, only to bump into some guy who pushes me back toward the middle of the circle that's formed.

"Come here, babe. I'll make you feel better," the blonde says, pulling Hunter into a greedy kiss, which he not only accepts but answers with his typical theatrics, sticking out his tongue this way and that, glancing sideways to make sure I see it.

I retch; the crushing in my chest feels as if air was forced from my lungs.

"You didn't just kiss this...this...How could you? I can't believe you're so wasted!"

"Go away. I've had enough of your drama," he mumbles through busy lips; he swats at me with his beer bottle like I'm a fly, spraying foam on my silver jacket.

I feel my head lose touch with my body, unable to make it

move.

Hunter breaks the kiss, scowling. “Whasss wrong? Want me to repeat?” he slurs loudly. “Leave me alone. Will you go already?” Perhaps I hear tears in his voice, perhaps it’s wishful thinking.

The girl plants herself over his mouth again. Disbelief doesn’t let me move. I flush with jealousy, then shame, then revulsion, then utter humiliation, and then I lose it. My stomach dives about a thousand feet, and rises up as bitter bile.

Tara seems to have recovered from my commands as well, because she finishes yet another song and shouts from the stage, “You’re making me feel like I’m high, Seattle. Are you having a good time?”

People shout back, jeer.

I feel small and ugly, like an impostor who needs to be ejected, that has no place here. This is not my party after all, whom was I kidding?

“Alright! This next song I dedicate to my parents. Thanks mum and dad. I love you. I love you very much.” Her thick British accent makes me think of a man and a woman, perhaps as slim, yet broad in the shoulders as she is; with dark blond, almost reddish hair, and proud smiles on their faces. I want to wail like a baby.

Hunter’s hand travels down the blonde’s waist, and I push them both away from me before I can stop myself.

“I thought I told you to just leave already!” he shrieks, his face contorted and hard. This is not the Hunter I know. This is someone else, someone revolting and bitter and angry—an almost formed siren hunter and a future woman hater like my father.

Bewildered, I turn and dart through the watchful crowd. Moving feels like being underwater, each step is heavy and excruciatingly slow. My mouth is dry and my muscles resist as if

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atrophied.

“Wait!” I hear, as Hunter stumbles behind me.

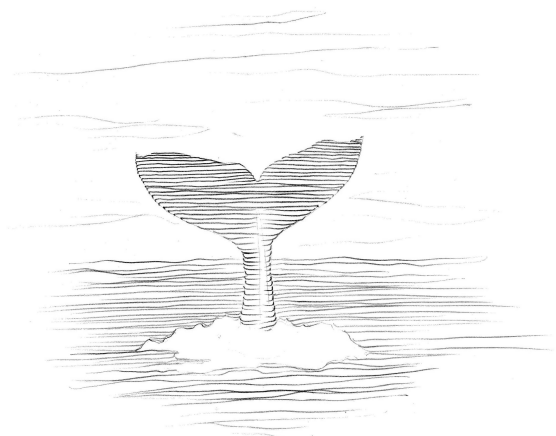
But I’ve made up my mind. Seeing him one more time was a mistake, a big fat mistake. I need to get out of his life and disappear. A pounding migraine threatens to split my skull. I cover my ears, as if it would help. I don’t want to hear Hunter’s shouts. I want out of this constant noise and into complete silence, for at least once in my siren life. I crash blindly through the crowd, past the stage, by the bar, and toward the restrooms. I kick open an unlocked steel door and turn left into the narrow bright red corridor behind it. A few guards try to stop me as I elbow past them and head toward what looks like the back exit.

The door is plain wood and I kick it before realizing it’s probably unlocked and I can open it in a normal fashion. I twist its cool metal handle and swing it wide open. Closing my eyes, I inhale the evening’s damp fresh air. Just as I take a step forward, ready to run, I bump into someone who was about to enter the club, probably one of the backstage guys unloading equipment. But then, I would’ve heard his soul.

I open my eyes.

“Papa?” I gasp, breath caught in my throat, the sweet smell of the evening forgotten.

Chapter 5



Lake Washington

“There you are, sweetie.” He seizes my right arm and presses a sonic gun in the middle of my chest. “I was wondering if I’d find you here. I’ve looked everywhere for you!” Barely discernible coffee breath escapes his lips as he speaks. I’m basked in a trail of expensive cologne, his signature Bulgari cologne. Italian, of course. He’s dressed meticulously, in a casual, yet sophisticated ensemble of shiny oxfords, dark wool jacket, and a carelessly tucked in scarf, woven from the finest cashmere, as if he’s running errands instead of hunting his daughter. Our eyes meet, and I feel a tug of horror in my gut. I know this time he won’t simply let me go; He is my menacing nightmare, forever stalking me, always knowing where I am. And, as in a proper nightmare, I’m always running. This seems to be our game.

“It’s you. *You* did it. You pushed mom off the bridge. Canosa told me. How could you?” I whisper.

His eyes widen for a fraction of a second, then he proceeds with his usual response, as if he doesn’t hear me. “Look what you made me do, Ailen. You made me waste a whole day looking for

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you all over the city. I've been sick with worry. You're leaving me with no choice."

I do something I never thought I could do, though I imagined it a thousand times; I told Canosa about it in sickening detail when she was a bronze faucet in our bathroom.

I lean back slightly, raise my right leg, and kick him in the balls with my knee, hard. He opens his mouth in a grimace and yelps soundlessly in pain. The sonic gun drops from his hand and crashes onto the asphalt, rolling into the gutter. His grip on my arm slackens and the last I see of him is his chin, perfectly shaved and shining with freshly applied lotion, his head lowering down at me as if in slow motion, his body bending.

The horror of what I've done overpowers my rationality. I dared to hit him. I *dared to hit him!* I fall on my butt, roll onto all fours, dive between his legs—kicking him off balance in the process—and then run. My promises to die are promptly replaced by an instinct to escape imminent punishment. I feel like I'm five again and run for my life; for whatever my siren's life is worth.

I cross the street, weaving my way between cars, jogging along the sidewalk. A focused sonic boom hits the air behind me. Craaack! That's death on my heels, screaming in my ears. It's what I wanted—to die, right? Then why the fuck am I running? Pain pricks my ears with a thousand needles, bright circles shimmer in front of my eyes, ready to explode. I know that if I stop to even catch my breath, I'm toast.

I break through a pack of walking teenagers because they happened to be in my way. They gasp in surprise, and then start cussing me out. I pay them no attention. I pass display windows on my right and glimpse my reflection, that of a *mad* teenager, one who doesn't belong, with unnaturally white skin and frightened eyes, skinny and lonely, nearly stumbling.

I think of Canosa, of her grace and poise and elaborate

Lake Washington

meanness that can be even adorable sometimes. I wonder if she saw me leave or if she's still at the club; I wonder where the other sirens are, though none of this seems important. The only important thing is to get away from it all, to some place quiet where I can rest and think. Canosa's face floats into my mind again, the words she told me while I was looking down from the Aurora Bridge pulsing with excruciating clarity. *Ailen Bright, do it for your mother, remember? Hurt him, for hurting you mother.* Can I, ever? There he is, not more than forty feet behind me, and yet I'm running away, again.

There are more distant sonic blasts, but none of them hit me. My legs carry me forward, past closed coffee shops, by grocery stores and gas stations; faster, faster, creating a soothing rhythm, like the heartbeat of my mother's womb. One-two, three-four. One-two, three-four.

I want water. Water calms me. Water will rescue me and tell me what to do; soothe me like my mother used to with the silky, nonsensical stories she made up for me, her tone magical, an infusion of love and caring that's so calming.

I hop over fences, dash through backyards, and race past astounded late-night pedestrians, dog leashes in one hand, cups of coffee in the other. I splash through puddles, jog across roads, and skulk through sleepy suburban alleys, all the way to Lake Washington—guided only by its sulfurous smell and the vibration I feel on my skin. Water. All I need right now is water.

I stop at the very edge of the pier that juts into the lake. Bending down, I clasp my chest and breathe in short rasps, watching my faint reflection shimmer in the dark water. The pier's old wooden beams creak timidly under my feet, mimicking the flow of the waves. The distant drone of highway traffic is punctured by an occasional seagull shriek or two. The air smells moldy. After a minute of steadying my breath, I finally raise my

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head and look around.

It must be close to midnight, because the sky is dotted with stars. The lake is a huge, velvety expanse, black like oil; I once read that it is about thirty-four square miles in size and was excavated by a glacier into a long, ribbon-like shape. I always imagined that real sirens lived here, the irony doesn't escape me.

To my left and to my right, each about two miles away, two garlands of passing lights stretch over the lake's surface—the State Route 520 and I-90 floating bridges—as if the lake is my pool and they are my lane ropes.

I tighten into a string with my arms pressed to my sides, my two legs together as one, my neck straight, and my gaze forward. A memory of my father's sonic gun blast is my starting signal. I dive in head first, piercing the water's surface like a pro, with barely a splash. I inhale the liquid, shivering, glad to be soaked. I gulp it greedily and swallow; gulp and swallow. The lake hushes me, forever oblivious to life's emotional drama—so muddy, stagnant, and quiet.

"Thank you," I say into the water, watching dark bubbles speed to the surface. "Really, I mean it. *Thank you.*"

I don't know what I'm doing or where I'm going. I simply swim, deeper and deeper into the silence.

Rare fish rush aside to avoid collision as I burrow through the lake's underbelly leaving a trail of sand rising in my wake. It's crunchy on my teeth; some of it makes its way into my mouth as I gulp more water, breathing it out through my gills. Other than a gurgling warble that passes through my throat, and the slosh-slosh of oxygen flow into my blood, all noise is gone. The darkness is cold, complete.

A sticky web of self-loathing, self-hatred, and agony weaves its strands around me. I dream of a place with no sound; maybe a desolate cave at the base of an ocean where I can hibernate. I

touch the bottom of the lake and hover inches above it. Water presses my silver jacket close to me, pushes on my eardrums. I must be about a hundred feet deep. *This is what Papa always wanted, complete silence.* I take a handful of sand and let it sit on my palm, catching individual grains and rolling them between my fingers. I can barely see them in my glow. Against my will, I think that maybe, just maybe, I'm beginning to understand my father. I wonder what it's like to be a siren hunter. Was my mother's singing driving him mad? Was he acutely aware of every single sound, amplified into excruciating pain—was that it? Was that what drove him to push her?

What about Hunter? What's in it for him? We could still be together if not for this whole siren hunting business. Well, that and if I didn't jump. I can't turn back and fix everything, it's broken beyond repair. Hunter hates me; he called me *a monster*. And that girl; so blond, so perfect, so warm. So alive. I'll never be like her, yet I can't even manage to be a proper siren. There is simply no place where I fit in.

I don't resist the current; I let it carry me along, feeling numb. I see a few crabs zigzagging between the rocks, their tiny souls a clickety-clack of claws as they scatter away from me. I wonder how many crabs it would take to match one human soul—thousands, millions? Revolting, but possible. Horror floods me; food seems to be always on my mind. I run through my latest tally: the fishmonger from the market, nine people on the way to the Chop Suey club, the security guard, and that rude guy from the dance floor. Their souls raised my body's temperature back to ninety eight degrees, but it was borrowed warmth. It has seeped out already, leaving my body gutted, hungry.

Twelve victims in twelve hours.

The pain is too much and I kick into a mad race, flapping both legs, thrusting my arms, propelling myself forward and

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humming at the same time. I turn into a living torpedo and cover the first hundred yards in a minute, and then speed up to ten miles per hour, to finally bursting forward at fifty knots, travelling at some crazy submarine speed and leaving a rushing tunnel of turbid water behind me. I think that perhaps if I exhaust myself, I'll forget everything and simply linger. I keep propelling myself until my muscles tire out and my vocal cords buzz with exhaustion. Finally, I let myself float up.

I break the surface and hit open water, bobbing on high waves in the foggy dawn and pelting freezing rain. The sky is sleepy with heavy steel clouds hiding the rising sun. Looks like I swam through the night and into the early morning on the day after my birthday. I breathe in the salty air, realizing that I'm no longer in the Puget Sound like I thought. I'm in the vast, open waters of the Pacific Ocean.

I lick my lips—salty—and brush the wet hair from my face. A wave rolls over me; it covers me before spitting me back out again. I glide against its swell, watching the sleeves of my jacket ripple. My growing pain sinks its teeth even deeper into me, pushing past the coldness hidden in my marrow and touching my bones.

"This is what I'm running from," I say to the sky, to the rain. I ache to hear it one more time. "Hunter's soul."

His soul's melody is the only lullaby to which I can sleep, the only rhythm that makes me pulse and forget and dissolve. I try to chase it away, but it just won't go. Like a stubborn bug, it whizzes inside my head and bumps around my skull, making circles in my consciousness, forever restless. The flawless *Summer*, violin concerto No. 2 in G minor, Opus 8, by Antonio Vivaldi—it's set against the texture of all things warm. Now I'm burning.

Perhaps I'll never hear its splendor again, because I'm the very reason it's expiring.

Lake Washington

"Hunter," I say, to taste his name and savor its sound. This is why I keep failing at killing myself; it's impossible to cut him away, to lose him forever. *Oh, my God, what did I do? I left him. Canosa probably snuffed him out like a sweet melodic pudding. I shouldn't have left him; he was too convenient of a target.* I slap myself repeatedly on the head, first with the palm of my hand, then with a fist. Then I scoop handfuls of my hair and pull as hard as I can to feel some physical pain.

"It's my fault!" I cry to the sky. "All my fault!"

But the sky doesn't answer; it keeps dropping rain on my upturned face like a million tiny slaps. And I deserve it. My needy, selfish side got so scared, I ran away. In my fear of facing my father, all I thought of was *me*. Good job, Ailen. Hunter is probably dead right now.

Suddenly, I want to scream. The wind picks up as if in tune to my need. Waves roll over me, hurtling me underwater and spitting me back out again. *Breathe, Ailen, breathe.*

I inhale and exhale to prevent myself from hyperventilating.

"You didn't finish him? What's wrong with you? Are you a siren or not?!" Canosa's voice breaks over the tumbling water.

I spin around, promptly forgetting every single one of my worries. "Canosa?" A seagull shrieks, then another. Rain patters softly, streaking down my face. Waves crash and roll. "Canosa!"

"No need to yell, silly girl. Would you learn your manners! I'm right here." Canosa's head bobs up to the surface and she glides toward me until we're a few feet apart, her long hair streaming in white tendrils next to her body.

"Canosa!" I say again, as if to reassure myself that she is real, that she is here. "How did you know where to find me?"

"You're not the only one who can swim fast, you know." She wrings out her hair, as if it won't get wet again right away.

Chapter 5

"And I don't like ocean water; it tangles up my hair and makes it dull. Ugh."

"I was just thinking about you. I was just wondering..." The question dies on my lips. I was going to ask whether or not she killed Hunter, but the idea threatens to become real if spoken aloud.

"Go ahead, finish. What were you going to ask?" she says.

"I was just wondering..." I start again, unable to say it.

"Did your mother do everything for you? Is that what you're used to? Three times. You've had three perfect opportunities and you blew them!"

She glares at me, and in the middle of the ocean, her grin reminds me of the open jaws of a shark that's about to eat me.

"I..."

"Don't you realize it's harder to kill a siren hunter the more he falls in love, silly girl?" She yells in my face with such force that even the ocean water seems to retreat.

"He doesn't love me. He told me I'm a monster. And my mother never..."

Canosa grabs me by the shoulders and raises me out of the water about a foot, shaking me violently for a few seconds and then dropping me, causing me to go under.

I swim back up, sputtering. "What was that for?"

"I set it up for you. There was background noise for cover, it was a perfect location, and the target was drunk and pumped with drugs. I even got him a girl to make you jealous. What else did you need me to do? How do you intend to be part of our family if you can't even kill a budding siren hunter? Explain yourself, Ailen Bright!"

I stare back at her with the innocent, stupid eyes of a shocked lamb, that seem to say, *I'm scared, I don't know what to do, kill me!* This always happens to me when someone shouts in my

face and I'm not prepared. My father used to do it all the time to make me stand up to him, and to make me break this habit. Needless to say, it only made things worse.

"Stop staring at me like you're mute. Say something!" Canosa is fuming. Her otherwise lovely features look sharp and prickly.

"I couldn't..." I start, and want to slap myself. This is my typical response, to apologize. Everything has always been my fault.

"Oh, don't cry." She pouts her lips and waves a hand in the air, brushing something imaginary away. "All I want to hear is a good enough reason why. Why couldn't you do it?" She smiles, her anger seemingly gone.

"Because..." I swallow. "Because I love him," I say, finally. Another wave crashes over us and, this time, I let it drag me several feet down, not caring to come up, preferring to simply drift until I cease to exist.

Canosa hooks her arm around my waist and pulls me up. I breathe in the salty ocean air and let her hold me. We bob like this for a minute, or maybe an hour; two sisters bound by the same grief, in the middle of nowhere. When she gazes into my eyes, I see a sadness deep inside, lurking quietly. She pushes it down and appears cheery and mean again; in other words, her usual self.

"Then I will make you," she says. "That's what family does. We help each other in difficult times. Do you understand?"

"What are you going to do?" I say, my words rushing out faster than usual.

"Hmmm..." She taps a finger on her chin.

"No, not Hunter! No-no-no! What are you going to do to him?" I break out of her embrace, shivering.

"Well, I haven't decided yet. But I think I have an idea." She twirls her finger around a lock of her hair and chews on it.

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“What!” I scream. “What idea?” Then I begin spitting questions one after another, as if a dam was opened and, finally, everything has been permitted to spill out. “Wait, is he okay? Did you see him at the club after I left? Did he leave? Did that girl leave with him? Did he drive in his truck? But he was drunk, so did he drive drunk? Did you see my father? Did he...”

I take a breath to continue my tirade when Canosa waves her hand at me and dives, a fountain of frothy water erupting from where she just kicked her feet. A streak of white foam burrows into the steel-blue ocean water and I realize she has left me alone, moving away at an enormous pace.

“Wait!” I yell, diving after her.

A swirl of eddies grabs me and twists me around, threatening to snap my bones. This is what it must feel like to be caught in a turbulent submarine wake.

“Canosa, wait!” I try to yell into the churning liquid. I get dragged further down by the current; it saps my energy and envelops me in a cloak of gurgles and a rough, salty taste.

“Where are you?” I peer into the darkness around me, falling slack. I’m still turning this way and that like a puppet, but slower now. As the wake recedes, I begin swimming without any idea which direction I came from and which direction Canosa went.

“Canosa, please. Why do you always have to leave like this?”

I swim up toward the light to orient myself. Surfacing, I join the rain and begin to cry. I can’t fight anymore; I have nothing left to fight with. Guilt surges through me like a focused jet of scalding hot water, searing my intestines and setting my face on fire.

“Please, don’t do it. Don’t harm him! I’ll make up the courage. I’ll go back and finish the job. I promise.” I don’t know

Lake Washington

why I say it or to whom. It's no use. I know I have barely enough strength left to stay afloat, unless I eat a soul. And I vowed not to kill anymore. The sky weeps with me, perhaps sensing that my crying is not enough. I wish I could drown in its tears. If only I could listen to Hunter's soul one last time.

"I'm lost," I say, as if the sky will help me. "I'm tired and I'm lost. What do I do?" I can barely move my lips and I know I need to eat, soon. The ocean swells around me, its waterline breaking my world in two: above and below. Both are pewter-gray, one light and one dark.

Which one will it be, Ailen Bright? Are you going to run like a coward again? Will you keep choosing this slippery, numbing existence of a recluse, fluctuating between bouts of endless amnesia? Or will you go after your love, even if it means death? Take your pick. Indecision sobs within me, striking a precarious balance act. The rain stops and the waves subside. Morning advances, turning the sky pink and the ocean's turbid water turquoise blue. The sun's first rays start to burn my skin and I scowl. My instinct is to run again.

"Stop it!" I yell. "Stop running away all the time, you chicken shit!"

But it's the only thing I know how to do. "I need...to stop...running away...from myself," I whisper. I lay flat on my back on the quiet water and float like a sea star, watching the sky shake its remaining clouds.

"Women were not made to haul water on their backs, Papa. You got it all wrong. We're not evil!" My angry cry forces an excess of air through my vocal cords, and I cough up each word with phlegm. I feel energy rise within me, something that was awoken not by hate, but by something else.

"It's love that you see in our gaze. Women were made to love. The way we look at you, the way we talk, the way we walk.

Chapter 5

Of course every man wants a piece of that. It's called love!" I let it all out in a way I've never allowed myself to before.

"Yes, men want to hear our song, a song to die for, because love is the only thing worth dying for, Papa. Have you ever really loved in your life? Have you? Did you love Canosa? Was that real? Or was it a lie like everything else?"

As soon as the last words leave my lips, I know that if he's a siren hunter, it means he really *did* love her, if what Canosa said is true. Perhaps not everything is lost with my father; perhaps there is something that's still alive within him, deep inside.

I'm done running.

My retreating game is over. A rare calm settles over me as I hatch a plan to clean up my mess. It's simple. I'll revive my father's soul—see if I can bring it back to life. I won't kill him, I'll let him live. And I'll try to reverse the process so that Hunter will stop loving me. I'll make them both normal, again. I'll need to reason with Canosa and the girls so that they agree to leave them alone; and if they won't, I'll fight them until I die in the process, if I have to.

"Sounds like a plan. This time, when I finally bite the dust, at least it won't be for nothing," I say and grin.

The world rights itself. I find myself humming and I drift to the shoreline. Minutes ago it was miles and miles away, and now it's within a couple hundred feet or so. Sheer will propels me forward and I find that I'm close to the mouth of the Salish Sea, that point where it flows into the Pacific Ocean. A couple of fishing boats make their way out on their daily prowl. Ahead of me is the line of beach, with its dirty sand and slippery logs that are bumping and bobbing in the surf. Beyond the shoreline, the dark woods grin at me, their top branches grazing the bottom of the sky as it rapidly turns blue.

A crowd of seals rests on a jutting rock. One of them barks

Lake Washington

and another one answers. Their souls overlap like badly played tubas in an orchestra, sounding rich and fatty. *This, I could eat.*

I glide along with the tide, taking in the scene, when a large amount of water feels misplaced to my right. A loud snort follows a gigantic splash. My heart skips a beat as I get doused by a wave. Underwater, our eyes meet for a brief second. Within arm's reach, a humpback whale passes, its large, glistening body crusted over with shells, its tail rising and falling slowly in motion. Its soul envelops me in a boom of the lowest note a pipe organ can produce, accented by high-pitched wails and trilling, as if it pursed its lips, frowned, and shook its head, saying, *Don't you even think about it.*

I'm dumbstruck.

It takes me a few minutes to float up.

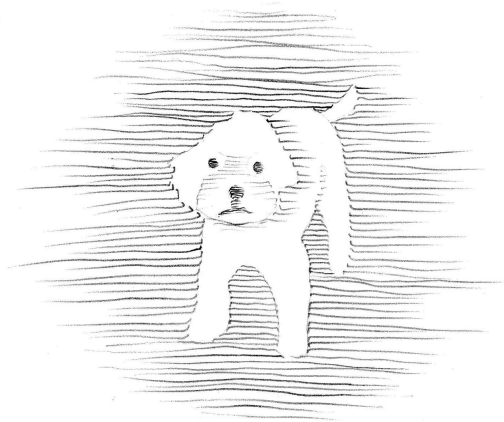
"I swear...I'll, never. Ever," I say and swallow.

The whale answers me with one last snort; it sounds like a laugh, but it's approving.

I feel insignificant in its presence—small and pathetic. The whale swims away from me, overpowering in its grace. Its tail breaches the surface in one last wave goodbye. This was the last push I needed, confirming what I'm doing.

The salty water rolls over my head as I dive and speed toward the city.

Chapter 6



Seattle

I part the murky water, gliding fast, propelling myself by a desire to share what I've seen and felt; my hunger now put to rest in the deepest corner of my ribcage. I want to hold on to this overflowing emotion, pour its exuberance into a song, and wake my father's soul, making it rise from its ashes. Can I do it? Or is it burned to the ground with nothing left but hate? And what about Hunter? Though my heart twists from ache, the pain no longer stops me. I'm not running anymore. I'm moving forward. *Hunter, hold on, I'm coming.* Hours fly by like minutes. I make it through the Salish Sea curve, passing the interconnected basins of the Puget Sound. The water warms up the closer I get to the city and, finally, I reach the ship canal. I turn into it, moving cautiously so as not to attract attention. Commuter souls make a racket on their way into work. The hustle intensifies as I close in on the city's main artery, the Aurora Bridge. It's the same bridge I gazed down from while thinking about my mother—about what she felt and why she jumped—never imagining the truth.

I surface by our marina. It's the day after my birthday, and

it's close to lunchtime judging by the sun and the amount of foot traffic on the Fremont Bridge. The sun's rays break through the milky haze of a typical September afternoon. By midday, they'll probably completely disappear behind the clouds. I gaze up and find myself unconsciously drifting to where my father moors his boat; but its slender nose is not poking out. He must be on the prow, cruising, looking for me or Canosa.

I breathe faster, licking water off my lips, passing a hand through my wet hair. It's been hours and hours since she left me in the ocean. What could she be doing? Where should I go first? I'm trying to decide if I should swing by my house or go to Hunter's house, or if I should check out the siren meadow in Seward Park. Then, I hear a song. And hysterical barking that sounds faintly familiar. A siren is feeding on someone right by the Burke-Gilman Trail. What? In the middle of the day? Across the marina from where a siren hunter moors his boat?

Curious, I follow the sound, quickly diving to cross the canal. There, where the asphalt road hugs the shore, curving into an S shape, a pocket of mist hangs in the air, obviously out of place.

I raise my head barely a few inches above the water, to avoid being seen by some eager tourist gazing from either bridge. "Shit!" I proclaim, and cover my mouth. "Who could it be? Certainly Canosa is not *that* stupid."

The mist grows thicker, in billowing plumes of steam, partly reaching over the ground, partly sitting in the water. As far as I understand, it's designed to hide the feeding siren and her victim, rolling off a siren's skin amidst the song. But not in plain sight, and at the busiest time for foot traffic! Maybe it's a trap; maybe my father set up a fog machine to lure me? I cautiously swim toward it, diving to avoid a pair of kayakers and resurfacing about fifty feet away.

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A couple of bikers point at it now, pedaling as they pass by; they're mesmerized by the echo seeping from the cloud, mixed with the dog's yelps. A man with a cane walks by, never lifts his head, and continues on his trek, wherever it is he's going. A couple of women chat as they jog by, too busy with their daily exercise routine to break and investigate. My fears fall to rest.

I drift closer, plunge, and dare to resurface right on the inside edge of the fog pocket, careful not to let the siren notice me.

She glows a bright white against the dimness of the haze. Her petite body shivers in tune to the song. She's submerged up to her waist in the lake; her arms stick out like two colorless limbs as her hair cascades down her back in long waves, strands of it flowing in the water. A faint odor of decay wafts from her, but not too strong; it's mixed with a hint of lily.

"Pisinoe," I mutter under my breath, recognizing her tilt of the head and her slender, teenage-like figure. She's short, so it's definitely not Ligeia; she's not chubby, so it's not Teles either. And she doesn't have enough curves to be Canosa.

"Yep, that's her," I whisper.

Her song trills in the high, lovely tones of a choir singer, a soloist, one of those super-gifted girls you see on TV in talent competitions. I realize I've never heard her sing.

*"...want me a lamb,
A white little lamb.
I'd feed it, I'd pet it, I'd kiss it, I'd hug it.
I'd make it a pillow, I'd walk it, I'd tug it."*

On each *it* she sways to her left or her right, twirling her hands in the air and then clasping them together like a little girl as she rolls her head, almost dancing.

I carefully step forward, feeling the cold sand under my

feet; I wince at the barking and can barely make out the shapes of the victims in the shifting fog. A white poodle thrashes on a taut leash, his breath puffing into the cloud. Its owner appears to be an elderly lady who is slumped over on the rocks. Her comfortable walking shoes are dipped in the water, their pinkish beige skin soaked. Her eyes are transfixed, her hair a crown of dandelion fuzz about to be blown away into oblivion.

I stifle a gasp. *Missis Elliott! Oh, my God, It's missis Elliott and her doggy Lamb-chop!*

No matter the weather, my neighbor always went out on her early morning and early evening walks with her poodle, huffing and puffing up the steps back to Raye Street. Any time she saw me, she claimed it was her solution to a long life and would shake her finger at me and demand I do the same. Whenever the Seattle sky decided to play peek-a-boo with the sun, she was out in a flash, pulling her poor poodle with her; she was always telling me I need to soak in the *vitamin D goodness*. This sun-walk is killing her now, as if life said, *You thought you could predict me, old lady? Eat this!*

I'm on the fence. Do I want to save her? The last time I checked, I hated her guts. The last time she saw Papa slap me on the porch, she conveniently averted her eyes. Then she gossiped about it to Mr. Thompson, our immediate neighbor, her convenient ear for stories of any kind. I know because I saw them give me weird glances when I went to school that day, shaking their heads and bowing next to each other so closely their noses nearly touched, as if they were discussing some secret conspiracy. On top of this, the last time she said anything nice to me was... never. She was always scolding, bitter and disappointed.

"Old hag," I mutter.

Of course her soul sounds like whispering lips; that, and the sound of breaking plates and the rushing of frilly cotton,

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underscored by some other disgusting sounding scrubbing... powdery. Pisinoe must really want her dog, to be able to stand the taste. Missis Elliott's soul strings across the mist, leaves her body, and oozes into Pisinoe's mouth with an audible pop.

*"I got me a lamb,
A white little lamb."*

The last verse of the song dies and the old lady looks straight at me, with such pleading in her eyes that I should've known better. I'm probably the last person she sees who could help her. How am I different from Papa? What did I just do with my pitiful hate? I instinctively raise my right arm to reach out. It's too late. Her life is gone. She folds down into a heap of pastel cotton, her head falling on the rocks with a dull thud. A smile of utter happiness spreads across her wrinkly face, making it appear younger, as if it belongs to a sweet old woman who loved everyone in her life and baked cookies for her neighbors every single day.

I unfreeze. "Pisinoe!" I yell.

"Huh?" She turns and smiles broadly. "Ailen!" Without missing a beat, she turns back, sways to the shore and seizes the dog by the scruff of its neck, jerking the leash out of Missis Elliott's cooling hands. The dog is hysterical, and so is Pisinoe.

"Shhh, quiet now. I got you, I got you. You're a strange little lamb. How about I call you Daisy. Is it okay if I call you Daisy?"

She covers it with kisses. The dog barks like mad, trembling all over, its tail twitching, its paws hitting the air.

"Pisinoe. Number one, it's not a lamb, it's Missis Elliott's dog and his name is Lamb-chop. Number two, you can't feed in plain sight during the day, are you out of your mind?"

"I got Daisy, look. My first pet lamb. I finally have a pet!

I'm so excited!" She stretches her arms out. The poodle twists madly in her grip, its eyes rolling in terror. It stopped yelping and only whimpers now.

"I said, it's not a lamb. *It's a dog.* Can't you tell the difference? And where are the others, where is Canosa?"

"Oh, well, Ligeia wouldn't hunt with me, she's with Teles. I hate her. Stupid cow." Her pretty face clears as she shifts her attention back to her newfound pet. "But isn't she cute? She's so soft and warm." She buries her face in the poodle's mane when I hear the boat. I don't even care to tell Pisinoe that the dog is a he, not a she. There is no mistaking the engine's purring.

"Did you hear that?" I grab Pisinoe by the elbow.

"Hear what?" she says, her eyes wide.

"My father! The siren hunter! Do you hear it? The boat!"

"I don't hear anything. You're playing a trick on me!" She pouts.

"I'm not. Jesus, girl, I swear! My father, the siren hunter, he's coming. We need to get out of here, now. Please, put the dog back on the ground. Let's go." I tug at her.

"I'm not leaving my pet. I'm taking Daisy with me." She purses her lips and attempts to dive. I grab her shoulders and block her. Without either of us singing, the fog disintegrates. A biker stops, uncertain. I can see his silhouette shimmering through the remaining haze.

"Drop it!" I hiss through gritted teeth.

"But I just got it!" Pisinoe wiggles out of my hold, her voice a stockade of bells. Lamb-chop starts barking again. The fog lifts completely, revealing two more onlookers. Whatever mesmerizing magic was in the air is dying quickly.

My father's yacht purrs louder. He's no doubt maneuvering around boat traffic to get here as fast as he can. He's still several miles away, but I can discern the Pershing motor clearly through

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the surrounding white noise.

My impulse is to drop everything and run. I tell myself, *I'm done running, remember? I have to face him.* Papa's voice slips into my thoughts, *Women were made to haul water, Ailen.* A familiar fear jumps into my throat, but this time, I choose to ignore it.

"I'll show you what women were made for, Papa, I promise," I whisper. I struggle with Pisinoe, shouting in her face, "Please, leave the dog, *now!*"

"But! It's my Daisy! You can't take her away from me. You can't, *you can't!* I just got her—"

"It's not her, it's *him!*"

"I always wanted a pet. You have your boyfriend, and what do I have? Nothing. Please don't tell Canosa, she wouldn't let me...Have you ever wanted something really, *really* badly?" She pleads with tears in her eyes, probably understanding that I'll win the fight, but still wants to convince me.

Hunter's face flashes in my mind. "I don't have a boyfriend," I say, slacking my grip. I feel sorry for her and for her wish to have a warm body next to her, a body that's living; I understand this simple desire for someone who simply loves you without any questions asked.

Tears cascade down her lovely cheeks, as if she is playing a game of pretense that went too far and got serious. She reminds me of me, the night before my mother left. I begged her to sing one more song, knowing that it would anger Papa, but still demanding it until she did. After she tucked me in and left, I heard him yell at her through two closed doors, my bedroom's and theirs; heard him hit her repeatedly, storm out, stomp downstairs, then slam the front door of our house so hard that the walls shook. That evening was the last time I saw my mother. It was my fault he pushed her. My fault...

“Have you?” Pisinoe repeats, looking into my face, pressing poor Lamb-chop to her chest so hard the dog can barely breathe; he just whines quietly.

“Yes.” I blink. “Yes, I still do. I still want it really badly.”

“See, I knew it, I knew it! What kind? What kind?” Her eyes sparkle again.

“I don’t want a pet, Pisinoe. I want my mother back,” I say.

“Oh.” Her mouth forms a perfect O in surprise.

I look away, staring hard and swallowing. There, below the Aurora Bridge, Papa’s silver yacht is visible now, breaking the speed limit and rushing toward us. It sends clouds of spray up its sides, its nose diving and rising. We have a minute at the most.

Shouts make me look back at the shore. Several people run toward us to investigate. Another few yards and they’ll be upon us. I use Pisinoe’s distraction and yank the poodle out of her hands, but as I lift my arms to toss it back onto solid ground, she shrieks, jumps out of the water, and lands on top of us both.

We sink. Water gurgles in a mess of bubbles, hair, and struggle. Pisinoe’s hands circle around the dog’s neck, I hear his laborious breathing. He’s suffocating. I thrust my hands into her armpits and surface, bringing her up with me. We play tug-of-war with the poodle that is now wet and slippery, shivering like crazy, and biting my arm in agony.

“You’re killing it, let go!” I scream.

A man shouts something, his hand on Missis Elliott’s neck checking for a pulse. He points at us, and flips open his phone. Two more people run up, one takes off his shoes and steps into the lake. I swirl to look back. My father’s Pershing 64 is about a hundred feet away, complete with its engine-whirr and ethanol stink.

We struggle above the water, then again below it. I’m stronger, but Pisinoe is holding on to the poodle for dear life.

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Lamb-chop gulps for air, the water sloshing down his throat. Great. Now I have to get him back out and revive him, too.

I hear the motor revolutions. They resonate in the waves, louder, louder. It's too late to do anything else now except to try and get Pisinoe away. There's no time to explain to her why I need to see my father alone and not with her in tow.

With the dog firmly in Pisinoe's arms, and both of them firmly in mine, I kick off; I dive away from the boat, and swim across the canal and deeper into Lake Union. At that moment, Lamb-chop's soul—the obnoxiously crunchy noise of gnawing on bones that promises to taste raw—escapes his little body. One second it lingers close to its muzzle, the next it disappears into the murky water in a bubble, barely visible, glistening with a faint iridescence before popping.

I keep swimming deeper on autopilot, mesmerized by what I just witnessed. I wonder if people who die of natural causes let go of their souls exactly like that. A new idea about how to satisfy my hunger visits me like some morbid joke. Perhaps I can catch souls from the dying, perhaps...

Pisinoe bites me. I'm so surprised, I let her go.

"Daisy! My Daisy! Oh, no!" She shakes the poodle. His mane swirls in slow motion; his bead-like eyes open and his tongue lolls out lifelessly, floating to the rhythm of her shaking.

"He's dead, it's no use." I clasp her forearm.

"*You!* You did it! It's your fault! You interrupted me when I didn't ask you to!" Pisinoe lets go of the dog and punches me in the ribs with both fists. "You killed it, you did, you did!"

I quickly circle around her, come up from behind and press my hand over her mouth, but she keeps trying to scream, so some mumbling escapes through my fingers. Slippery little thing, she twists out of my grip just as my father's yacht, now within twenty feet, takes a sharp ninety degree turn. I know the maneuver

really well; it's an emergency stopping technique used to avoid hitting something on the water, because simply pulling the throttle back won't work. Papa is a master at stopping directly where he plans to, having boasted about it to my mother so many times. Precise as always, he stops his Pershing 64 directly over our heads. He found us after all.

The boat's hull hovers over us in a dark, ominous oval. The dog forgotten, there is a momentary stillness. We're about ten feet underwater, floating silently, and our bodies are shimmering faintly in the gloom. We both glance up, then at each other. In a split second, an understanding of what's about to happen passes between us.

I look up.

A huge bubble the size of a life preserver erupts from a protruding conical contraption right at the waterline, on the hull's bow. The bubble quickly grows, doubling and then tripling in size. I watch it, enthralled, as if it's moving in slow motion. In reality, not even a second goes by. The bubble reaches its maximum size and bursts into a foam-cloud, as if a fizzy tablet has been dropped into the lake. A million tiny bubbles speed toward us in the focused jet of a sonic blast.

Boom!

I'm caught in a violent current that yanks me down several feet, dousing me with sparkling bursts of gas and hissing into my ears, stretching my eardrums inward, to the point where I think they'll pop. Miraculously, they don't. My arms and legs go numb, but I can feel my gills spurting water. This tells me that I'm still alive. Carried down by inertia, I begin flexing my fingers, one by one, until the drag subsides and I can finally open my eyes, not afraid anymore that my eyeballs will burst from the blast's pressure. The problem is I can't see anything.

My eyes feel like they've been boiled, making everything

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dark and blurry. Sand particles dance all around me, and that's all I can see. Something crunches on my teeth as I swallow, wincing at the pain of inhaling and exhaling. My right side is one gigantic bruise. I move my legs and try to swim up; I advance slowly, knowing that this is what it's like to be hunted. This is so Papa's style. Let machinery do the job for him, firing blindly, hoping to hit the target but never having to get wet or even pulling on the fishing line.

Fury pokes its head into my chest, raising my blood pressure, dancing on my skin like a million needles. I struggle to push it down, searching for every single memory of my father that brought me any kind of joy, but coming up empty. My weak attempt at love ruptures like a sheet of wet tracing paper.

This is blast fishing. I float higher. Hunting sirens, perfectly legal and admirable, huh? No casualties to report, only a burst of bubbles.

I want to yell at him. A perfect tirade forms in my head, pumping in rhythm to my growing anger. I want to shout it in his face so that he can hear me.

We're fish that are supposed to float belly up. Is that what we are to you, Papa? Fish, to collect in an easy catch? We're not even human, right? We're vile undead creatures that want to thwart the very spirit of men.

Boom!

Another blast shakes me to the bones, but this time it misses me, merely brushing me with its echo. My ears explode with brilliant pain. It shakes me from head to toe and I go limp, but it only lasts a few seconds. I'm recovering quickly. I flex my fingers, one by one. Slowly, they move. Good.

I raise my hands and work my jaw, up and down, left and right, until I can feel my tongue and talk.

"Pisinoe," I croak into the water, barely audible. "Pisinoe!"

Louder.

Above me, her white body floats, belly down, arms and legs spread wide in a star-like pattern.

She got hit, and she got it worse. Her eyes are two question marks, her mouth a silent *why* as she drifts upward, eyelids aflutter. For the second time today, I see that look again, that last cry for help, as if her face is my mirror, magnified and distorted. Pisinoe, the girly, flirty, capricious me who never got to happen; the long-haired, flaunty me who didn't dare to exist.

"Hang on, I'm coming!" I yell. *I will not give you the satisfaction, Papa. I won't, I won't!* I kick up and reach for Pisinoe's ankles, yanking her down, straining from the concentration of effort. She's not answering me, not blinking. Her mouth is open, and her arms are slack. We're face to face, and I'm no better than a child, shaking her like she shook Lamb-chop not too long ago, knowing that it won't make her any more alive, but not giving in; clinging to some crazy hope that everything will be all right.

"Don't you die on me," I croak. "Don't you ever..."

Boom!

Another explosion moves through the muddy water at an alarming speed of a mile per second. It hits Pisinoe directly in her head, ripples along her body, and exits her feet. I feel her disintegrating in my hands. She jiggles once, and then simply bursts into what looks like a million bubbles. The bubbles pop, and Pisinoe is gone.

Gone, like my mother.

I stare at the empty water.

Rage rises in my stomach and fills my entire body with a blinding urge to kill.

"No!"

My scream shakes the water around me. As with my humming before, the lake answers. It swirls and rushes into a mad

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undercurrent, twisting everything in its wake. I forget who I am; I cease to exist as a thinking, reasoning being and become primal. I become some living organism that's high on a murderous rush, crazed with grief, exalted at the prospect of killing.

Time comes to a standstill.

My mind is gone, my siren instinct takes over.

"Here I come, Papa. Hear me? *Here I come*," I say quietly, knowing he heard my warning, or sensed it.

Nothing matters anymore except that oval shape ten feet above me, the boat's hull. A sharp pang sings my throat, eager to exit. Something dark and sinister wakes inside me, and it's mad. Mad for being disturbed. It seeps into my muscles, burning, filling me with hatred. Irrational, consuming, blind.

My vision rolls into a focused tunnel. Like a perfect joint, I suck on it, inhale with my stomach, hold it in, then let it out in grim satisfaction, knowing that I'm only getting warmed up.

Another boom brushes past me. I merely flinch.

"I. SAID. NO!!!"

One powerful stroke is all it takes. I surge upward and leap out of the water.

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Lake Union

Imagine being shot from a cannon. That would be me. But it's not *just me* anymore, not my will and muscles alone. There's water. Water cradles and pushes me up, creating a fountain jet, with my body on top of it. First my head, then my shoulders, and then my torso breaks the surface, rain jacket and jeans sticking to my skin. I sail up. Light, noises, and smells all hit me at once, making me ravenous. At some point I realize that my toes don't touch the lake anymore, yet I keep moving up, perceiving everything in one tenth of the speed of normal time. I'm propelled about ten feet into the air, riding a singular spurt of water. When its force recedes, I pause mid-leap, arms stretched out to my sides like that of a flying bird, legs folded beneath me in a diamond shape, the soles of my feet fully touching. I take a mental snapshot of the view, to remember it later.

My father's boat sits about five feet beneath me. I can't see my father behind the glare, but I sense him staring. Still hovering, in the momentary pause of not moving up anymore and not yet falling, I holler a guttural animal cry, pouring out my dismay for

him to hear.

“You!”

My voice expands into a circular sound wave that travels quickly. I feel nearby living souls vanish into hiding, reverberating to my accord, terrified. Fish, crabs, dogs, boaters, drivers, they flinch with the desire to run. Only my father stays put, in his cockpit. I hear his leather-gloved hands grip the steering wheel, and the hinge of his cleanly shaved jaw as it falls open; I imagine his eyes growing large and vacant, perhaps jealous in some way. I hope.

Gravity does its job and I fall, but not before forcing my trajectory forward. His boat’s deck is my landing target. As I descend, I continue bellowing, oblivious to anything or anyone in my path. My mouth opens wide in a poisoning agony, spitting a terrible cry all over the lake’s basin, echoing off sails and building facades and marina garage walls—any flat surfaces it can find.

“You killed her!”

The Pershing’s cockpit glass shimmers at my cry. But I have no effect on my father. His soul is long dead, so the boat doesn’t move. It only careens on the waves, wider, harder. The waves are rising. They play with it like it’s a dull plastic toy in an enormous bathtub instead of the sleek luxury yacht that it is. There is no wind today; the waves are of my making.

I land on the padded area of the deck with a soft slap, and crouch, my legs spread wide for balance. The large glass pane is the only obstacle between me and my father. Behind me, the mass of the jet spray’s water crashes down and over the deck.

“I HATE! YOUR! GUTS!!!”

My cry resonates with the entire body of water. It shakes every molecule, even making wood crack and splinter because of the wood’s moisture. Any material that has liquid in it answers me and expands. I can call it to me and break everything in my path.

Lake Union

After taking another breath, I instinctively dive into *Let Me Be* by Siren Suicides. It's the song I didn't get a chance to finish; I never made it to the end in the Pike Place Fish Market restroom. I'll finish it this time, no matter the cost. *I'm going for it.* Only one of us will be left alive after this. Only one.

*"Why can't you let go of me?
Whispering in my ear,
Pulling on my skin.
Let me be happy, let me be happy.
And I will be, I WILL BE!"*

Waves crash against the yacht, in tune with my singing. I take a breath as the wind picks up and a dark cloud rolls overhead, blotting out the sun. The cockpit window grows dark and I can see my father behind it. His face is a mix of awe and disbelief. We stare at each other.

*"Why don't you believe in me?
Cradling my hopes,
Strangling my dreams.
Let me be happy, let me be happy.
AND I WILL BE, I WILL BE!"*

For one second, there is only a thin layer of crystal between us. It explodes into a shower of shiny reflections. Papa shields his face and cups his ears. He doesn't want to hear me. This time, he will.

I'm a predator ready for attack, spreading my arms wide, lifting my head up, opening my mouth until it cracks, and howling my deadly call.

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*“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, I WILL BE.
I! WILL! BE!!! I WILL!!!”*

My song is complete. I take the liberty of adding an extra line, because it feels good to shout it, because I wanted it to come out of me before I died, to be heard. I'm overwhelmed by the time I hit the last note of the word *will*. I shriek it a pitch too high, and the sky amplifies my raging pain like an enormous loud speaker and slams it back into the lake with immense power. Its rush hits the water like a boulder with a deafening crash.

This is it, I'm going to explode right now. He hasn't heard me, he never does.

All around the boat, water rises in wet dirty sheets topped with foam, gliding higher, building a crater with me and my father in the middle, glued to each other by an invisible bridge of mutual hate. Where is this love I was thinking about, that divine experience I had with the whale? It vanished, leaving me bitter and empty. That desire to ignite his soul back to life is gone. I'm full of hate and I'm about to pay the price. The very last piece of goodness that was hiding in the corner of my existence is now crushed into nothing.

Sheets of muddy liquid rise around us in solid walls, now about fifteen feet high. The waves crest and roll down, causing the boat to bob and spin. I try to grasp at something, but there is nothing to hold on to, only the smooth surface of wet leather. I fall and slide, breaking my gaze and closing my eyes. A roaring crash makes me look up as I'm gliding off the deck. The giant wave continues toward the shore, breaks on it, sweeps over empty

picnic tables and benches bolted to the ground, then recedes at the base of the Gas Works empty factory building, before reaching the parking lot and the road. Drivers stop their cars, roll down their windows, and gawk. There is honking, shrieking, and general chaos.

Guided by some leftover survival instinct, I dig my nails and teeth into the leather, but it rips and I'm sliding again. Turbulent water sloshes back and forth, carrying life preservers, pillows, clothes, and magazines in its wake. I glide to the left and get stuck in the railing. My chest slams into its steel pipe, my knees hitting the hardest. The boat careens and I'm forced to glide back to the other side. I bunch up against the railing again, a sorry sack of wet clothes, my feet dangling in the air. After a couple more rounds of this back and forth, the boat stops spinning and rights itself. My fingers are numb. I manage to steal a glance at the cockpit. There's nobody there. Did my father get washed off? The yacht groans. I feel its paneling give out, its screws coming loose.

I lick my lips and croak, "How come I'm still alive?" Does this mean I somehow managed to kill my father with my song? It's impossible. He must be drowning!

I begin crawling toward the railing to look down.

Two more, almost simultaneous, rolling crashes shake the air, resembling an echo of a bomb explosion. The same gigantic wave that swept Gas Works less than a minute ago, now finally reaches two other lakeside roads opposite the park. Both waves were not as high as the first one, and merely douse the ground, creating more noise than destruction. Traffic comes to a standstill. Some people scream, others open car doors and scurry from curiosity or fear. Car alarms go off, and the air fills with the dusty smell of disaster.

And souls...There's an overwhelming melody of frightened souls, a soup of them, a savory, mouthwatering

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concoction of flavors. I inhale greedily, letting my guard down, my sinister side swiftly taking over.

There are about a thousand feet between the boat and either shore. Both stretches of land are covered with running people the size of ants. Distance doesn't matter. A blinding curtain shuts off my mind like a swift guillotine. Hunger overwhelms me; hunger perhaps brought on by spending the last of my energy on this tsunami of outrage. Blotted out by the primitive desire to feed, there are no more thoughts left in my head except one, pulsing, flashing, and demanding: *I'm a siren, and I'm starving.*

"Papa, if you're alive, watch me now!" I holler. I unclench myself and crouch, grabbing the railing and focusing on the people on the shore.

It's impossible to make eye contact from this far away, but I don't care. I just need to single out a particular soul by its melody and tune in on it, hum to it, matching its overall tone. I pretend I'm a gigantic toad and my humming is my one-thousand-feet-long tongue that strikes with surgical precision. My heart rate goes berserk; my chest grumbles with a terrible void, and my hearing sharpens so intensely I can detect the hair moving on people's backs. I gaze at the pack of stalled cars and fleeing people on Westlake Avenue. Though they are merely dark silhouettes from here, I ignite their souls one by one, spitting out rolled up wads of siren-whine, and precisely hitting each target. They light up by one by one like firebugs, without a single one missed. I sing one low note and suck out their souls before any of them have time to utter a scream or moan. Savory, astringent, lukewarm, soggy. I'm not picky. I gulp them all up like mad. They drop on the ground in scores, dead and happy.

Thick fog rolls off my skin, puffing up the sleeves of my rain jacket and oozing from under my leggings. A lacework of soul ribbons hangs in misty contrails, creating ethereal bridges from the

shore to the boat. I'm shrouded in my own vapor, slurping a few more, unable to see anything due to the mist, but no longer needing to. This is siren binge-eating, compulsive, uncontrollable, excessive. I want to gorge on this sweetness and fill myself to the brim. To feel warm again. But I'm past warm, I'm nearly boiling hot. In fact, I start feeling drowsy as if I'm about to faint from a heat stroke. One more, I think. No, just a couple more, or a dozen. There, I want that one. It's a baby onboard an empty car. She's wailing loudly, her soul sounds hopelessly delicious, pure sugar with a touch of vanilla.

Greediness makes me feel superior, unstoppable.

I decide to feed some more and leave the baby for desert. She isn't going anywhere, none of them are. I rule them. I rule them all. I stand in the middle of the upper deck and holler into the mist. I holler as loudly as I can, emitting a newfound power from feeding in reverberating cascades of soprano. I inhale the odor of ruin and the stink of panic. My arms spread-eagle over the chaos, god-like. I feel like the goddess, Hera—majestic, beautiful, and terrible, possessing the power to kill at will, to rule the water.

My father pops his head from the cockpit, followed by his hands and elbows. He pulls himself up and out of the hole where there used to be a window. His gloved hands and suited knees meet the deck in hopes of holding on. He falls face first, then he picks himself up, kneels on all fours, and slowly raises his head. I don't fully register the importance of this yet, still enthralled in my all-powerful mood.

"Was that loud enough for you, Papa? Did you hear me this time?" I say.

He blinks and licks his lips.

"You did? Wow! Well, how was it, tell me? I'm dying to know here, see." I spread my arms wide, showcasing the chaos I have created—the dampened fog, the dead bodies strewn along

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the shores, the shrieking of mechanical police sirens in the distance, the distinct chop-chop of a news helicopter. It takes a beat. Then the shock of seeing him alive, of understanding that we're both still alive, renders me speechless.

I open and close my mouth, when a shadow sweeps over me. Something, no, someone, flies through the air. Before I realize what's happening, Canosa propels over me in a wide arc, sneering, not in a good way, in a *I'm about to eat you for lunch* kind of way. For a brief moment, she passes directly over me and we look each other in the face, except her face is upside down and six feet above me.

"Ailen Bright! What are you looking at? Help me finish him, go on. Go on, silly girl! I haven't got all day," she yells, flinging the weight of her body spear-like and scooping my father off the deck like an eagle would fetch a jumping salmon right out of the water. He flails his arms and legs mid-air, strains to say something, and reaches for me, pleading. His eyes are...wet?

"Sweetie..." I hear it, faintly, but it's there. Was that a hint of worry on his face? He heard me. He talked to me. He needs me! Suddenly I'm aware of my own breathing and have to think about it.

They plunge into the lake.

For a few seconds, I'm paralyzed.

Then it hits me. He's alive. I'm alive. I finished my song. If it didn't have an effect on him, I would've exploded. But I didn't. Does that mean...Does that mean, that...Mad hope rolls over me and I stumble to the railing to follow them, diving in head first.

The water brings its usual calm, and with the renewed energy from feeding on so many souls, my movements are fast and fluid. Papa floats about twenty feet ahead, his mouth opening and closing the way a fish does when caught and taken off the hook. His arms are stretched in front of him in the gesture of a

welcoming hug, fingers opening and closing, opening and closing. I can barely see him amongst all the debris and sand floating around. But I can see Canosa's glow. She spoons him from behind, her arms belted around his waist in a death grip. Her floor-length hair flows in torn strands, her white teeth shining, her face spread in a gleeful smile.

"No!" I yell. "Get off him, you stupid bathroom fixture! Leave him alone." So much for the art of persuasion.

I kick, accelerating my own pace and burrowing through this gumbo of liquid mud until I'm upon them. I'm a foot away from my father's face, his skin gray and his eyes glassy. Yet there is something that tells me he's still alive. It's so faint I can barely grasp it with my ears; it's more that I can feel it with my skin. A barely detectable tune, almost like the distant echo of a flute, fragile and uneven, played by an amateur from the top of a mountain, brought to me on the wings of the wind, distorted, yet there.

"Finally. For once you did a good job, Ailen Bright. I'm proud of you, I'm..." Canosa continues her typical condescending babble, yet it doesn't have the usual effect on me. It fades and I catch another whiff, another glimpse of the flute, and something else. Butterflies. The hush and quiet patter of fluttering butterfly wings.

"Your soul," I whisper, overtaken by the moment, peering into Papa's eyes. "Papa, I have ignited your soul," I say.

He blinks, not seeing me, and lets out a bubble of air, then a few more. I have maybe ten or twenty seconds at best.

"Let him go!" I shout at Canosa, grabbing her arms and trying to wiggle him from her embrace. But her grip is too strong. This is no easy tug-of-war the way it was with Pisinoe over Lamb-chop. This is a fight to the death, and my father's life is at stake.

"This is how you repay me, after everything I've done for

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you? Very well," she hisses at me. "I'll show you what happens when you betray your family; I'll give you a taste. Let's see how you like it."

The water gets colder as we rapidly sink deeper, and more bubbles escape from my father's mouth. I resort to biting and scratching like a pathetic little girl, grabbing handfuls of Canosa's hair, tearing at it, kicking her and punching her, clawing at her face with my nonexistent nails. All it produces is a mad, triumphant cackle; still, she doesn't let go.

"You're hurting him! You'll kill him like this!" I shout.

"Isn't that my intent?" She grins.

"LET. HIM. GO!"

Papa blinks at me, looking directly in my face. His cheeks fall in, his hands suddenly on his throat, his body convulsing. Then his arms begin pounding everywhere he can reach, though he has barely any strength left. We're face to face, a foot apart. He scoops a handful of my rain jacket and pulls me closer.

I recoil at his gaze. He looks mad; he's thrashing, holding his lips pressed tightly, and obviously fighting the urge to inhale water.

"He's suffocating!" I shout, wrestling with her iron grip.

"Suffocating?" Canosa laughs. "Your father, suffocating?" Her cackle makes me bristle.

"*Yes!*" I come too close to her face. She bumps her forehead into mine forcing me to let go, blinding me with pain.

"Good, he should. And you should get out of this game. This is my business now—it's between your father and me. You nearly ruined my trap and caused such a huge racket. What an annoying, impulsive, flaky girl. And you're being mean to me, irresponsible and forgetful. I can't stand it any longer."

"It was a trap? You used Pisinoe as bait?" I gulp water, disbelieving.

“Now you’re getting it? Finally! I’m impressed.” Her lips move slowly, chewing on each word. “Maybe there is hope for you, after all. Tell me, were you planning to finish your dear papa, like we agreed? Or was this just another attempt to show off what you can do, to get a compliment for your performance?”

Papa stops thrashing. His hands fall off his mouth and he gulps water. Immediately, his body goes limp, his eyelids flutter and his eyeballs roll to their whites. His head hangs and rolls in rhythm to his floating, his dark hair creating a fuzzy halo. In an immeasurable distance away, I detect the faintest tinkling of a flute. He’s still alive.

“Don’t you die on me now! I don’t want you to die! Hold on!” I scream, and then bite into Canosa’s right hand.

She kicks me in the face with her foot and I let go, furious, searching her eyes for some sign of compassion.

“You’re quite a pest, aren’t you? Why won’t you give up? He killed your mother. He treated you like dirt your entire life. *Why* are you trying to save him?” she asks. In her eyes there is a frightening absence of emotion; a coldness so deep, I think my heart will stop. I dip in and out of her gaze, clenched by this final fear. In a few seconds, this will all be over. I cry into the water, feeling my hopes and promises vanish. Papa swiftly reaches behind Canosa’s neck, and with a piercing yelp, she lets him go.

I freeze. It was a performance after all. Didn’t Canosa tell me that a siren can’t kill a siren hunter with an ordinary drowning or strangling or stabbing or any other way a normal human being would kill another? Didn’t she tell me that the only way to kill one is to reignite his soul and then sing it out in a normal siren manner?

He tricked me, again, using me as always.

Canosa continues shrieking, her face distorted with pain; her hands cover her neck and she pulls her knees into her face,

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framed by her flowing hair.

“What did you do to her?” I say.

My father doesn’t answer. Not like he can talk under water but, still, I at least expected a nod. Instead, he glances at me with his typical disapproval, then swims up, reaching with his muscular arms and bending his legs and kicking them. He reaches with such precision, it’s as if swimming fully clothed in a fine Italian suit is the latest trend nowadays. I watch him, in awe and horror, dumbstruck, unsure if I should follow him or if it’s best to leave him alone.

Canosa’s moans kick me into action.

I need to keep her from hurting him. I need to keep them apart and from hurting each other. I don’t know what he did to her. And, yes, she yelled at me, but I can’t leave her here, all alone and in pain. In fact, I feel like I’m caught between two fighting parents. The thought makes me shudder. I reach for Canosa’s ankles and pull her toward me, wincing at the rain of her curses, struggles, and kicks.

“You can kick all you want, but I won’t let go. That’s what family does, remember? We care for each other. You’re the one who told me,” I whisper, determined to keep her here as long as I possibly can, to let my father make his escape.

Canosa thrashes around, screaming. We sink until we bump against lake’s bottom. She picks up a rock and smashes it at my arms. Still, I hold on to her for dear life, like Pisinoe held on to Missis Elliott’s poodle, never letting go. Despite everything, I’m hoping Papa will make it to the surface all right, hoping he will be okay.

“Oh, I’m not done with you yet, Ailen Bright, the girl who thinks only about herself.” More kicks.

I squeeze my eyes shut and dial the pain down a notch, then another, making myself numb. Finally, I feel nothing. How

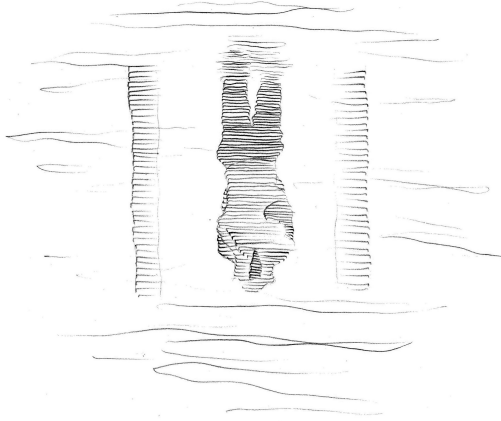
Lake Union

long I hold on like this I don't know. After a while, my knuckles threaten to burst through my skin and my muscles ache from the constant strain. My fingers are curled in a deadly grip that will take minutes to unravel.

At this point, my energy ebbs; Canosa manages to swim, pulling me along with her, up and up and up.

We surface to chaos.

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Union Bay

The air shakes from a multitude of noises, crashing on my ears with a deafening force. A helicopter cruises right above us, the annoying chop-chop-chop of its blades cutting through the white drone of traffic, sending down waves of gasoline-stinking wind. Police cars whiz by on their way to the scene of the tsunami aftermath. Adding to that are the usual cacophony of human souls spiked with fright and extremes of emotion that are typical during times of distress. In contrast, the lake is calm, as if it never erupted. The only evidence of the storm are the brown leaves, twigs, and other floating trash. I look around. We seem to have drifted a good distance away and are now close to Union Bay, which opens up into Lake Washington.

“He stuck his filthy fingers in my gills! The bastard!” Canosa fumes, spitting water from her mouth. She combs her hair with her fingers, pulling it nervously out of the water and wringing it like long off-white cotton sheets that have started graying with age. Her lips quiver with hurt. I decide that she’s clearly very upset and it’s best not to talk to her right now. I

mentally note that a siren's gills must be a very vulnerable spot. Involuntarily, I raise my arm and touch mine gently, feeling their rough edges; I don't dare stick a finger inside to discover how it feels.

"You've had your fun, *now* can we go?" Canosa says, finally.

"I'm not holding you back; you can go anywhere you want," I say, bemused, not fully understanding why she's asking.

"We are going together." She pulls me closer. "Now, tell me, your father..." she begins, twirling a lock of her hair around her finger, glancing up at me and then back at her hair. "Did you really hear his soul?"

Her voice reaches me from far away, as if it's been spoken into one end of a tunnel, and I'm hiding at the other. "Yeah," I say, moving my tongue with difficulty, watching algae float around me as if in a trance. "Yeah, I did. I thought it would sound... different."

She purses her lips, clearly disappointed. "What did it sound like?"

"Oh...You didn't hear it?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "It sounds different when it's reborn. It's very weak at first. It was too weak for me to hear. So, I'm just curious."

"Ah," I say, catching her forceful stare. "Well, it sounded like a flute. A flute and butterfly wings, flapping. I didn't expect it to be so...pretty. And there was something else. I don't know what. I didn't hear it very clearly," I say, afraid to dig deeper into the memory of the sound, afraid to discover what I think it might have been.

"Butterflies." Canosa looks into the sky, as if hoping to see one. "Butterflies and a flute?"

"Yeah, it was like their wings were whispering, you know?"

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Like they were brushing against each other.”

“That is *fascinating*,” she says with fake dreaminess in her voice.

“Wait!” An idea pierces my mind. “What did it sound like before? When you...” I catch myself mid-sentence, terrified I’ll make her angry again by asking about her past, and frightened by my own curiosity. I should hate her. She was, after all, my father’s lover. His only true love. How can I even think this right now, when my mother is dead, when...

Mechanical wailing breaks up the flow of my thoughts. A Harbor Patrol boat closes in on us and we duck underwater, to avoid it.

When we surface again, a few minutes later, I look around, realizing I’m searching for any sign that Papa made it back to land. He’s nowhere in sight, of course; we’re too far away from where we fought. Still, I fear the worst. My heart sinks, and I promptly hate myself.

“I’m sorry,” I say, perhaps to my mother, perhaps to nobody in particular. Or, perhaps to all those people I killed, hoping that this simple declaration will change things for the better. How naïve.

I don’t notice Canosa pulling on my arm, don’t notice us drifting deeper into a wide expanse of water lilies. After a while, we stop. She bobs next to me, her perfect statuesque body waist deep amongst flat, heart-shaped leaves and their slightly lemony aroma. She sweeps her purposefully innocent gaze over me, through a tangle of matted hair. The evening sun breaks through the clouds for barely a moment and reflects in her eyes, coloring her hair bronze.

I have a feeling of *déjà vu*, like I’m back in the tub and she’s my big bronze sister, merely a bathroom statue.

“I decided. Apology not accepted,” she says.

"What? I don't understand," I say, disoriented.

"It will take something more than that, Ailen Bright. You naughty, naughty girl. You promised me you'd kill the siren hunter. Did you do it? No. What did you do? You blew my chance, interrupting my carefully set up plan. I'm happy that you revived his soul in the process. At least you did *that* much." She looks like she's going to bite me in the face.

"At least?" I balk.

"Yes. Good job. But I'm still mad." She narrows her eyes. "After everything I've done for you, after I granted your wish and turned you into a siren. I've been helpful every step of the way... and there's no gratitude. None! Not a single word of thanks!" She shakes her head. "No wonder you have no manners, your mother obviously didn't teach you."

On the word *mother* I snap.

"Don't you dare mention my mother. You. You started it all. It's all your fault." I curl my hands into fists. "Why me? Why didn't you let me die, back in the bathtub, why wouldn't you just leave me alone? What do you want from me?"

She stares me down for a moment.

"Oh, I was bored. I've played every possible game already with the girls and was running out of ideas. So I went for a swim, and that's when you showed up. I didn't even think you'd have the guts to drown yourself, so you nearly ruined my plan. I mean, I had to wait until you turned sixteen, *on the dot*, to change you." She chews on her hair, awaiting my response.

"What?" Her last words hit me with their poison, yet I don't fully grasp them. A few ducks quack and scatter as we drift closer to the shore.

"What do you mean?" I gasp, thinking back to when I jumped off the bridge, which must have been a few minutes after the time I was born, which was at 6:30 in the morning on the

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seventh of September.

Canosa raises her eyebrows and continues droning on, oblivious to my distress.

“The bastard. He fetched himself a living girl and managed to lose her. Idiot. He knew one day I’d try to get my hands on you, so he kept you well locked up. The problem is, he locked you in the wrong room.” She grins. “When you were born, that’s when I had the idea, how to get back at him, you know. How to make him pay.” She smiles, but there is no warmth at all.

“You...you planned this all along? But how...” I think about our marble bathtub and my father telling me it was a Bright family relic, to cherish and not to trample or play with. “How did you turn into that thing, that bronze statue?”

“Who says I did?” She smiles with knowledge that only she has and I don’t. I can see it in her eyes.

“Then how...It looks so much like you. Did he commission it or something? To make it look exactly like you? So he can have you next to him at all times, even when he takes a bath? Is that what he did?”

She blinks so innocently I can tell it’s fake.

“I can’t believe this.” I think back to mom cleaning our bathroom, always taking care to wipe every marble siren on each corner, taking time to polish Canosa’s bronze body with a special paste until it sparkled. She knew how much my father loved it, how he loved to take a long bath after a hard day of work. In contrast to his distaste of all things wet—like the rain or getting his toes wet in lake—he was simply ecstatic when it came to bath time, locking himself in there for hours. I shudder, trying not to imagine exactly what he did in there.

“I’m just a tool for you, aren’t I? A tool for both of you, to get back at each other, right?” I say. Disgust tugs at my gut. I want to claw out her pretty eyes, smash a gaping hole into her gleaming

white teeth, and kick her until she begs me to stop.

"I hate you," I say quietly to her face. There's so much force behind my words that my fury terrifies me. "I hate you both."

Canosa doesn't flinch. "I'm glad we got this straightened out. I hate you too. Very well. What does this change? Nothing. So, it's time we get back to business." She tugs on my sleeve unceremoniously, as if I'm supposed to follow along without a single question.

"Don't touch me! Where are you dragging me?" I thrash, ripping the jacket sleeve in the process. Canosa ignores me, her grip tightening on my arm. I decide to test my theory about a siren's gills being a vulnerable spot and lunge for her neck. As if expecting it, she easily avoids me.

"No-no-no-no, not your filthy fingers too, silly girl. Don't even try it. I think you'll want to quiet down. Because you *want* to see your friend alive, am I right?"

"What friend? Who are you talking about?" I ask, but I know as soon as I do.

"You have more than one?" She smirks. "I was always under the impression that there was only one and one alone. That's what you told me."

And she's right. I never had any friends, always shunned at school, always ridiculed or laughed at, never part of the cool crowd. I shake my head to clear my unpleasant high school memories, and try to concentrate on where she's taking me.

"Hunter?" I exhale and my heart fills with dread. Since I reached Lake Union this afternoon and got distracted by Pisinoe, not a single thought about him has flashed through my mind. Guilt skewers my gut, followed by shame, followed by disgust and, finally, excruciating pain.

"Did you really have to ask? Tsk-tsk-tsk." She shakes her

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head. Her right arm splashes arcs of water droplets as she tows me behind her, parting the carpet of lilies like melted butter.

“He’s alive, isn’t he? Canosa, please tell me he’s alive. Where is he? You didn’t do anything to him, did you?” I say and bit my lip to stop asking questions, knowing I’m babbling to drown out the guilt.

“I didn’t do anything to him *yet*. The girls, however...I told them not to, but you know how they are. They never listen to me. Hurry up then. Come along, let’s go check.”

I hang my head and follow her, feeling empty. What did I get Hunter into? Why do I always screw up everything around me that I touch?

Minutes pass by.

My eyes drift along the lake’s surface, picking out shapes and colors in no particular order, for no particular reason other than to focus on something, anything at all, to make myself stop thinking.

It feels like we swim in pea soup. Debris floats up and around us after being disturbed from the bottom of the lake—rank brown muck mixed with patches of green algae, clumps of kelp, and dead fish bobbing belly up. A pair of greedy eagles that usually perch on the streetlight by the on-ramp circles above, shrieking, waiting for us to pass so that they can dine in peace.

We make it out into the middle of Lake Washington where the water clears up, and Canosa pulls me into a dive. I hold on to her hand, and let her movements carry me, barely flexing a muscle. I slice through the dark liquid with my sorrow and shame, watching her hair flow like bleached seaweed. How much time passes? I don’t know.

Finally, we surface.

Evening is in full bloom, opening up its lavender depths to dusk and rare bird calls, getting ready for the night. About fifty

feet away is the shore. I recognize it. It's the south end of Seward Park's peninsula, the one that conveniently houses their sweet siren meadow. I remember the chant, from when they turned me, when they asked me to kill my father for the first time.

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.

As if this is not enough, I remember finding out about Hunter's job, on the north beach side of the park; I remember our fight, the sirens emerging from the woods, and my father shooting at me. I should've trusted my gut. I should've gone here first, and not let myself get distracted by Pisinoe.

"Canosa? He's alive for sure, isn't he?" I ask again. "There is no chance that Ligeia or Teles have done anything to him while you were gone, is there?"

"Oh, I would never deprive you of the pleasure. We are family, after all," she throws out at me, not even turning her head.

"Right," I mutter, dreading the very idea of what she expects me to do.

We near the beach and come out of the lake, lucky not to scare any evening joggers. Darkness is our cover. Although popular during daylight, not many people dare to venture this far into the park after dusk. Good for them. We're a sure recipe for a heart attack, one wet female clothed in her own hair, rising stone-faced out of the water, shining like a glow-stick, and another one, clad in stolen leggings and a torn silver rain jacket, looking equally as deadly.

I can hear only a dozen souls meandering in the distance, in the parking on the other side of the park, a popular spot for teens to park their cars and blast music. But there's an echo of something else. There, it's very close. I can hear it trail along the warm evening wind.

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“Hunter,” I say under my breath.

I look down, irritated at the pebbles on the beach. They grit into my soles and interrupt the divine melody of the most beautiful sound in the world—that soft, warm tune I was dying to hear one more time. It’s the desire I tried blotting out with my eating binge, to replace the void somehow. Yet knowing, with piercing certainty, that I’ll never find the same tune in another human being, no matter how many I kill, no matter how far I go. The knowledge rises in me like a curse, obliterating coherent thought, logic, and reasoning.

I hear another thing. The wound. His soul is burning; it’s smoldering with a sour taste and it makes his melody snap out of tune every few seconds, fluctuating as if performed by an amateur who didn’t have enough practice.

Pain rips me apart. This means he still loves me, yet I have to make him stop.

“I’m coming, Hunter, I’m coming,” I breathe, trotting after Canosa, across the hiking trail, and up into the woods toward the amphitheater where we both goofed off only yesterday. Now it seems like years ago.

Pine needles stick to my feet with every step, forming a disarrayed crisscross pattern on my white skin, reminding me with their yellowing hue that the summer of my youth is over.

It’s fall. It’s September. And it starts to drizzle. Bushes part like a toothless mouth, letting us in.

I raise my head and survey the meadow, not that there’s much to survey. Its entire expanse, the size of a small soccer field, is blanketed with fog as if covered by a low sitting cloud. Barely visible through the milky haze, two freestanding post-and-beam frames, twenty feet tall and five feet wide, flank both sides of the stage like two gigantic doorways into nothing. This time, I’m entering the meadow from the backside, where actors would prep

for their performance. I step onto its platform and blink, to make sure I'm seeing right.

Evening light hangs in shafts of dark purple, jutting into the mist, promising to turn black soon. The smells of rotten wood and decay circle around my head in a stagnant cloud. The sirens' chant is being performed live, sounding like tears through the air. Goose bumps run up my spine, covering my scalp and face. I don't want to hear it, I don't want to see what I see, but I can't stop.

*"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."*

It's Teles and Ligeia. I step closer, peering up into the mist, and shudder. About ten feet up, on top of one of these weird, empty doorframes, gleeful and hungry, two writhing bodies hold something down as if inspecting their catch.

"Girls, look who is here!" Canosa claps one time and the chant stops.

"Teles? Ligeia? Is that you guys?" I say.

They turn their faces down, sneer at me, and promptly go back to their chanting, repeating it over and over again.

*"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."*

I have the feeling you typically get when watching a bad

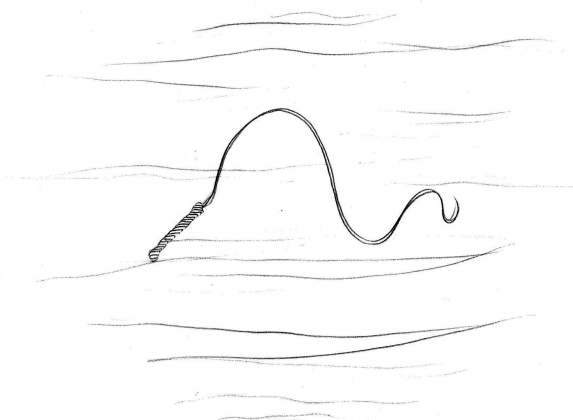
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horror movie, getting ready for the massacre scene, knowing that it doesn't happen for real, but still dreading it, biting your knuckles, hating the stupid actors for their awful performance. Hating them for the fact that you are actually scared.

My heart surges, and then sinks, as I make out the shape in the middle, as if I didn't know who it was all along; the somebody they're squirming over, hanging upside down with his feet tied to the beam with dry vines, his hands tied behind his back, his hoodie loosely draped over his head.

Hunter.

Chapter 9



Siren Meadow

He looks as if he's sleeping. Wisps of fog are his blanket. The mad daze spread across his face must be nothing more than a passing nightmare. His lips are blue, haggard and tired. I want to collect the leftover summer from the air, and tuck him in it to warm him up. I want to sing him a lullaby, one that is never-ending and can soothe his pain away. But I can't.

If I sing to him, I'll accelerate his soul's burning and destroy him for good. If I don't sing to him, he'll turn into a fully fledged siren hunter and destroy me. It's the matter of a simple choice, really. A choice I already made, so why all this doubt? Why do I want to slide in between these ethereal sheets, cuddle close to him, and lie like this forever?

I flinch at Canosa's voice.

"I told you not to touch the boy. Get off him, both of you. Go!" She shoos the sirens away. They scowl and hiss, but they scramble down, deprived of their treat yet obedient. They shout their displeasure and pout like two upset little girls who were told to leave their favorite doll behind and go to bed. Canosa hushes

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them with a cry, yelling at them now. They flee through gaps between the trees and are gone. I'm sure they won't go far, but will hide and watch from behind the overgrown firs and cedars.

I gape upward, at the endless distance that separates me from Hunter.

"Don't just stand there, get on with it." Canosa prods me in the small of my back and I stumble closer.

"Get on with what?" I say, hoping that maybe she forgot.

"Finish him! Before he turns into a ruthless killing machine and wipes us all out, together with your beloved papa," she jeers. She taps her small feet across the stage and jumps off onto one of the benches. She turns around and plops gently down, her hair spread around her in a matted blanket, legs crossed, hands clasped, her face expectant, ready for my performance.

I take a quick second to think, wondering what I can do to stop Hunter from turning and still keep him alive; maybe even reversing it, somehow, and restoring him to the way he was before he saw me jump out of the lake. I need to make him stop loving me; it's the only way.

I dare not take any more time, afraid Canosa will think I've hesitated for an important reason and start asking me questions. I lick my lips.

"Hunter!" I call and wait. "Hunter, it's me. Are you okay?" It's a dumb question to ask; of course he's not okay.

He doesn't respond, but opens his eyes. Dark circles make his irises bluer than I remember, now almost over-saturated against the background of growing darkness. He blinks several times, turning his head this way and that, until he finds me. A big grin stretches his cracked lips and parts his face in two, in the lovely way I've grown to adore. I forget our squabble at the dance club last night. I forget the girl who was hanging on him, and his bitter words. I forget I'm a siren, forget I'm dead. I rush to him, reach

up, and grasp at empty air. He hangs too high.

“Fuck!”

His soul’s faint murmur overpowers my quiet swearing.

“Hunter! Can you talk? Say something, please,” I beg.

He loses his concentration, his lips fall slack, and his eyes close again. I squat, ready to jump up and untie him, when Canosa shrieks.

“Stop!”

I freeze.

She bends forward, indifferent and as cold as a fish, pointing at Hunter with a conductor’s gesture.

“My dear boy, your last wish has been granted. I promised I would bring her, and I fulfilled my promise. Now it’s your turn.” She looks at me. “Do not disappoint me this time, Ailen Bright. Do you understand? I don’t like being disappointed. It makes my skin dry.” She rubs her forehead and flings her hair back, pinching her eyebrows, perhaps to make them look more arched.

“What last wish?” I say, though I already understand. “You wanted to die from my song, not from Canosa’s?”

Hunter’s eyelashes flutter, but that’s all I get. The fog recedes and I can see him better, but it’s getting dark.

“How darling of you to explain. Thank you for sparing me the trouble.” Canosa clicks her tongue loudly on *trouble* for a dramatic effect and stubs her finger at my chest. “I haven’t got all night. Go on, silly girl, sing already.”

I notice that she’s not wearing those stolen clothes anymore and wonder what she’s done with them. I feel my sanity slipping away from me, and am distracted by all the little details that are totally out of sync with time and importance.

“Why didn’t you do it yourself?” I say, hoping to delay having to start.

“You’re hurting me. You’re being mean, again. I want to

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help, we're family, remember? You had trouble doing it at the club. Well, here he is, all ready for you, tied up and not going anywhere. You really know how to try my patience, don't you, little sister?" She shakes her head in a stern big sister kind of way, and I notice how, for the first time, she calls me *sister*.

The look on her face tells me she fully means it. In her world, she really is doing me a favor by letting me finish my kill, as proper predators do in a pack. It's no different than how I let her finish her kill at Arboretum Park, guided by some new-found hunting instinct.

"Thank you," I say, before I can catch it. It comes automatically, prewired into my brain from a young age. From all the times when I had to thank my father for everything, even a slap he would administer, because it was a favor he did to teach me. This must be the help she was talking about when she found me floating in the Pacific Ocean.

"Can I take him down before I do it? Please?" I say, considering my options. Can I fight Canosa? She is obviously stronger than me. Do I stand a chance?

"No. He's not going anywhere. I'll take him down myself, when he's dead. You still can't make up your mind, can you? What's stopping you?" I detect a hint of familial worry in her voice.

I swallow. "Nothing, I'm just..."

"Ailen?" I hear from above. Hunter's voice sounds hollow and cracked. "Nice to see you, turkey. Hey, I'm sorry for yesterday. For shouting and stuff. I didn't really mean it."

I peer up at his face, now turning blue from hanging upside down too long, but his eyes are still fully alert. That must be it. He is turning, otherwise how would he be able to hang upside down for so long and still function?

"No-no-no, it's okay," I say. "*I'm* sorry for leaving you, and

for getting mad. I'm—I don't know what happened. Something made me so angry, and then..." I trail off, not sure how to communicate my fear of never being enough, of not being perfect for him; my jealousy toward "normal" girls, beautiful and warm, soft and curvy, womanly and capricious, in a way I'll never be. How do I tell him that he deserves better.

"I just wanted to hear your voice one more time," Hunter says, his eyes glistening with his brimming tears. He blinks hard, trying to hide them.

"You did? Really? *Why?*" I say, looking up into his face, now almost purple, and barely visible in the darkness.

"Because it's awesome, and I love it."

"No, you don't. It's fake. You think you love it, but you don't really. It's because I'm a siren. Everybody loves a siren's voice. That's how it works...it means that my deadly magic is working." I breathe in and breathe out. "I wonder," I say, taking another breath. "I wonder, why mine? I mean, did it sound especially charming or something?" I try to sound even, but my voice catches.

"Yeah, totally. For real, I swear. It has nothing to do with you being a siren. I've always loved your voice. I tried telling you, but you wouldn't listen." A shiver takes over him. He coughs and bends upright, then drops back down, swaying.

There's a corridor of space between us, and everything else stops existing. I don't hear a thing except for Hunter's soul; I see nothing but him.

"You don't get it. What I'm trying to say is, it's not me who you really want. It's *her*. The siren inside of me. It's not the Ailen Bright you once knew. Forget it, I'm rambling." I hang my head, furious for not being able to explain what seemed so clear a second ago. For not knowing what to tell him, how to make him stop loving me, how to make him hate me. I'm failing miserably.

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“That’s simply not true. You know that, so stop fishing for a compliment. You are you, voice or not, siren or not, or whatever else the freak you decide to be. I don’t care. Remember when we first met, at the lake? Skipping stones? You tinkled like a thousand bells. You kept asking me questions, and I kept answering them in a half-ass way, just to make sure you’d ask me more. So I could keep you talking.” A series of coughs interrupt him, and he twists and bends again.

My neck hurts from looking up. Drizzle collects on my face in drops, then glides and hangs off my chin, but I ignore them. An urgent need to cry threatens to erupt from my throat; it takes an enormous effort to hold it.

“Hunter, why are you doing this to me?”

Hanging upside down, he still manages to shrug like he always does before blushing. “I’m not doing anything.” He averts his eyes, studying something immensely interesting on his shoulder. “I just love you.”

It sounds so true that it makes me want to die on the spot.

I search for words. I know what I want to say, but it gets stuck on my tongue, scared because it has no right to exist. I must kill it; I must root it out of me. But I can’t.

“I love you, too,” I say finally.

Time stretches and becomes endless. Our hearts beat like crazy—his alive, mine dead. Night clouds drift, sending filtered moonlight on us through the drizzle.

Canosa breaks our sacred silence.

She claps. She stands and claps loudly, tearing us from our stupor and dragging us back to reality.

“Oh, how splendid! Please, spice it up, children. There’s not enough emotion for me. Please, more genuine feelings. I beg you, indulge me. Make it exciting, this advent of imminent death; this exploding finale.”

Shame flushes my face. I forgot she was here.

"Hunter, tell her how you planned to kill her. Go on."

"You did?" I say.

"Oh, he told us all about it, it was very entertaining."

Hunter doesn't look at me, he's coughing again.

Canosa hops on stage next to me. "Lovely, kids, very lovely. This is so much fun to watch. I'm delighted, not bored at all!" She grabs my chin and brings my face close to hers. "Of course he did, darling sister. He's a siren hunter, what did you expect?"

She lets go of me, hops off the stage, and sits on the front bench again, cupping her head like a little girl ready for the show of a lifetime.

I take a step back. "You planned to kill me? When?"

Hunter shakes his head. He still has a bit of warmth left, and it envelops me. I don't dare move, not wanting to disturb the feeling. Frankly, I don't care what he's about to say, as long as we get to stay like this, together.

He moves his lips, struggling to say something. I block out the discord of the noises to hear only him. I watch his lips to make sure I don't miss a single detail.

"I did. It's not what you think though—" he begins.

I rush to say it before I get scared. "I don't think anything. I get it. I'm a siren, you're a siren hunter. What else is there to expect? So, it's okay. It's all right."

I glance back at Canosa and see her scowl. I smile back at her, as if to say, *I win this time, big sister.*

"Do it!" she shouts.

I look back up at Hunter. Pain flashes across his face. I notice his eyes have become bloodshot. He's wet and shivering from the cold. His heart accelerates as he lifts himself with a grunt and folds over his legs, then he lets go and dangles again. I can

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only imagine the discomfort he's in. I realize I don't know how long a person can hang upside down before dying, siren hunter or not.

I wonder again if I stand a chance against Canosa, if Ligeia and Teles will help her or if I can persuade them to help me. What would it take for me to wrestle all three of them so that I could free him. Can I resist the urge to feed on him, to finish his tasty soul?

"Just hear me out, okay? Then you can beat me up later," he mumbles from above. "I wanted to distract your dad, wanted to make him think I'd do my job well, wanted to—"

"I don't care. Stop apologizing, I get it!" I say.

He gapes at me. "You do? You don't hate me?"

I remember what I have to do, but my heart won't let me serve it up straight and raw, so I decide to tell the truth.

"You have to stop loving me," I say.

"What? Why?" he says.

"Your soul is burning," I say.

"That's enough!" Canosa erupts. "Either finish him off right now or I will. We don't have much time and I'd prefer if you two stopped talking."

My hope evaporates, and I take one last glance at Hunter's face. I try to etch into my memory the line of his jaw, the roughness of his cheeks, the piercing blue of his eyes, his mop of unruly hair, and the funny way he tilts his head when he's intently listening, like now.

I take a step back, and decide to die fighting if that's what it takes. But I still try to unclench him from this stupid teenage love we both fell victim to. One more thing to say and, hopefully, he'll understand after I'm gone.

"Just one more question, I promise," I tell Canosa. Before she can respond, I quickly say to Hunter, "Hey, have you ever

wanted to do anything it takes to save someone you love?”

He opens his eyes wide, I hear Canosa cursing and moving swiftly toward me. I grunt and make myself hate everyone and everything, digging deeply into my siren core, awaking my hunger—my hunger for Hunter, for anything living. I try to get to that place where I don’t care, where I’ve turned into a ruthless murderer.

Just in time, because as soon as I feel Canosa dig her fingernails into my shoulder, the unmistakable timbre of the voice I despise so much quietly asserts itself.

“Nice setup you got going here, impressive. I’d say it lacks a roof, a door, and air conditioning, but aside from that, it’s not bad. Glad I found the right time to visit.”

“Papa is here,” I mouth.

I didn’t hear him approach, none of us did. Yet now I hear it, the faint echo of a flute. It’s barely audible, like the whisper of butterfly wings that only a trained ear can detect.

“Would you look at that, the bastard is back,” Canosa hisses. Letting go of my shoulder, she turns to face my father.

It’s the first time I see them talk to each other, apart from Canosa shouting, *Die, siren hunter, die!* at him in the Pike Place Fish Market. On some level, I watch the exchange with abated breath, disgusted and morbidly curious at the same time. Is there anything left between them? There must be, because where there is hate, there is always love beneath.

“You didn’t even think about this possibility, did you? You always forget things, always wrapped up in that little head of yours.” Papa taps on his head. I bristle, before realizing he’s not talking to me.

“Girls,” she shouts, without breaking her gaze. She leans forward and sticks her arms back like an angry bird ready for a fight.

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I see a face peek out from behind a thick fir tree, and then Ligeia steps out. She cautiously moves forward, pulling Teles behind her by the hand. Their two bodies are shrouded in glistening hair, glimmering lightly, one short and chubby, the other tall and lanky.

Goose bumps trail up my back. I know I have to face Papa. I don't know if I should be happy that he survived or not. I don't know what it means that I have reawakened his soul, even if it's only a little. No matter. I finally dare to turn.

The dark soot of his outline mars the drizzle over the meadow like graffiti on a clear shower curtain. Water drips from his hair onto his face. His fine Italian wool pants and polo shirt are soaked, covered with spider webs and pine needles, which means he has probably been crashing through the woods to get here the same way Hunter and I did yesterday when we fled the beach. He studies me, his two powerful arms resting at his sides, with a bullwhip at the ready in his right hand, and his left hand curled into a fist. His legs are spread apart in a military stance, his loafers miraculously still on his feet.

How did I not hear his sloshing steps? And a whip...I remember seeing a collection of them on the wall of his man cave and wondering why he had them. Now I know. I guess a whip can produce a sonic boom, too. Maybe not as powerful as a sonic gun, but still—a sonic boom is a sonic boom. How clever. He must have had it tucked into his pants. It's so like my father to have a hand-crafted back up to his highly desirable technological tool, just in case. I bet the whip is made from Italian leather.

His words trail through my mind, the words he readied for his future son who was never to be, the words he repeated to me ad nauseam whenever he blasted my face with the back of his hand.

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, and then strike with the back of your hand as if you crack a whip, deliberate and fast.

Deliberate and fast. I can see he is ready to do it. His right hand twitches, his long, slender fingers curled tightly. I remember being little, remember badly wanting those hands to hug me, to make me feel safe and solid and warm. I needed them to show me that nothing bad could ever happen to me in those strong hands.

Barely a second has passed since Canosa shouted.

In this moment of shock, and to my surprise, instead of attacking my father, she swiftly jumps behind me and wraps me in a headlock. She hooks her chin on my shoulder, her breath a fish purgatory in need of a thorough cleaning, rank and rotten.

"I was beginning to worry you'd never show up. You're late. Well, don't just stand there, come closer. Come, I have something to tell you." She beckons him with her finger, tightening her lock on me. He doesn't move, standing firm, studying us both, and he never glances up at Hunter. Ligeia and Teles come up to us on both sides. I choke, clawing on her arms to no avail, unable to speak.

"If you came for her, she's mine—and mine alone. Now, you may go away. You're interrupting a splendid performance. It's not like you can do much with that toy of yours anyway," Canosa says with quiet force, pointing a finger at the whip.

"A toy, you say? Very well. I can see this is a game to you, is it? I thought we discussed this already, and I was hoping you'd remember the consequences. Get your hands off my daughter. Please," Papa says, his voice remaining calm. I know this tone too well, it's not to be threatened, or it will erupt in terrible fury.

"He's scaring me," Teles whispers to Ligeia.

"Shut up," Ligeia whispers back.

Canosa shushes them both with a low hiss.

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"You can try taking her. But she's still mine. You all are. One day you'll all die, whether you want it or not. And then we'll meet again, in this siren meadow. I'll take your hand and guide you on your after-life journey. All the way this time, *all the way*," she cackles, and I can't help but to think that, on some level, she is completely insane. Mythological creature or not.

"I'm the Siren of Canosa and death is my girlfriend. Would you like me to invite her to our little party?" Her laugh turns to raucous clucking with some sick glee. Spit flies out of her mouth, her teeth bared to the sky.

I shake in rhythm to her hysterical convulsions, appalled. Yet her laughter makes me feel a strange awe toward her, toward my *siren* family, a new affection I haven't detected before. It's this unyielding force, an unbending will, a desire to fight and stand up for them, no matter the threat.

I catch Papa staring at me, as if he doesn't care for this outburst and is only waiting for my reaction. Is this some kind of a test? I hear the echo of his soul again. For a split second, a childish desire for praise and validation overwhelms me. The wish to be a good girl, a girl who deserves a standing ovation.

"Papa, you made it!" I say, smiling like a total idiot, wishing I could drop through the stage and disappear. Yet, I'm not done. That little girl inside of me is giddy, happy he's alive and here. He came for me, after all. Isn't it worth something?

"You and me, we'll have a little chat. Later," he says.

My giddiness and hope are squashed, just like that. For a second I get a feeling that this is it, I'll never escape this—this broken, crazy, ugly concoction of people who hate each other's guts and have caused so much pain that it should've killed them by now but, amazingly, it hasn't. This is my weird Frankenstein family, sirens and siren hunters.

Papa raises his right arm. The whip uncoils like a deadly

snake that woke up from an evening slumber, its thong falling softly into the grass. A familiar fear spreads across my chest. Of all times, why now? Why am I so scared and so pathetically needy? I reach out and clutch the beam for balance.

Canosa shrieks, lets me go, and jumps with a hideous cry.

But Papa is faster, lighting fast. He takes half a step back and arches his arm behind him, just enough to turn into a tight line of muscle that is poised to throw a powerful crack. The whip's thong follows his arm in a long curve, and then, as one, they both lunge forward. Papa's arm snaps into a straight line, the whip circling a foot above his head for a fraction of a second before uncoiling. It flies fast, reaching a straight line, its end curling around Canosa's hair. And I notice something else.

He doesn't even look at her, he looks at me.

Crack!

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All of this looks surreal, like an ink drawing on dark evening paper. As the deafening crack splits the air, I flinch and cover my ears, but can't stop staring. The whip is like the black, delicate outline of an angry snake. It produces a momentary gust of wind, within one second of unfolding, and twists, snaps, and yanks Canosa from mid-air. Her glowing body leaves a shimmering trace in the fog as she slams into the ground by my father's feet. I hear both Ligeia and Teles quietly retreat behind me, slinking back into the woods. Stinking cowards! Without their alpha and her commands, they're nothing.

I stand still, studying my father's face. He's killed so many, and he came for me. Most likely, not out of love, but from his obsession with purification and his desire to rid mankind of siren corruption with their lethal, perverted, love-inducing songs. Love. If love even exists in his vocabulary. It must have, at one time. I wonder if his mother ever loved him, my grandmother whom I never knew. What did she do to him that screwed him up so badly, to make him hate women with such ferocity? What did she do?

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Canosa writhes under my father's foot, shrieking. He cracks the whip again, close to her head, not to kill her but to torture her, I'm sure. Because, at their close distance, if he wanted to, he could've already evaporated her into a million drops, making her vanish like a puff of fog. He cracks his whip again, and I flinch. He watches me, watching the effect it has on me, and smiles. It creeps me out and I shudder. This is the smile of a killer.

I don't know why I'm still standing here, I must do something.

With her white hair spread wide in a torn blanket over the grass between two rows of wooden benches, her face and body glowing in almost full darkness, Canosa stubbornly begins singing her song. Perhaps it's to irritate my father, or perhaps it's a last attempt to kill his newly ignited soul.

*"We live in the meadow
But you don't know it.
Our grass is your sorrow,
But you won't show it.
Give us your pain,
Dip into our song."*

The entire time she sings, Papa cracks the whip until, finally, he makes her stop.

Each time the bullwhip cracks, a wave of pain similar to an electric surge passes through my body, shattering all hope and longing and desire. Yet I'm unable to move, enthralled by the violence of the scene. And deep inside, there's the satisfaction of revenge. *This is what you get, Canosa, for making my father fall in love with you. It should have been my mother. He never should have met you.*

At last, she is quiet. My father raises his head. It's so dark

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now that I can barely make out the white of his eyes.

"This is what happens to women who don't listen," he says, directing it to me.

My heart aches and I grasp the beam harder, to stay upright. I swallow.

"This is what will happen to you."

My soulless chest rings with horror at his words. Surely, if he wanted to kill me, he would've done so by now. Still, I can't move. It's as if someone shot industrial strength staples through my feet and bound me to the stage.

"This is what women were made for, to haul water. That's all they're good for." He grabs a handful of Canosa's hair, wraps it around her head several times and stuffs the end in her mouth. She lies motionless, stripped of her mane, unconscious from the repeated blasts.

I shake, glowing in the dark like the silver of a freshly caught fish, trembling at the end of Papa's line. I fight the familiar urge to run, run for my life.

"Did you...Is it true? Did you push mom off the bridge?" I ask, moving my tongue with difficulty.

"Do me a favor. Repeat what you said?" His jaw works slowly over each word as he wipes drizzle from his face.

I clear my throat. "Did you push her off the bridge? Canosa said...is it true that you pushed mom? Is it because she didn't give you a son?" The second I finish talking, I think I'll die from fear. How dare me to contradict him, to argue. But I did kick him in the balls once before so, what's wrong with me now? I only know that I want to disappear, to shrink to the size of some whirligig beetle and swim rapidly in circles, alarmed, until I find a gap to wiggle into, narrow and hidden and so deep that nobody could ever get me out.

Hunter moans above me.

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I have absolutely forgotten about him! Before I can take a look, Papa has pulled himself up onto the stage and placed a hand on my shoulder in that *don't you think about running away* gesture. His other hand points the handle of his whip at my chest. I can hear his soul better now, and I bask in its sound, elated. I did it. I did it.

"Son? You failed your first assignment. You're fired," Papa says into the fog above us.

I hear Hunter's mouth open to say something, but don't dare look up, consumed by Papa's cold and merciless stare. I'm frozen to the ground under the weight of his hand, yet I can still hear his soul. I can hear his soul!

"About your mother..." he begins. A tugging sensation spreads through my chest. I don't like this feeling. I can't be weak right now. I have to be strong, yet I seem to have forgotten how to breathe, let alone sing or stand upright and not crumble. Never mind that I was able to cause a tsunami, it all evaporates in an instant when he mentions my mother.

Hunter's voice says from above, "But, Mr. Bright—"

"That's enough! Dismissed. I don't want to talk about this right now, not ever. Understood?" he tells Hunter, never veering his eyes from mine.

"Fuck you," Hunter whispers.

The full moon breaks through a layer of clouds and illuminates the meadow with an eerie clarity, the fog completely gone.

"Get yourself off this comic bird perch and get out of here. I need to have a word with my daughter." He turns and blows his nose loudly into the grass, pinching one nostril and exhaling through another. Looking down at his snot flying, I want to throw up.

Hunter grunts above. "I can't..."

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"Ailen, get him down already, will you?" This, he directs at me.

Too happy to oblige, and yearning to get away from his hand and his stare, I climb the slippery beam, pull myself up, and balance on the top beam. I tightrope-walk to where Hunter's feet are bound with a thorny blackberry vine. I saddle the beam and begin untangling wet knots, stripping my skin in the process, and sucking on the cuts out of habit. It's not blood that I taste, it's salty sea water. Cold, slimy, and revolting.

"Hurry up, now!" Papa calls. "You know I don't like to wait."

I hook the beam behind my knees and swing down, working Hunter's hands free. I pull myself up and sit upright, both exhilarated and terrified by my agility and power. *Then why am I not fighting my father right now?* I shake my head, confused.

Hunter moans as he pulls himself up, his fingers unbending. I grab his arm and say, "I got ya, I got ya."

I untie the rest of the vine to free his feet, tearing his jeans a little in the process. His right hand slips off the wet beam and he dangles down, nearly falling.

"Hang on!" I clasp his left hand, then wrap my other hand around his wrist and gently lower him, until he manages to circle his legs around the post. I let him go so he can slide down, arms and legs wrapped, as firemen do on their steel poles.

All the time, my father watches us, silent.

Hunter reaches the ground and holds on to the post, perhaps dizzy. Then he simply collapses into a heap of soaked clothes, hangs his head, and wipes his face.

"Get out of here," Papa says.

Hunter props himself up on all fours and tries to stand, but he stumbles, and then leans on the post. Its wood is shiny from the drizzle, glistening in the moonlight.

"I said, move!"

Ignoring my father, Hunter raises his head at me. "Ailen, you all right, brat?"

And I know that if I won't do it now, I'll never summon enough courage to do it at all. I take a breath, let out all the air from my lungs, and then I inhale again and shriek in the craziest voice I can muster, still perched on top of the beam like a strange bird of a girl gone cuckoo.

"Yeah, get out of here, you slime ball!" I look him in the eyes. *Slime ball* sounds stupid. I was always bad at creative cursing.

He doesn't buy it, obviously. He raises one of his eyebrows. "You're joking, right?" he says.

"You...you betrayed me. Your...your father left your mom because of you, because you're an unworthy son. That's right. You can't even kill a siren. Fuck, you can't even hold a job long enough to buy meds for your mother!" That does it. His face contorts in pain. Before I allow myself to feel any kind of compassion, I lunge into my tirade, shouting louder, shaking my fists in the air and nearly convincing myself that what I'm yelling is absolutely true.

"And your mother never wanted you! She never wanted a son. She always wanted a daughter, she told me once when I came over during spring break, remember? Remember when she asked you to leave the room?" I watch Hunter open his mouth, close it, open it again, and then take a step back. He takes another, gaping at me, his silhouette skirting the stage.

I'm on a roll. "And I never loved you! I lied. You were just a sidekick for me, that's all! It was all a game of pretense. I don't care about you, you're food! If you ever cross my path, know this, fuckhead—I'll finish you off if I ever see you again, got it? Now get your sorry ass out of here, you *piece of slime!*" There we go, why did I have to say *slime* again?

Step by step, his sneakers slide in dirt. I hope for

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something, for a glance, for a word, for a signal that maybe, on some level, he understands why I'm doing this. Instead, I hear his soul's warmth desert me. He doesn't make an effort to hide his disgust. Even in the silvery moonlight, I can see it on his face. We're miles of pain apart. Score.

"Fuck you, you pathetic siren lover! Go find yourself a real living girl. Or, have you got no balls for that? You like 'em dead and cold, instead? Is that your problem? Is it? Is it?" I scream, going for the kill. Though, truly meaning it this time, I convulse into sobs.

Hunter turns and stumbles away into the black woods.

And I want to die. I want to die so badly, I begin hitting my head with my fists. I bite my arms, and then smash my head onto the beam, wishing it were concrete and not wood so that I would feel some kind of pain, something to silence my agony.

"Ailen, sweetie, stop monkeying around. Get down," my father says.

I watch myself obey, not fully understanding my own actions. My butt slides along the beam toward the post, my hands working their way down until my feet meet the ground. I slowly sink, tracing the beam with my back, and meet the soft ground with my butt.

"What was that all about?" my father asks. Sticking his hands underneath my armpits, he hoists me up and props me on the spectator's bench. "Sit. Explain."

He waits for me to talk. His parental care—or at least the resemblance of it—and the trace of his soul's melody, my forceful breaking up with Hunter, Canosa spread-eagle a few feet away, and the memory of my mother...everything swirls up and turns into a ball of grief that needs to get out. I begin wailing like a baby.

He slaps me hard across my face. I stop crying out of shock. As usual, he slaps the other side of my face, for symmetry.

Green Stage

Blast her. That's what he used to tell me, administering his cheek-smacking lessons. 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 rooting this out of you, do you understand?

Here we go again. Siren or not, nothing has changed after all. My knees turn to liquid and I slouch down. Papa sits next to me, about a foot away. Canosa lies at our feet, motionless. We're drenched, as it's still drizzling. There is a barely audible hissing coming from the woods. Ligeia and Teles must be watching us from a safe distance. Good. At least it gives me comfort to know they didn't follow Hunter, didn't chase him into the dark. Not that any of it matters.

Loneliness buries me.

Hunter is gone. And I did it.

I make a concentrated effort to push my pain as deeply as I possibly can and go numb. I know I'm about to slide into stupefied daydreaming, that's what always happens when I do this. I guess it helps my body continue to function on autopilot, while my mind has gone elsewhere.

I face Papa's stare. It's empty and cold. There is no emotion in it—no love, no hate, nothing.

I search his dark eyes. He didn't gasp, and he didn't say no when I asked him about mom. He never answered my question. He never recoiled at it or protested, as I was secretly hoping he would. He pushed her, then; he must have. I feel like I'm staring into the eyes of death itself. I'm no longer the Ailen I knew; and

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he's no longer Papa. It all got corrupted somehow along the way, got changed so that it can't be reversed, no matter what I say or do.

"Back to your question, about your mother," he says, finally breaking the silence. "What you don't understand is that the mere act of you *asking* this question leads me to believe that you, as is typical of your behavior, never even considered..."

I shrink into myself and tune him out. I know that whatever follows is a lie. It'll be his usual lecture on how I'm wrong and he's right. It's what always follows a good slapping. It's my highly valuable learning experience, the one I can't get anywhere else. He used to make me listen with abated breath, and I had to be able to repeat it afterward, word for word, if I wanted to avoid any more blows to my face. It's easy to turn his droning voice into white noise; I'm used to it. I've had years of relentless practice. As it turns out, I really don't want to hear it this time. Especially not now.

In some corner of my mad, childish wish, I cling to the hope of turning everything around, of going back to the bathroom, having him knock on the door, getting out of the water, wrapping myself up in a warm towel, and shaking all of this off like a bad dream. Wouldn't it be great if life was like that? Any time you didn't like it, you could pinch yourself and wake up?

Involuntarily, I pinch the top of my left hand, hard. I even twist it, for added measure. *Yeah, nice try, Ailen Bright.* It hurts, making me snap back to what Papa is saying.

"...tried saving her, tried pulling her up, but she just wouldn't listen. She was one stupid, stubborn woman, your mother. And here I was, standing there like a fool, after all of these years, thinking that maybe once, just this once, she might..."

Something did change, after all. He's telling me the actual story of how it happened, and I missed it! He's actually sharing with me how he felt when it happened.

“...slippery little thing, unfortunately. I tried to hold on, but it was a question of either both of us...”

I sit up straight, alert and mad at myself for sliding into my typical slumber. Shit! I listen intently to his next words, rolling out in his low timbre against the soft patter of the rain and the crunching of pine needles. Pine needles. The sound snaps my attention again and I turn to look behind us.

There is nothing there, only my paranoia.

I turn back. My father is on a roll. He gets this way occasionally, especially if you pretend that you're listening intently, nodding and not saying anything in return. That's the most important part—to agree with everything. He loves it. Hence, my learned ability to tune him out.

I try to tune back into his monologue, but once I'm gone, it's almost impossible for me to return fully. Instead, I see his face grimace as he talks, his volume turned to zero. I realize how much hate I've been carrying inside, toward his face, when I used to tune it out.

I would often imagine ripping his throat out, his vocal cords dangling in my hand like ripe grapes, about to squish his voice between my fingers. Or, sometimes, I would picture breaking every bone in his body into a jagged landscape of shards, with me sitting on top of the pile, giddy, like a victorious siren. But, most of all, I loved to imagine my song actually poisoning his ears, grinding him into the dirt, all the way until his head would disappear. Then, in my fantasy, mom would rise from the lake, walk up to him, and stomp on his head, laughing, chortling, giggling, with spit flying from her mouth.

I realize I've forgotten my mother's face. I've completely forgotten what it looked like.

“...to tell me. Are you having fun?” Papa's voice comes at me from the far end of a tunnel.

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“What?” I say weakly, like a feeble old woman. He’s talking to me—he’s actually talking to me about me having fun. He asked me a question, an impossible one. At once, there are so many things I want to say, so many things I need to ask. My tongue has a mind of its own and it blows up so thick I can’t swallow, let alone move it to produce an articulate sound.

“I asked you a question, sweetie. Are you having fun?” He cocks his head to the right, his eyes so big and frightening. Steam rolls out of his mouth into the drizzle. He is wet and looks cold, but doesn’t shiver. How is this humanly possible? Must be a siren hunter thing.

I have to remind myself to breathe. In, out. Repeat.

“Yeah. I mean, no. No, I’m not. Fun—doing what?” I squeak in a small mouse-like voice.

This is so awkward, we’ve never talked like this before and I don’t know how to behave. Why the interest?

“That’s not very descriptive. Please, I want you to elaborate on your behavior on the lake. It cost me my boat. It’s completely destroyed. Do you know how much I paid for it? Do you know what a pain it will be for me to replace it?” He sneezes, and it jolts me from my apathy.

My tongue unrolls. I think I can talk again. He means all those people, of course. All those people whose souls I ate. Guilt floods me and makes me stutter. “I didn’t want to, I swear. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry!”

He opens his mouth, as if in shock.

“You’re sorry? You’re *sorry*?” Then, he laughs. I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen him laughing. His mouth opens wide and he throws his head back and shakes in a silent spasm, as if a giant, invisible hand is gagging him. Chest heaving, eyes watering, arteries bulging, with his hands jumping over his knees, he shakes quietly, and then ends with a series of cackles.

Green Stage

“Did I say something wrong?” I ask.

He wipes his eyes and steadies his breath. “A siren. A siren is sorry, for killing people. I didn’t know you actually had a sense of humor, Ailen.” He looks at me with a hint of a new appreciation, and I think I’m supposed to be grateful.

“I do? I’m sorry,” I say and bite my lip. Why did I have to say *sorry* again?

His face falls.

I press my lips together, so that I don’t say anything else stupid. I’m so afraid to disturb the flow of our conversation, the first in years that involves actual talking. It’s our first real exchange as opposed to a one-sided lecture. I’ve choked on my words and screwed it up again.

His eyes fill with lead and dart to the sides, then down at Canosa’s lifeless body. I strain to listen, but there is no sign of Ligeia or Teles. God, I hope they’re not after Hunter.

“When will you learn to stand up for yourself? When? When will you learn to defend your own words? What you’re demonstrating to me with your apologies is a sign of weakness. Never apologize for what you have to say!” He presses his lips into a thin line and strokes his whip. Rain drops roll from his bushy eyebrows over his long curly eyelashes; they’re almost girly in stark contrast to the rest of this face. The raindrops spill from his lashes to his cheeks, silvery in the moonlight.

Am I mistaken, or did he just show some compassion? I gape, knowing I’ve broken the magic.

“Sorry,” I can’t help but mumble.

“I don’t want you to apologize!” he explodes.

I clasp my hands over my mouth so I don’t say another *sorry*.

“I want you to show me what you’re made of. How did it make you feel? Tell me. How did it *feel* wiping out dozens of lives

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for fun as opposed to simply satisfying your hunger? I must admit, on some level, I thoroughly enjoyed your show.” There is an excited shine in his face, spreading rapidly from glistening eyes to a stretched mouth to the parade of meticulously brushed teeth and minty breath, despite his recent dip in the lake.

I feel like I said something wrong again, not understanding where this is leading, hoping to maintain this new connection we have.

“It wasn’t a show, I swear!” But it was. It was to show him that I *can*. I can sing; I can move an entire lake with my song. I can move anything I want. I can even reignite his soul back to life from its ashes. I can make him listen to me, make him hear me, make him tell me I’m good enough for him. At least once in my life, I want to hear him tell me that I turned out okay, that he loves me.

The rain stops and a light breeze picks up.

I decide to try harder, to play along and be evil, like he obviously wants. I sit up straight and clasp my knees for support.

“Well, it was no big deal. It was just a warm up.” I deliver my line with the iciest tone I can muster, and stretch my lips into a fake grin, hoping he won’t notice.

“A warm up? A warm up for what?” Papa unrolls his whip, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile. His chest muscles tighten under the wet film of his shirt, the virgin pink of brushed cotton, complete with pearl buttons and immaculate stitching on every seam, now dull and gray in the moonlight, sagging from moisture.

“For a city-wide massacre.” I make myself smile.

“Really? And you expect me to believe you?” he says. But I detect appreciative notes in his voice.

“Why wouldn’t you? I’m a siren, right? Made to kill.”

“That was,” he scratches his chin, “spectacular, I must admit.

Would you care to let me know in advance next time? I don't want to forego your next performance; don't want to miss any more *deadly* singing." He smiles and smacks the whip on the bench like a tiger would smash his tail before jumping at prey. That's his attempt at humor. At another time, I would've fainted from this amazing miracle. Not right now. Right now, the only thing I know is that he has just cut right into my wound.

"You never came to hear me sing in the school choir. You never came to any of my school performances, for that matter." It's too late to stop now, I try very hard not to cry, terrified at my own boldness but pressing forward, trying to connect. I was never able to tell him this before, how much it all mattered to me.

The sounds of nature wither, pausing, eager for us to continue.

"What?" He's taken aback. "What did you say?"

An ancient hurt blossoms within me like a tumor of a fast-spreading cancer, and I can't stop myself.

"Everybody else's parents were there, taking pictures, bringing flowers, you know, bringing cookies. I was the only one alone. The only one. Do you know how that feels?" I force myself to look at him, because his eyes have gone from steel to darkness. "Would you like me to explain? Because I can. I can demonstrate it right here." I dare to stand and inhale, only to see Papa move lightning fast, uncoil his whip, and curl it around my neck in one wrist movement.

Crack!

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Amphitheater

The bullwhip breaks the speed of sound and the small sonic boom it produces rips right into my ear, deafening me and making my muscles fluctuate. The leather thong coils around my neck and knocks me off my feet, the cracker biting into my skin. So much for our first real conversation. I land between two rows of benches, face first. Dirt mashes into my nose, grass stalks tickling it. The slippery lining of the rain jacket sticks to my chest. My father quickly untwists the whip from around my neck with practiced fingers. Then he fists my hoodie and, carefully stepping along the aisle, drags me out into the grass-covered nave, the central approach to the stage. He lets me go and I land next to Canosa. I feel one of his soft leather loafers on my back, my face pressed firmly into the turf. I mistake its earthy smell for a whiff of strong medicinal marijuana, herbal with fruity undertones, sweet and pungent on the heels of the recent rain.

“Here’s the deal, sweetie.” Papa’s voice reaches me from above. “I’ve dealt with the likes of you for my entire life so don’t try playing games with me. Daughter, or no daughter, it makes no

difference. Understood?" He presses harder. I mumble back my agreement, sickened and disappointed in myself.

"Good. An idea occurred to me just now. You might be worth something, after all. You're too melodramatic, but we can work out the kinks, I think." Pause. "Yes, it might work. Let me think about it for a minute..."

I hold my breath. He isn't going to kill me. He's going to use me somehow, just like everyone else usually does. Like Canosa did until she got all tangled up in her own hair thanks to her grandiose belief in her own invincibility.

Everybody always uses me, but it's not their fault, it's mine. I'm the one who lets them. This ugly realization hurts.

How did I end up on the ground, my face streaked with dirt, after splashing an entire lake into a tsunami and sucking close to several dozen souls into oblivion? Memory of my binge perks up a newly born hunger. It growls in my chest, waking again. As if in answer, Papa cracks his whip right over my ears and I go limp. The sound waves it sends make my bones feel syrupy, as if my whole body is weightless and about ready to expand, and then to contract and collapse into itself again, in a painful spasm.

He crouches down and whispers in my ear, pressing the end of the whip handle between my shoulder blades so hard that it nearly punctures my skin through the rain jacket. "What I'm thinking is...you'll be my right hand from now on. A helper, of sorts, to catch other sirens. Clever, wouldn't you agree?" He chuckles at his own pathetic joke.

It's so clever that, for a second, I forget how to breathe. I'm shocked at the idea and produce an involuntary, "Uh-huh." *There are more out there, others whom I haven't met yet? Hiding in other lakes, seas, oceans?*

"Good. I knew you'd like it. It speaks of your nature." He lets out a heavy sigh, like he's the victim here, suffering from the

impact of such an important decision. “Do me a favor. Don’t pull any of this singing of yours on me anymore, all right? Let’s make this easy on both of us. Do I hear an agreement?”

I produce another, “Uh-huh.”

And I hear the echo of his soul again, a barely detectable tune, a distant trickle of a flute accented by fragile butterfly wings, flapping, hushed and covered with another melody that I can’t quite detect, but it’s there. Promising to taste tart, the same way my soul felt in Canosa’s chest when she converted me. Tart and burned, charred like an unripe persimmon that someone decided to fry in a pan without oil. Like someone ripped out his soul when it was still green and set it on fire. I think I know who that might have been, long before Canosa surfaced on the scene, long before my father even knew how to hate: his mother, my grandmother. The mysterious woman whose grave he wouldn’t visit, whose name he wouldn’t say, and whom he tried to erase from his life, to no avail.

I feel his usual concentration waver, and a hunger to kill rises within me.

“Is that a *yes*? It better be,” he says.

I blow grass away from my lips. It tickles and it’s hard to talk with its stalks exploring my mouth.

“I can’t hear you, sweetie. Yes or no?” He presses his foot into my right gill this time. I wanted to know what it feels like, didn’t I? Conveniently, he reads my mind. Pain shoots around my neck in a steel belt and then through my spine, making me break out in a cold sweat. It’s like pushing on a day-old bruise, hard, right in the spot where it hurts most. I struggle to respond, breathing hard into the wet grass.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” he says, from above.

I mumble into the ground.

Amphitheater

“Can’t hear you.” He sort of sings it, *caaaaan’t heeeear yooou*. This makes me borderline lunatic, ravenous for revenge. His fake care combined with his soul’s burnt taste. I twist my neck to the right with as much force as I can gather, still weakened.

“What if I don’t?” I ask, before I get scared and swallow the words.

“Not a thought in your head, is there? Stupid and stubborn, just like your mother.” He presses his foot harder into my gill and spits on the grass next to me. I watch his saliva roll down the yellow stalk. I remain still, with only one movement left within me. It’s a nagging, growing rage. But this is what he wants me to feel. He wants me to get angry, so I try to suppress it. I remember my resolve to let him live, to find the good in him, to fight for it. “You always need to be directed, always. You’re never appreciative of the help I give you, the advice. Is there nothing you can do on your own, Ailen? Open your eyes and look to your right.”

I glance at Canosa’s hair a few feet away from me, tangled with grass, swaddling her face like a veil.

“Do you *like* what you see? Do you want to end up like her?” He abruptly steps off me, and I catch sight of him, poking his whip at Canosa. She doesn’t move. Her eyes are rolled up, the whites showing beneath thick eyelashes. The womanly shape of her pristine body is smeared with mud like the corpse of a recently recovered floater.

I forget it’s Canosa. I only think of her as a little girl who was once naïve and happy, who had dreams, who reveled in innocence and yearned for love before something happened to her that turned her bitter. Something at the hand of a man, I’m sure of it. Something happened that violated her trust, which explains her distaste for couples and her hunger to kill them off during their most precious moments of affection, like that couple she snuffed

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out under the bridge. The thought is enough for me gain strength in my voice.

I study my father standing over Canosa, poking at her like a fresh catch on a fishing trip, eyes ablaze with glee. I see him as a threat to all things *girly*, all things he would never let me be. My resolve is forgotten in an instant. Anger rears its ugly head, adding to my hatred; it fuels me. It rattles the lid I have so carefully put over my emotions, pushing against it until it pops and flies off and I spill.

“You’re not a father to me. You may have produced me, but you’re not my father. You don’t even know how to be one. You never should’ve had kids. Because you’re one *fucking* asshole, that’s who you are,” I say into the grass, shaking. I gather my strength so I can stand up, not caring how primitive that sounded and trying to come up with more hurtful, ugly words.

“What did you say?” He promptly leans over me, the whip handle back between my shoulder blades.

“I said, you’re one revolting, women-hating, disgusting piece of *shit*.” It comes out as a scream and catches at the end. I desperately try to come up with a whole array of swear words to make it sound even more hurtful and biting, like they do in the movies.

“Watch your mouth, you little whore!” he snaps, stepping on my gill again.

I wince. He’s called me a whore before, but never in such an openly hateful manner. For only a second, it lacerates my heart. I ignore the pain. Years of practice kick in at just the right moment. A tear of anger rolls down my cheek.

“Oh, yeah? Why should I? Because *you* think I need to? Well, I don’t think so. You need me. Just like Canosa needed me. I happen to have talent—true siren talent—and you know it. And you know that I know it, you’re just afraid to let me see it, so you

always beat me down, always try to make me think that I'm nothing." I take a shaking breath. There is silence on the other end and less pressure on my back.

"You've seen it. You heard me sing. You witnessed me rousing a whole *fucking* lake, did you not?" It feels good swearing at him again, something I never dared to do before. I almost want to say *fucking* before each word, to assert myself, to see how far I can go with this. In one concentrated effort, I prop myself up as if rising from a push-up, my palms sinking into the soft turf, my body in a straight line. I watch my father take a tentative step to the left and raise his whip at me.

"Go ahead, Papa, crack it. I know you want to," I say, kneeling into the mud and pulling myself up. I grab my shins, then my knees, taking the what-the-fuck-do-you-want stance of a disoriented drunk, reeling from dizziness but holding my ground.

The moon shines upon us, waiting.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that!" he shouts, his voice wavering at the end. There is a moment of hesitation in his movement, but he flings his arm and cracks the whip. An earsplitting clap shakes the air and my muscles give out to its vibration. I plop back onto my ass, producing a low and wet smack. Still, I raise my head up, defiant, not willing to give up since I've already started this. I sense that something is giving in him, while something is growing in me. For once, it feels like I'm in control.

"How does it make you feel? You like it, don't you? Don't you, Papa?" I realize I'm asking him the questions, and each one makes his eyes grow larger. His mouth hangs open as if it will snap, and his hands are trembling slightly, his skin painted gray with the silver sheen of moonlight.

"Did your mother hug you when you were little, did she kiss you?" I take a step toward him. He edges back and nearly

stumbles on a spectator's bench.

"Did your mother tell you she loved you? *Did she ever tell you that?*" My voice echoes across the meadow, now perfectly dark and clear of fog.

"Shut your mouth if you want to live! Shut it, right now! Don't touch me!" His scream borders on a hysterical outburst. All intelligence is gone from it, and I'm not even close to him, there are a good ten feet between us. This is not the father I know; it's a scared little boy who stands before me. I search for pity within me, but there is none, only a perverted pleasure in causing him pain.

"What if I don't, Papa, huh? Did you ever think of that? What if I don't want to live, what if I *want* to die? What if there is nothing for me to live for after you pushed mom off the bridge? Go ahead, kill me." I stop walking and spread my arms wide, noting the gentle crinkling of the rain jacket's waterproof fabric, its gluey pull on my skin. I'm ready to die in this moment.

He must sense it, because he raises his whip again, pauses, drops his arm, and licks his lips.

"You think you know what you're doing, sweetie? You think you're smart, that you've actually figured it all out, don't you?" He makes himself smile, if a slight crack of his lips can be called anything remotely close to that. I can see the strain on his face, barely illuminated in the dark.

"I don't," I say, taking another step forward. "I don't know shit. You're the one who knows everything. You tell me. Did your mother love you?"

A grimace of pain takes over his face, true agony, something I've never seen before in my entire life with him. It looks like the face of a man after a stroke, when one side goes slack and the other scrunches up to compensate for the tension. That must be it. I struck gold.

"Or, was she a whore—like a siren?" I finish my thought.

“Shut your mouth! How dare you.” Papa’s hands shake and he strikes out at me with his whip, but misses by a couple feet and it doesn’t make a sonic boom. He’s retreating into the benches now, and I’m advancing, on a roll. Ideas and images swirl in my mind, wanting to get out.

“So, she was a whore, wasn’t she? At least, that’s what you concluded years later, because you couldn’t come up with another explanation with your primitive mind. She was simply trying to find a new life, after her husband died in the war.” It strikes me at this point that I know virtually nothing about my grandfather except this fact, and that his name was Maximilian Bright. “So she dragged men into her house and slept with each and every one of them, because what else could a widow do in those times, huh? And they hurt little Rogie, didn’t they? Those men? Because he was a cry baby, because he was adorable, too adorable for their taste. And maybe she hurt you, too. You reminded her too much of the husband who went and died on her, leaving her with such a miserable life!” I throw my last word out with such force it rings clear and almost hangs in the air a second after I said it.

“Shut up! SHUT UP! SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP!!!” Papa is now at the far end of the row, backing into the woods.

Loud hissing comes from the trees and we both turn to look, startled. Ligeia and Teles jump out from behind a growth of firs. They must have been standing there all along, listening to our conversation, too scared to come out. But now, food is simply too close not to act. They must hear his soul like I do, intrigued by its burned tartness. It rings louder now, cleaner. Before either of us can react, they jeer and spill over my father in one hairy blanket.

He curses, shakes them off with a practiced move, takes the stance of a fighter, and begins a series of misdirected cracks. His arm wavers and the whip jerks mid-flight, instead of soaring seamlessly to curl up and break the speed of sound. No cracks

come out, each flip is dry and poorly performed, until its leather thong catches on a nearby branch and the whole thing hangs listlessly, yanked out of my father's hand. I must have shaken him to the core and nudged his soul closer to revival.

He searches my face; there is no malice in his stare, only a pleading for help. I do nothing, strangely calm as I watch Ligeia and Teles converge on him. I'm buried in an observer's curiosity at how this will turn out. Perhaps that's how true sirens are supposed to feel, cold and oblivious, viewing people as food only, like Canosa told me. My father shouts my name, asking for help, his usual confidence shaken. I pretend I'm watching a movie. I sit on the bench and prop my face with both of my hands.

Briefly, Ligeia pauses, as if she remembers I'm here and this is my father. "Ailen, you don't mind?" she asks.

"Yeah, do you mind?" Teles picks up.

"Girls, have at it," I say, without a single pause, without considering that this might be the death of him, not even appalled at my own indifference.

Both sirens nod and circle-dance around him, shimmering in the dark with their glistening skin and tangled hair, grabbing his arms and then letting go. They pinch him and play with him the way they played with me when I got turned. He groans with exertion and terror, weaponless, his usual focus and precision gone. He's reduced to a frail human again, not fully, but close. He drops on the ground, Ligeia on top of him, squirming, Teles on top of both of them. He shouts my name again.

"Sorry, I can't hear you," I say. I don't recognize myself, but doubt quickly vanishes and is replaced with a murderous glee. I watch the scene unfold, curious, elated, thirsty. My father's mouth gapes open in a scream, in a plea for help as the sirens start singing their lethal song, their voices joining in a terrible, misaligned contralto.

*“We live in the meadow,
But you don’t know it...”*

Fogs rolls off their skin and obscures them in a new level of bone-chilling coldness.

*“Give us your pain,
Dip in our song...”*

The temperature drops another twenty degrees. I can’t see more than lucid figures moving in a mist that begins spreading across the meadow like a thin blanket. I catch myself liking this. My father’s agony, I can’t stop listening to it. I’m soothed by his cries. This yearning for pain revolts me and I make myself look away.

*“Give us your soul,
Breathe in our song...”*

Where did my promise to let him live go? That stone-hard decision to revive his soul but not to kill him? To talk the remaining sirens into leaving him alone? I don’t want to answer any of these questions, yet I can’t bear listening to his cries anymore.

Like a coward, I start crawling away on all fours, smearing my borrowed leggings with more dirt. Maybe I don’t want to commit suicide anymore, maybe I want to survive. This thought fills me with strength and I crawl faster, ignoring the liquid mud oozing between my fingers. Maybe that’s why I got turned, to help catch and eradicate the likes of my father. Siren hunters, women haters, and other denigrating scum. That’s why I’m a monster,

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because the likes of him simply don't deserve to live. Maybe it's truly my calling, my destiny, to have this power. I want to tell Canosa, I know she'd appreciate it. I'd tell her, *Guess what, you were right. And you know what? I think I found myself, I found my place. I know what I need to do. Ailen Bright, a siren. That's me. I'm with you, all the way, now. Let's do it.*

And she'd smile at me and maybe even give me a hug, like a real big sister who's proud of her little sis. And I'd tell her more, I'd say, *It was not for my father, by the way, and not for my mother either, if that's what you're thinking. It's for me. I'm doing it for me. And check it out—I helped trap my father. He's gone now, well, almost. Can you please tell me everything that happened to my mother? What did she do when she got there, on the bridge? How did he push her? Did they struggle? How did she hit the water, did she sink right away? What happened to her body? Where did her body go, do you know, did you see it? You promised you'd tell me if I killed the siren hunter, you promised!*

But Canosa lies on the ground, motionless. I watch her lifeless face stuffed with her own hair, now shrouded in hazy tongues of mist flowing low to the ground. I know she's not dead, her body would have to explode into a myriad of droplets to truly vanish. But I'm afraid to touch her, afraid to break up Ligeia's and Teles's feeding binge if I make a noise. Later, I decide. I'll ask her later. For now, I need to go somewhere and just be alone. Think it all out, feel it, be okay with it, flex my muscles. That's what I need to do.

I look up into the darkness beyond the meadow, pitch-black in the weak, silvery light of the moon. I scramble to my feet and run.

Chapter 12



Seward Beach

I'm running again, but not running away. It's more to simply run and feel comfortable in my siren skin, for once. To bask in my power. I break through spider-web infested woodland, jump over raccoon holes, skirt bushes, grab maple trunks for support, and revel in the speed and agility of my body, finding new strength, listening to the orchestra of animal souls in the dark. Yet my mind keeps telling me, *Ailen, you promised yourself you won't run anymore*. And I counter, *I'm not! I just needed to move. I stood up to him, see? I talked to him. This is not running. I need to warm up my muscles for a bit; I need to be alone*. My mind says back, *Bullshit, Ailen. It's total bullshit, and you know it*. I try to silence my thoughts, but they keep crawling in like the annoying spiders that land on my face and shoulders as I make my way through the park.

Fallen branches crack under my feet. Startled owls flap their wings and screech their displeasure as I pass them. Sleeping trees exude their sappy aroma. I notice it all and I don't at the same time, letting my feet carry me forward. Moving seems to

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help me process stuff. Maybe it's a siren trait, similar to that of animals getting restless after sitting in one place for too long. Maybe not, I don't know. I keep running and thinking.

I think about life having a tendency to play cruel games, games of choices that don't exist, as if mocking me. I can picture life sitting behind some desk like a clerk, pushing up its glasses, looking up at me, and asking, *Ailen Bright is your name? Let's see here. Your father is a misogynist, a fancy name for a woman-hater. Choose. Your mother is a weakling who decided to commit suicide instead of fighting. Choose! Your best friend loved you, but after that tirade you gave him, he probably hates your guts. CHOOSE! Ain't I full of choices?* I can see life standing up and parading around in front of me, twirling, showing off. *Ain't I full of splendid colors?* And I can see myself nodding, defeated, because what else is there to do? What choice do I have but to accept it? There is no skipping turns or rolling doubles. The game board of life is bleak and straightforward.

I hang my head, automatically moving my legs, hopping, breaking through obstacles, when abruptly, there is nothing to break through anymore. I make it out of the woods and into a clearing. No, it's not a clearing, it's a beach. A clump of pine trees here, a fistful of bushes there. It's devoid of any other vegetation, stretching in a silver line against the dark water of the lake, dimly lit by the moon that's playing peek-a-boo with heavy clouds. I fall into the dirty sand palms first; spreading my fingers wide, I grab handfuls of it—wet and cold—and sit on my haunches. Raindrops slink off pine needles and one splashes on my nose, but there is no rain and the lake is clear of traffic. The distant noise of ambulances and cop patrols echo across the water as they make their way to and from the bridge. They're probably still clearing out the aftermath of my little performance. I wait for it to surface, but no pang of guilt emerges, only a desire to eat more.

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Hunger grumbles in my soulless void, and I hear something. Something so warm it hurts my frozen innards. Impossible. I stand and stumble step by step toward the water, feeling the soft sand change to pebbles under my feet. I turn right, following the melody, and see a solitary figure hunched up on a washed up log about a hundred yards away. A tiny black speck against the vastness of the open landscape.

Hunter.

I break into a jog.

You're not supposed to see him, you're not supposed to, stop it, stop, go in the opposite direction, go away! Now!

But it's Hunter! I can't turn myself around. I just can't. I have to see him; have to explain what happened and why I did it. Then I'll go, I promise.

Noooooo!

I ignore what's happening in my head, and concentrate on my movement, feel myself being drawn to Hunter like a pathetic scrap of steel is drawn to a powerful magnet.

It takes me but a minute to reach him. About twenty feet away or so I start slowing down. I'm sure he hears me, but he doesn't flinch. He doesn't even raise his head to look. The log is long and twisted, ghostly white in the moonlight, covered in bark forming an intricate pattern. Its thick end dips into the water. Hunter sits on top of it, his sneakers half-dipped into the lake, so I'm sure his feet are soaking. He doesn't move, he just stares into nothing. I step into the water and come close, touching his shoulder. He slowly turns and looks up at me, a shrunken version of himself, his eyes vacant. I suppress an urge to ask, *What's wrong?* Because everything is, it seems, and it was my doing.

"Hey," is all I manage. I fall silent, unsure how to continue.

Without saying anything, he lowers his head, and I see

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now his palms are turned up, resting on his knees, and that is where he's staring. His soul sounds healthier, cleaner, none of the sour notes I started detecting a while back, only the full bloom of the magnificent *Summer season* by Vivaldi, hiccupping here and there, but no longer burning—which means I managed to kill some of his love. It makes me want to break down right there and then, sobbing. And it makes me ravenous, famished, like I've been starving for a year. I want to eat his soul, lap it up whole. Two conflicting forces swirl into a tangle of war inside my chest, and I hold it, press it down, squeeze it, until it stops threatening to erupt.

"Hey, Hunter...I'm...About what I said..." I motion back at the woods and fall silent again. My words sound small and pathetic, and I lose all hope that I'll be able to explain anything at all.

"You don't need to apologize, I get it," he says without looking at me. His voice cracks as if it hasn't been used for a while.

"Oh, you do?" I ask and immediately feel stupid, searching for the right thing to say and coming up empty. I bite my lip and curl my fingers into my fists.

"What, your chat with your *papa* didn't go so well, did it? So now you're back on the prowl?" He raises his eyes at me, and there is so much hurt in them. I want to break off a thick branch from the log and stab myself, make a hole so big that it hurts like madness, and then twist it until I hear myself cry from agony and fall.

"Hunter, please, hear me out. All that stuff that I said, I really didn't m—" I begin, but he interrupts me.

"Oh, yes, you did. *Yes, you did!*" His lower lip trembles and his breathing becomes ragged.

I gag on his rage and don't know what to say.

"Look, see this?" He spreads his arms. "It's called a beach.

Do you know the word beach? Want me to spell it for you?"

I shake my head.

"I'm glad you understand the word. Now, let me explain to you its meaning. You know what a beach means? A beach in the park? Public property. You can go anywhere you want. But no, you had to find me, didn't you. You had to make sure it worked, had to see for yourself." He sniffs and wipes his face with the sleeve of his hoodie.

"No-no-no, it's not like that. I swear I didn't—" I begin, but he cuts me off again, visibly shaking.

"Why should I believe anything you say, Ailen, why? Leave me alone already, will ya? Jesus, girl! Get a life!" He gets up and hops off the log to a quiet splash, wades out on the beach and begins walking away, pebbles grating the soles of his sneakers.

"Wait! I'm sorry!" I say the first thing that comes to mind, the only thing I know will maybe help repair what I've broken.

He abruptly stops and turns around so fast I think he's ready to strike me. "You're not sorry, so spare me the bullshit, please. You're just some...crazy, hideous monster thing. Like your perverted father. Both of you. Christ, what did I get myself into..." He cradles his temples. Then he says, under his breath, "Sometimes I wish I never met you."

Every one of his words nails me into a coffin of grief. I wish to be back in the tub but not filled with simple water. I want it to be filled with poison, with some strong acid that would melt me as soon as I stepped in—that would melt the whole thing, the bathtub marble, the sirens, the bronze faucet, and stupid Canosa with it. The bathroom, my house, all of it. Burying me in a liquid death, drowning me, making me die for good, to never surface.

Instead, I still stand, looking at my bare feet.

Hunter's stare crawls all over my skin. I can tell he's fuming. I'm afraid to look at him, afraid to say anything else that

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will cause him more pain. He squats next to me and looks up into my face, passing a hand through the mop of his hair.

"All right, fine. Sorry I yelled. I got a little...agitated. All that stuff you said, do you know how much it hurt?"

"I just—" I begin.

"I'm not an idiot, so stop trying to explain everything to me!" He erupts again.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Stop apologizing!"

I fall silent, terrified to even open my mouth, blinking my first tears away.

"*I'm* the one who is sorry, all right? So let me finish, please. I'm trying to say something important here." He stands and takes my chin into his warm hands. Our eyes meet. I fight the urge to melt and crumble into him, press my cheek into his chest, and beg him to hug me, to hold me.

"Listen. I thought it all over, while I was sitting here. I think it's a good thing, for the both of us." He grills me with his stare.

I have a bad feeling about what he's going to say next, swallowing, trying to hold it in.

"I'm...I'm sorry it has to end like this. I really am. Truly. But it has to end, you get it, right? It *has* to." He lets go of my face and hugs himself. A sharp pain sears me open from the top of my head to the bottom of my stomach. He's breaking up with me, that's what he is doing. And I'm the one who started it, I'm the one who wanted it. I yelled all those ugly words at him for this very purpose. Then why am I ready to die right now from pain, why?

"We can't be together. It's too painful. You fighting your urges, you know, fighting the need to eat me. Don't shake your head, I know you do. And me, well..." he trails off, looking over

the water. I trace his gaze, glancing over the gentle waves lapping at each other, oblivious to our drama.

“How the hell am I supposed to get medicine for my mom now...” he says quietly, tracing circles in the pebbles with the tip of his foot.

I drop my gaze down, and become engrossed in his sneakers. Six eyelets on the left, six eyelets on the right. His shoelaces are dirty, woven patterns of closure, like the closure between us. I’m dying to tell him about my love, and I don’t know how to do it, not daring to think he’ll believe me, not after I lied.

“Hey, turkey, don’t be so quiet.”

He called me turkey, he’s not mad anymore. I raise my eyes.

“It kills me when you’re quiet, you know that, right? I’d feel better if you said something.” He pushes the hood up and over his face, sticking his hands in the pockets of his jeans and shivering lightly.

“Like what?” I manage.

“I don’t know, anything.” He begins jumping from one foot to another. Left, right. Left, right. Change in his pockets jingles in rhythm.

He always starts moving when impatient, getting restless, like a little boy who needs to pee. For some reason, this playfulness angers me. How can he be playful when we’re talking life or death here? Does he even get it?

“Your soul, it started burning. When you saw me jump out of the lake yesterday, when you...” I take a breath, not able to say, *fell in love with me*. “I’m simply trying to save it, trying to stop you from turning into a siren hunter, to become like my father. I suppose it’s none of my business and I should stop and leave you alone.” Tears decide to grace me with their sudden appearance. I blink several times, vigorously, as if something got caught in my

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eye, quickly wiping my face with the back of my palm, sniffing.

“Did I ask you to save me? Did I ever?” he says and stops hopping, waiting for my answer.

I lick my lips. “No, I assumed...I shouldn’t have.” I want to say, *I’m sorry*, but I bite my tongue at the last moment. “At least you...at least you have a mom and a home to go back to, so it’s okay...”

He interrupts me again. “Oh, yeah? But I don’t have a job now, thanks to you. So it’s not okay! How am I supposed to show my face at home, huh? How am I supposed to provide for my mom?”

I shrug. “You’re sixteen. You shouldn’t be responsible for providing for your mother. Isn’t there some insurance thing or something that your father left, I mean, after the divorce? Are you saying that you’re the one paying her hospital bills? I don’t believe it for a second,” I say, hearing my father talking through my words, his cold reasoning without emotion. I bite my tongue before I say any more.

Heavy silence hangs between us, pierced only by a distant cry of some nocturnal bird.

“Right, of course.” Hunter picks up a pebble and throws it into the lake. “What do you care, anyway? Your mother is dead. I don’t want *my mother* to die, don’t you get it?” he says. I know he means to hurt me, to get back at me for everything I said.

It works. “Leave my mother out of this,” I say through my teeth.

“Oh, yeah? Why so sentimental all of a sudden? My dear, Ailen, I’m so sorry for hurting your feelings.” He sort of dances and claps his hands by his heart at this, his typical theatrics. I glare at him.

“But that’s the only thing I’m sorry about, get it? The rest of the stuff, all this crazy siren shit—Jesus, it’s fucked up! Do you

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hear me?" He waits for some response, I count the pebbles.

This is typical Hunter, once he's on a roll, there is no stopping him. Whatever it is he decided to do in his head, he'll keep moving forward until he's completed it, even if it's against his better judgment. His current goal seems to be to hurt me back in any way he can.

"You're not even listening to me. You don't give a crap, do you? Whatever." He digs his heel into the shore making pebbles clink and scatter.

Now he's fishing for my answer and, of course, I seal my lips tight, defiant, determined to make him suffer. I watch the indentation made by his sneaker suck in water with a slurp and turn into a tiny puddle, its glistening surface reflecting a starry sky that is slowly changing from black to blue. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an average person to drown, I remember reading it somewhere. I remember thinking it yesterday morning when I was preparing to drown.

From the corner of my eye, I see Hunter steal a glance at me, and we both quickly look away, as if neither of us meant it, only to find ourselves staring at each other a minute later, both of us suppressing a smile.

I'm mad at myself that I can't stay mad at Hunter for longer than a few minutes. Ugh!

I bend my knees and plop down on the shore, letting rocks bite into my butt through my borrowed pants, but not caring. Every piece of me is broken and confused, my abdomen feeling heavy with emotions. Hunter sits down next to me, a few feet away. Involuntarily, and before I can stop myself, I stretch out my arm to touch him, but he yanks his hand away.

"Hunter? What's wrong?" I say the very phrase I avoided saying at the beginning. Score, Ailen, score.

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His face doesn't move, not a single muscle, his skin gray in the receding moonlight. His eyes lock with mine, and yet they don't, floating in and out of focus. I'm afraid to open my mouth, when he speaks.

"What's wrong? After all, of this you're asking me what's wrong?" He emits a chuckle of incredulity, and I smile. It does all sound ridiculous, everything that happened so far is so ridiculous that it's hard to believe it's real.

"Nothing. Nothing, of course." He attempts a smile. It looks sour. "You're just being you. That freaking siren monster thing, or what not, you're still as Ailen as you can be. I don't know why I'm still here, though, to be honest. You're right, it must be your siren voice that holds me, I suppose." He kicks into the ground again. And I know what he really means to say, but can't. He's a coward just like me.

"Why? I mean, why are you telling me this now? I tried warning you, remember?" I say.

Hunter jumps to his feet, suddenly agitated.

"I heard you," he nearly shrieks. "When those girlfriends of yours were dragging me to their stinking siren meadow—which was *my* favorite place to smoke *my* joints, by the way—I heard everything you did! It was so fucking loud. Did you think I would miss it? You killed innocent people! For fun! You weren't even hungry, were you, tell me!"

He glares at me for a second, and I lower my eyes.

"See, you're a hypocrite. I don't care what you say, I should've known. Should've known it all along. They're just food for you, and nothing else. I'm food for you. Always will be. Stinking siren, awesome my ass." Then he is empty, I can see it in his face. This was the last thing he had to get off his chest, the thing that probably bothered him most.

"Ah, that." I exhale. "I knew this was coming. I tried

telling you to stay away from me, but you wouldn't listen. So you finally heard it for yourself."

"What was I supposed to do, plug my ears with pine needles or something?"

"I think you were supposed to hunt me with my father, but you got yourself drunk and off the job." At the thought of my father, my hands begin to tremble. I wonder whether he's alive or not, and I wonder why I care. Isn't this what I always wanted, to get rid of him and be free?

"Ooooo, listen to that. So in love with her papa, sweet little pumpkin, Ailen—"

"Fuck you!" I jump up now.

"Thanks, but no thanks." He takes a step back.

We're back to ogling each other like two predators over one last scrap of meat.

"Didn't think so. And congratulations. I'm glad you got it off your chest. Feeling better now?" I step forward and Hunter inches away from me as if something disgusting is about to touch him. Breath coils in pockets of steam from his open mouth.

"Anything else you want to say? Go for it, monkey boy, I'm all ears," I say, taking another step.

"Sure, I got more to say. You wanna hear something interesting?" He squints at me. "Life's a zoo, Ailen, can you imagine? You don't get it, do you? Let me say it in a more formal way, then. Ladies and gentlemen, I want your attention, please." He wipes his hands on his sweatshirt, flattens his hair, and spreads his arms in a show announcer gesture. "Based on the latest scientific research, it appears we're all divided into two categories. Who would like to make an educated guess?"

"Stop it!" I want to slap him, but he steps back to avoid my blow, nearly stumbling on a mossy log.

"No guesses? Tsk-tsk. I don't dare hold you in the throes of

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wonder forever. Here is the answer. Are you ready? Drum roll...It's people—and animals!"

"I said, stop it!"

"But, let me present to you a rare specimen, something so special, something you paid your honestly earned wages to see, today and today only. A siren—a crossbreed between an animal and a human. One of a kind. It is, what they call, a true living monster." His nostrils flare, his eyes remaining immobile.

Silence veils over us, flapped only by the last warmth of a September night.

I cradle my head. If I thought I was dead already, I must've been wrong. This is worse than death; this is the continuous torture of dying but not quite getting there, ever. It's the stupid squabble of two teenage lovers who are too chicken to admit that they can't exist without each other. Great. I've lost my mother, I've potentially lost my father, and now I'm losing Hunter. All of this at my hands.

A familiar fear creeps down my spine, and the air becomes thick and difficult to swallow.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm a monster. I was wrong to think that, somehow, I could be a siren and, yet, remain human. Whom was I kidding? I was wrong. You're right. Run away now, before it's too late. Go. Or I will *fucking* eat you!" I begin to hyperventilate, but make no effort to stop it.

Pebbles crunch under Hunter's feet.

"Well, thank you for permission, I'm much obliged." He bows theatrically. "Now you're trying to make me feel bad," he says with force, but I hear guilty undertones, over the beauty of his soul's concerto. I shake my head to tune it out.

"I'm not trying anything. I just don't care anymore, okay? If you wanna go, go." I dismiss him with the flick of my hand. He scoffs. "You got fired, so what? You still have your mother. I might

be a fucking orphan at this point.”

“Thanks to you, I might be not too far from it either,” he lashes back.

“Then why are you still here? Go run to your mama!” I stomp in defiance and wince at the rocks biting into my sole.

“Fuck you!” He shrieks.

“Boohoo. Would you listen to that. Such bad language. Your mom will be washing out your mouth with soap and water.”

“God, you’re nuts, girl! Maybe you should’ve died! Think about it, evolution weeds out people for a reason. Some are born to die, some to shine.”

His words stab me in the gut, and I go full out.

“Oh, I get it. Shine. Right. I apologize for thwarting your ambitions. You’re probably hoping to be on the cover of a magazine one day, right? I can see it, all glossy. Nice fat letters, red. No, make them golden. *Hunter Crossby, the glorified siren hunter, reveled by society, sent out on a quest to protect humanity from the likes of Ailen Bright, a living monster.* I thought you were my best friend. But never mind.” I put my arms on my hips.

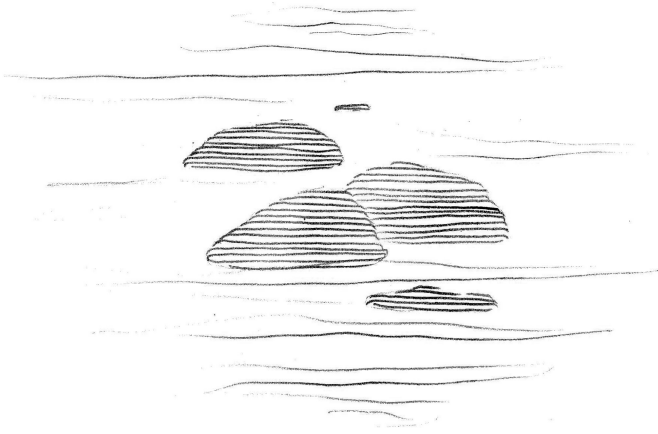
“You know what? I’m done listening to this shit!” He glares at me, yet doesn’t move.

“Then don’t! Go away, why don’t you?” I begin crying in earnest, wailing like a baby, spilling it all out.

“I hate you! Because I love you, and you and I know I’m not supposed to, but I can’t help it!” I yell.

Hunter freezes and exhales sharply, watching me. I cover my face and sob into my hands.

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Stolen Boat

I let go. I weep rivers, bawling, sobbing, and smearing snot and tears all over my face with my sleeves. All sixteen years of my pain propel outward, every instance of ache turns into a moan. They ring loudly in the night and ooze upward into the sky, tracing its velvety darkness with impossible hurt. I blink and rub my eyes. There it is; I can almost see it, our sweet apparition. If you could imagine a strong feeling having solid flesh, this is it: a nearly visible thickness of a magnetic field. It hangs in the air between us, our stupid teenage love, the perfect fantasy projected through rose-colored glasses. Vision by vision, dream by dream, it snowballs into a thing that I can almost touch with my hands. It gains strength, growing fast. Now, it covers us both. Hush! It takes us in fully, and we both know it.

I look at Hunter but don't see him. He's simply a black, blurry outline against an equally black night that's gently lit by moonlight. I listen to his soul. It has changed its tune and is burning again. Not just burning, it's wild with fire, crackling, spitting out scattered notes, bristling with a cacophony of tunes.

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Jumbled and crazy. No, it can't be, no-no-no-no!!! His outline shimmers; he shrieks briefly and then falls quiet. I'm enthralled and can't move. Warmth trickles out of his melody leaving behind a focused precision, like that from a skilled violinist who can deliver but can't feel, dispassionate, yet forever present. It's the end, the closing concerto movement. A faint trace of fumes escapes Hunter's lips as he breathes out. Then, even that sound is gone. Pfft! It evaporates, and silence settles over us.

Absolute silence.

Goose bumps raise the hairs on my skin, and my muscles tingle.

"NO!!!" I scream, taking a step, but my strength gives out and I stumble, falling on my knees into the pebbles.

"No!" I repeat. "No, you didn't. No, tell me, please, you didn't. Oh, what did I do, what did I do..." I rock back and forth, pinned into nothingness, afraid to look up.

"Man, that hurt!" Pause. "This feels weird. I'm not cold anymore," Hunter says, and I hear him cracking his knuckles. "I think I actually like it, that's what it's supposed to feel like? Fuck, this is cool."

I want to tear out my hair. I completed his transformation, instead of reversing it. *Great job, Ailen, always thinking about yourself, how about it? He's a fully fledged siren hunter, right there, look! Standing in front of you.* I lower my head even further.

"Come on, get up, no use crying." His voice sounds metallic in the absence of his soul. No wondering what happened to him, no freaking out, no comment, nothing.

Astounded, I find my voice again. "Do you know what just happened? I turned you...I was afraid of that. I'm sorry, I just wanted to see you one last time, to explain to you..."

He hoists me up and I stand, swaying. There is a coldness in his eyes, so close to mine, and yet so distant.

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“I really only wa—”

He puts a finger across my lips and presses gently. I swallow and fall silent.

“I love you, too. I always have, but you didn’t hear me, did you, turkey?” he says. “You know it *now*, don’t you? You have your proof. Listen to this.” He guides my head down, so that my ear slides across the rough cotton of his sweatshirt and stops directly over the middle of his chest. There is not a sound except the beating of his heart. “Happy?”

I sniff loudly, smiling despite myself.

“I don’t know.” I say it and I mean it, yet some of the pain leaves me. “At least we’re clear who is who, and why.” I say into his shirt and then raise my head.

“Yeah, you got that right,” he says. It sounds automatic. He traces my chin with his fingers. They are cold.

I can barely discern the color of his eyes in the darkness, but I know they’re blue, and I search for hunger within me, to see where it went after Hunter’s soul burned to the ground. To my horror, I find that it has transformed. It’s worse and stronger now, like a chronic pain that flares up the closer I stand to him, yet I won’t ever be able to satisfy it, because there is nothing to satisfy it with. His soul is gone. The very thing I crave, I’m cursed to desire forever. This is the horror Canosa spoke to me about, this is what she tried to shield me from. Now, I understand her wish; there is no worse pain in this world. It doesn’t compare to anything physical, it’s psychic. It’s like going mad and knowing you’re going mad, but never quite leaving sanity, always balancing on the precipice, and never falling.

I chase thoughts about her and my father away, not wanting to think about what happened in the meadow.

My psychic hunger for Hunter bolts through my head like an ice pick. I clasp my head to stop it, pressing my hands against

my ears to no avail. It grows stronger, seeping from my head into my limbs like a deadly poison, a liquid acid of love that is wrong and can't exist.

"It hurts," I exhale, finally.

"It did...It does," Hunter echoes.

We part and look at each other for a good minute or two. The wind ruffles our hair, owls screech in the distance. The lake keeps murmuring with its surf, rolling in low waves onto the beach and retreating, rolling and retreating.

"So you knew all along? About soul burning and stuff?" I ask.

"What do you think? Of course, I did. Your father told me," he says.

"Right." I fall silent again, pushing thoughts about my father away.

Then, curiosity takes hold of me and before I can push that back too, another question spills. "How does it feel? Don't you suddenly want to kill me or something?"

"Hah!" he chuckles, hands in his pockets again. "It's sorta like I...hardened. Like there was heat in my chest, you know, like from the flu, but ten times worse. Only for a moment though, and then it died and cooled off. I'm not freezing anymore. My sneakers are wet and I couldn't feel my toes, but now I do. They even feel warm. It's weird. I guess I'm super strong on some level? I dunno." He picks up a stone and throws it far into the lake. It flies about a hundred yards into the distance. Hunter whistles, and I open my mouth.

"Wow!" he shouts.

"And you don't..." I begin. "You don't even want to..."

I can see in his eyes that he understood what I meant to ask. He takes his hands out of his pockets and stretches out his arms.

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"I have this crazy idea that strangling you would be the best thing in the world, you know, imagining digging my fingers into your neck and tearing it open," he says as he steps toward me and circles my neck with his hands.

I gasp. "For real?"

"Yeah, it's like a love-hate thing. A very strong one." He tickles behind my ears and lets go, but not before I notice a true menacing sparkle flash across his eyes. Lethal. "I love you and I hate you at the same time, and I don't know which one will win."

"Jesus, that's fucked up," I say, thinking about Canosa and my father and what that must have felt like. Then I realize, with horror, that it's not much different than how I feel about Papa.

We measure each other up, like two fighters who are friends but have been put in the boxing ring and have to pummel each other whether they want to or not.

"I guess that's it then," Hunter says finally, breaching the awkwardness.

"I guess that's it," I join.

He takes a tentative step toward me, pauses, and minces his sweatshirt with shaking fingers. I swallow hard, lost in indecision. So we gaze at each other, hold invisible hands, blow nonexistent goodbye kisses, dip in and out of numbness for several minutes.

We can't be together and we both know it. What we don't know is when the urge to kill each other will win and how much longer we can continue talking.

"You know, I've noticed," Hunter says, looking out over the lake, his hands in his jean pockets. "Everything beautiful dies. That's just the way of life. It starts out beautiful and, for whatever the reason, ends up ugly. I don't know why."

"Yeah," I echo, trying to see what he's looking at in the water. "That's how it usually goes."

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Hunter shivers, and then dog-shakes his head. His hood falls off his head and folds up funny. I'm tired of standing, so I plop down and bury my head in my knees. A wave laps at my feet, then another.

"Hey, can't you feel the cold at all? I mean, your butt is soaked, you're sitting right in the water," I hear from behind.

"I am? Oh." I scoot back. "No, I don't feel a thing."

"Me neither." He sits next to me. We gaze out over the lake a little more.

I decide to try and lighten the mood. "Welcome to the freak club. We collect memberships in dead souls, one per day or ten per month, take your pick," I say and wait for a reaction, but there is nothing except an attempt at a chuckle. "Sorry, bad joke." I want to bury my head in the sand. Why do I always say stupid stuff like this, at the worst possible moments?

"No biggie. Hey, don't you wanna go check on your father or something? What's he been doing there for so long, do you know?"

"Being killed by sirens," I say, with a strange satisfaction. But as soon as the words leave my lips, I revolt at the feeling, pulling shame over my head. Immediately, I'm aware of how vulnerable we are on the shore, alone. "We need to get out of here," I say in alarm, glancing back at the woods.

"Wait, what? When the hell did that happen? Are you serious?" Hunter traces my glance.

"Yeah, I'm serious." Dread fills me.

"Who, the other two?"

"Yep," I say. I stand and pick up a flat stone, squint, measure the distance, then throw. The pebble revolves itself in a blur, touches the lake's surface—once, twice, three times. Each a gentle prod for a suitable grave. I count till nine, and then the stone sinks with barely an audible *blup*.

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“And you’re not doing anything about it?” Next to me Hunter’s breath rolls out into transparent cotton candy. I catch myself wanting to lick it.

I scoop a handful of stones and throw them with such force they ricochet off the water in one staccato succession.

Plup. Plip-plup. Plip-plip-plip.

It’s as if time became elastic and we’re ten again, the day we met on the lake, skipping stones, goofing off and running around without a care in the world. Except it’s the opposite picture, looked at through a magnifying glass gone wrong. We’re both grown, bitter, and freshly turned into hideous fiends. A siren and a siren hunter.

Hunter picks up a handful of rocks and we both throw them like we used to. I beat Hunter, as always, ten to nine. Yet there is no joy, no jeering, or celebrating—only our draining pain and confusion. We glare at each other, and, for a moment, childhood memories overpower me and I see their reflections in his eyes. They linger there for one second, and then the moment is gone. Reality drones back in as a swift blow in the face.

“What do we do now?” I ask, the question I’ve been trying to avoid.

“I dunno. I still have to go see my mom.”

“You left her alone?!” I ask.

“She’s fine, she can move around the house just fine. And a hospital nurse comes every day, so it’s cool.”

“Ah.” I’m trying to imagine what it’s like for her to wonder where her son has disappeared, worried sick, and I can’t. I feel empty, with no compassion. Is this a siren thing?

“What about you?” Hunter asks.

“I don’t know,” I say and shut my eyes for a moment. An image of Papa’s face floats up, white, dead, and with bluish marks on his neck from the sirens’ fingers. I shake my head to get rid of

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it, wondering for the first time how much time has passed and what happened, yet at the same time, not wanting to know. I quickly glance at the woods, realizing we stood here for quite a while and could've easily been attacked while in the middle of our drama.

"I'll help you. Is that okay?" I say rather quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"How about I give you a ride?" I hope he doesn't detect that I'm being desperate. "Let's find a boat. I'm sure we can find one."

He looks at me, strange, cocking his head to one side.

"Sure. Can I ask you a question though, before we go?"

"Yeah?"

He passes his tongue over his lips. "Why did you do it? Why did you jump?" It sounds like a final farewell, and I shrink at the idea.

"Do we need to do this again?" I say, stepping from one foot to another and repeatedly looking at the woods, my anxiety rising.

"Yeah, we need to."

"Why?"

"Because. I need to know."

This is Hunter and his typical stubbornness. Once he sets his mind on something, there is no turning him around, he's like a heavy, stubborn bull. I want to drag his ass out of here, but I know I have to answer. The worst part is, he knows that I know, and he counts exactly on this fact.

"I hate you," I hiss.

"Please, can you answer the question?"

I sigh. "Well...I secretly believed in that story you told me about sirens, remember? I thought, if I turn, I'd create more love and beauty in the world. Being immortal, singing beautiful songs,

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helping people, you know? Shit, now that I say it out loud, it sounds so corny.” I close my eyes and squint. “It didn’t quite work out the way I imagined. All those people...gone. That fishmonger guy, those people at the park, the guard and some guy at the club, and those people on the lake...” I let my head hang, hoping he’ll believe my lie. He is quiet.

“And now I’ve lost you as a friend on top of it.”

“No, you didn’t,” he says under his breath. “I’ll always be your friend. Siren or not, doesn’t matter to me.” But it sounds like he’s lying now.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Whatever.” His voice breaks. I glance up. He shrugs his shoulders. I feel instant regret for what I said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop! Stop apologizing all the time. No harm done. Let’s start new, like we just met, okay?” His voice is resigned, like he wanted to get something out of me and didn’t succeed, so he decided to give up.

“What if I don’t want to,” I mumble, studying my palms in the dark, listening to the water lap at my bare feet.

“You’re such a bad liar for a siren, you know that?” I hear a hint of his humor and my heart leaps all the way up. I steal a look. He jumps into an announcer pose, one leg stuck out in front of him, arms outstretched.

“Hi, my name is Hunter Crossby. I’m a siren hunter. What’s your name?”

“Ailen Bright, siren,” I say automatically.

“Hello, siren, Ailen Bright. You look ridiculous.”

I hide a smile and look down at myself. Torn silver rain jacket, soiled skin-tight running pants, bare feet caked in pine needles and mud.

“I hate this outfit.” I try really hard not to smile. It’s the

first time since this morning that I feel good. Like we're on a backpacking trip and, somehow, amidst the craziness of it all, I feel normal.

"Let's get moving," Hunter decides, suddenly nervous, and grabs my hand. I whirl around and feel it too. There is movement in the forest. Something is moving toward us, quietly and cautiously, and it's not an animal. A few branches snap, then all is still again.

Who? Father? Canosa? Ligeia? Teles? Guesses swirl in my head, and I dare not say any one of them out loud.

"Somebody is coming, you hear that? Shit," I say, peering into the darkness. "I told you! What if—"

"Come *on!*" Hunter urges me.

I clasp his hand and we break into a jog, skirting the beach and making our way south. About a hundred yards away, a dark shape sticks out into the water, with another shape bobbing next to it. A wooden pier and a boat.

"See that?" I gasp while running, pointing with my finger.

"No, I'm blind. Of course, I see that! It's exactly where we're going," he throws out in bursts.

He pants, but not as hard as he used to, and I find that I have to run quickly to catch up with him. Looks like this transformation did have an effect, making him stronger. Two things I know for sure. He can now fire a sonic gun and he can't die from my hands. When it comes down to it, when it gets really unbearable, maybe I can talk him into shooting me. This thought comforts me and I pick up my speed.

We trot along a stretch of grass and then on top of the creaky wooden boards to the very end of the pier. There, tied to a rusty nail sticking out of the beam, floats a simple wooden rowboat, its paint washed off and peeling, the color unidentifiable in the moonlight. I perk up and listen for any noises behind us.

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Nothing, only animal souls—scurrying mice, raccoons, and a few nocturnal bird cries.

Hunter jumps in and pulls at my sleeve, and I nearly topple over. The prospect of dipping my hands into the lake wins over, and my gills ache at the idea of ducking into the water.

“Hey, that’s called stealing,” I say under my breath and carefully step into the hull of the boat. Cold water puddles on its bottom and swishes around my ankles.

“Listen to you, since when do you care? We’re only borrowing it for a little while.” Hunter unties the rope, motioning to me. “Come on, do your thing.” He grabs the oars and they scream in their rowlocks, creaking and groaning.

I scoff. “Yes, sir!”

“Sorry, I just mean, can you do your humming thing again, please? So we can get out of here faster?” He situates himself on the middle bench with his back to me and begins rowing; he splashes the oar blades into the mirror of the lake, making the boat glide a few feet away from the pier, slowly.

“Sure, boss. Yes, boss. It’s what I was planning on doing anyway, you monkey,” I say defiantly. Dropping onto my stomach, I grab both sides of the boat and pull myself forward so that the front bench is under my hips and my chest protrudes directly from the bow, like I’m one of those wooden figureheads on the front of a pirate ship. I dip my hands into the water and it greets me with a familiar calmness, quieting my nerves. I pick out a melody in my head and hum. It’s a Siren Suicides’ song, of course.

The rowboat speeds away from the shore. We hit ten feet, and then another fifty, all within a few seconds. Foam sprays my face and I lick it off, exalted to be moving. Hunter drops the oars and turns to face me. I steer us north, away from the park. We glide in parallel past it, to its west side along Lake Washington Boulevard. The water glistens lightly then becomes a dull black.

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The moon disappears behind the clouds, and the wind picks up, as does the moisture in the air. I don't like the feeling of it. Adding to this, the temperature drops rapidly, first about ten degrees, and then another ten within the space of thirty seconds.

I think I know the answer to my question: Canosa.

I focus on humming. It gets harder not to turn my head to confirm what I feel all over my skin, like a liquid gloom that's ready to jump at us, thirsty for revenge.

Familiar calls interrupt me and I can't ignore them anymore.

"Ailen Bright! Where to, silly girl? Care to wait up?"

I turn my head, my humming interrupted, Hunter does the same behind me, and we both see them. The sirens are stepping out of the woods, a couple hundred feet away. The remaining three, their naked bodies glowing, shrouded in their long hair. That means my father is gone for sure. My heart sinks and I feel numb. Of course, what else did I expect? And yet, on some level, I was hoping to see *him* instead of them. I was, wasn't I? Yes, with a pathetic childish hope that he survived, that he changed, and that it would be different this time.

Our stolen boat drifts a little farther by inertia and then stops moving all together, bobbing gently on the waves I created with my humming. Canosa leads the way, followed by Ligeia, judging by her height; after both of them comes Teles, moving her short legs quickly to catch up. They cross the walking path that separates the forest from the beach. Without any hesitation, they step into the water.

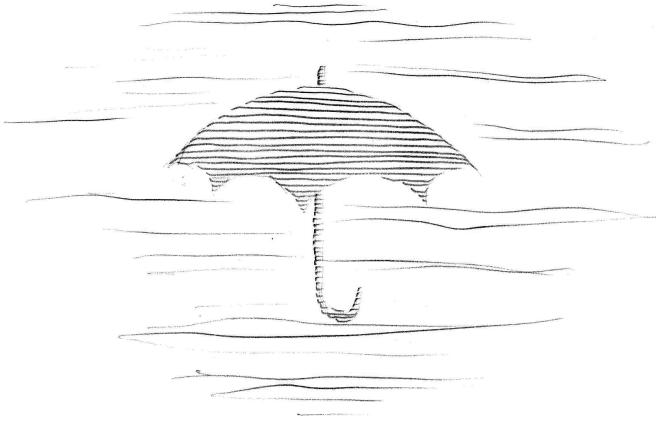
"Wait up, silly girl, I've got something important to tell you! I think you will want to hear it!" Canosa shouts before her head disappears underwater. It will take them, what, about a minute or two to reach us?

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“Fuck me running...she’s alive after all,” Hunter says, his mouth open.

I lift off the bow, turn to sit on the bench, and wipe my forehead. “Hunter, I think we’re toast.”

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In the space of half of a second, I'm split in two. Part of me wants to lodge underwater, soothe my aching gills, and become one with the world of songs, sirens, soul sucking, and all things morbid that come with being a predator. I want to buy into this illusion of divine existence, however perverted it sounds. I want to be a part of my siren family. It feels easy to give in, to define Hunter as my enemy and no more. To define people as food. To forget about my father. Yet, another part of me yearns for air, for the dreamy uncertainty of living, loving, and feeling—that amateur orchestra called life. In it, soul or no soul, Hunter is my star, the most skilled concertmaster, subordinate only to the conductor. But, exactly how will we be able to coexist like this? I watch his face, beckoning me to squash it and aching loveable at the same time.

An ethereal bridge forms between us, a trajectory of a question asked with my eyes. The sirens lunge through the lake's underbelly in a burst of excitement, flapping their feet as they advance toward us. I'm sure Canosa wants revenge for me not saving her, for her nearly dying. I have to decide, I have to do

something.

But what about Papa...I gaze into the darkness of the woods, hoping to see beyond, to believe that maybe, by some miracle, he has escaped. I wish I could just take a torch and extract this naïve love I have for my father, watch it burn and scream and sizzle. Angry tears burst their way through, spilling quickly down my cheeks, before I have time to wipe them off.

The lake bristles and stretches its toothless smile into a series of waves. The boat shakes and brings me out of my stupor. "What did you say?" I notice that Hunter was talking and is waiting for me to respond.

"I said, it took them a while." I detect nervous notes in his voice. "Looks like the hunt is on. That's good news, I suppose, right? Never a dull moment." He raises his eyebrows at me and waves his hand in this gesture of could-you-speed-up-a-little. "Do you mind?" At this, he lifts his legs, turns on his butt half a circle, plops his feet on the boat's bottom with a splash, picks up the oars, and begins rowing like mad. The boat jerks into motion and I nearly fall forward.

None of this fully registers in my mind. I don't really hear him, distracted again. "Canosa's alive, did you see that? That means my father's gone for sure," I say, mostly to hear it and taste the sound of it, to try it on. It feels horrible, and guilt washes over me. "Hunter, what have I done? I shouldn't have left him like that. I should've fought for him. I could've saved him, but I ran away like a coward. I could've—"

"Would you mind?" He drops the right oar, turns his head back to look at me, and motions impatiently, twirling his hand again, before returning to his rowing. He bends forward, falls back, pivots the oars, and lets them screech in their rusty rowlocks.

"What?" I ask, disoriented.

"Hum, please. They'll be here any minute—your femme

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fatale friends from the deep realm of the glorious Lake Washington, don't you get that? I, for one, have no interest in meeting them one more time. So, can you go?" he says, without turning his head. A forced pleasantness rips thin over his irritation.

"Did you hear what I said?" I try.

"I did. I heard you, Ailen."

"So? What do you think?"

"So." He drops both oars and twists around to face me. I've never seen his face contorted with fury quite like now. "You're his daughter! But you know what? He'd kill you in a heartbeat. So why would you feel obligated to help him when he's hated you your entire life? He's a fucking asshole, all right?" He is breathing hard.

I blink.

"Look, I'm sorry, but can we talk about this some other time?" He slides back into position, picks up the oars, and dips them into the lake once more. Splish-splash, splish-splash.

"No, he wouldn't!" I'm angry and hurt, fighting tears. Damn it. I'm not going to cry, I'm not!

"Dude, we'll be eaten alive here in, like, a minute? Do you mind helping me out?" Hunter shouts over his shoulder.

"Sure, sure. Sorry."

I crawl back over the bow and hum. Immediately, we jolt into speeding, but thoughts of my father lying dead in the middle of the siren meadow won't let me concentrate. We make it past the north tip of Seward Park and I break again.

"Fuck, Ailen, what's wrong now?" Hunter yells.

I turn around, Hunter does the same. We're several feet apart, sitting on opposite benches. I look at him but don't see him, looking through him as I talk. "Hey, I know it might not seem like it, but I know he loves me. On some level, somewhere deep down, he does. Or...I mean, he did." I wipe my eyes and my nose on my

sleeve, glancing nervously at the surface of the lake and expecting Canosa to surface any second. Yet, I'm unable to move.

Hunter slaps the bench with both palms in exasperation.

"Awesome, Ailen, just awesome. Let's see if I understand. What you're saying is that this is the rare occurrence of the mysterious beast called *familial love*. Ever heard the term? I'll explain. You're referring to one of those twisted love-hate relationships between parents and their children that qualify as the norm nowadays, you following me? Here is what it looks like."

He makes his typical theatrical face, enacting everything he says with extra care and an increasingly annoying exaggerated voice.

"I hate your guts, but I won't show it. Oh, no-no-no. I'll display an image of the perfect parent, loaded, over-protective, totally admired by neighbors, teachers, other parents, whatever, you name it. It's classic passive-aggressive. This is what you're talking about. Well, sorry to break it to you, Ailen, but that's *not* what familial love is."

He pushes my hot button—this desperate wish of mine—which is what he's good at. And I explode.

"Oh, yeah? How would *you* know. At least my father didn't leave me like yours did. I mean, think about it. He left you the same day you guys found out about your mom's cancer. Really? I mean, really?! Great timing, asshole!" The instant I close my mouth, I know I've said too much.

It's still dark, but the pre-dawn dimness begins trickling in, enough for me to see the blood drain from Hunter's face. Darkness circles his eyes and his whole posture tilts and weathers with pain. Both oars hang aimlessly along the sides, rotating slowly in their locks and squeaking in rhythm to the shallow waves. Our boat drifts north. A few cars whiz by, flashing darkness out of the sleepy boulevard—either very early commuters or late night bar hoppers

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returning home. I barely notice the sound of their souls, consumed by the wish to dig my fingers into Hunter's neck and rip it off his shoulders.

I shudder. Bitter regret spills into my mouth like bile. Gasping, I mumble, "Shit...I'm Sorry. I didn't mean to, it just came out like this, I swear. I didn't...Oh, shit." I cover my mouth, before I say anything else.

"Don't you...*ever*...mention my father leaving. *Ever*... again." Hunter speaks each word slowly, with force. "Got it? If you *ever* mention him again, I'll skin you alive." The veins bulge on his neck and he clenches the sides of the boat so tightly I can see his knuckles turning white in the darkness. Immediately, he twists around, picks up both oars, and begins rowing like mad.

After his threat, I'm not sorry anymore. Blood pumps my face full of bitterness and dismay. I reach out and slap him on his back. He turns in surprise.

"Go ahead, monkey boy. Knock yourself out, why don't you?"

We glare at each other.

"Screw you," he says under his breath and turns back to row. I slap his shoulder again.

"What now?" he yells, dropping both oars so that he can turn to face me. He opens his mouth to say something else, but this time I talk first.

"Did you really just say, *screw you*?" I'm fishing for anything I can sink my teeth into, to keep fighting, to satisfy my urge.

"I thought we covered this topic already, didn't we? So don't tell me what I can or can't talk about. Got that, monkey boy? Besides, I'd like to hear what's so special about your father that can't be said out loud. What are you, too chicken to say the truth?"

"Just keep your nose out of my life, will ya?" he fumes. "I

can make it on my own, thank you very much. Get out of my boat. Go on, join your freaky sisters.” He points to the water.

“Sure,” I say with grim satisfaction. “Never mind me, then. Sorry to have bothered you. I think I’ll go for a swim, like you suggested. That might do me good. See ya.” I make a motion as if to tip over the edge of the boat.

Hunter’s eyes open wide at this, but he says, “Go ahead. And stop reporting to me every single thing you’re gonna do. What am I, your parent or something? I don’t give a shit what you do.”

“Oh, you don’t? Really?” I say, and press a finger to my lips, indicating silence. “Hear that?”

The faint echo of Canosa’s voice pierces through several yards of water behind us. It comes out warbled, in a weird roaring noise that could be mistaken for a boat’s murmuring engine, choking on a lack of gas and blurting out its last revolutions before it dies for good.

“Hear what?” Hunter says, and flips back his hair.

“The sirens. Singing. They’re close now. Another twenty seconds or so and they’ll be here in all of their, as you said, *femme fatale splendor*.” I smile and cock my head to the side, knowing that I won. Because Hunter’s bravado wilts and he finger-combs his hair again and adjusts his hood, like it needed adjusting.

This is Hunter, though, and he is stubborn. He never lets me win without putting up a good fight. I see an idea flash through his eyes. He smiles back at me.

“Oh, but I shouldn’t be scared. Ailen here will use her magical humming thing or whatever, and she’ll get us out of this. She always does—the glorious savior, the hero of the moment. Come on, turkey, prove me wrong. I’m waiting.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest.

I gawk, not expecting him to pull the hero card, but then

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immediately retort, "I get it. Now you need me all of a sudden. Good luck." I mimic him, crossing my arms in a make-me-or-else gesture.

A few seconds slink by.

Canosa's voice is louder now, but we both ignore it, like two stubborn drivers speeding toward one another in the same lane, thinking that it's the other one who will yield, all the way until the imminent crash. The invisible tension between us is so thick it could be sliced in two. I realize it's time to choose. What's it gonna be, Ailen? Sirens and water, or Hunter and air? Air or water? Water or...

"I thought you were smarter than this," Hunter finally says, turning around and picking up the oars.

Plop-swish, plop-swish.

His back muscles roll under his sweatshirt and I can almost hear his teeth grinding. The boat slides north, away from Seward Park. Nowhere near fast enough for us to escape.

"Ouch. That hurt. I'm so hurt I can't breathe," I say, but it comes out weak and pathetic. Hunter ignores me and continues to row. For a second, I study my fingernails. Their bluish tint reminds me of a corpse. And my skin reminds me of wet paper with traces of veins catering to my dead heart. A faint, ugly pumping sound emanates from my chest. I think I detect an echo of Hunter's soul, but it can't be. It must be wishful thinking.

I crash into the abyss of regret, all the way from the highs of my fury and then deeply into the throes of vile and forlorn thoughts in a matter of seconds. It's exhausting, debilitating, paralyzing. My mood swings tie me into a pretzel of self-hate. I don't dare talk or move, afraid to disturb the flow, lucky to be sitting next to Hunter and savoring the moment, balancing on the edge of indecision. Then, the unthinkable happens.

He drops both oars, turns back around to face me, and

takes my right hand into both of his. I jolt with surprise. His skin is so hot, it almost burns me. I force myself to sit still, for fear of him taking it away.

“I just can’t seem to get you out of my system, no matter what I do. Sometimes, it makes me so mad, it’s like...” He falls quiet, perhaps trying to find the right words.

Then we both hear them.

Canosa, Ligeia, and Teles surface. Their arms snake out of the water all around the boat like the tentacles of a gigantic octopus hell-bent on getting what it wants.

“Ailen Bright, the girl who thought she could run away from it all.” Canosa says to my right, her eyes open wide and glistening in the dark with a faint, bluish glow.

“He’s mine this time, I called him,” Teles interjects, swimming along the left side of the boat, edging toward Hunter.

He drops my hand and turns to face her, shrieking, “Shoo, shoo!” as if he can’t come up with anything more intelligent at the moment.

“Shut up! You didn’t call nothing,” Ligeia silences Teles, coming up behind Canosa and looking important.

“It is not as easy as you think,” Canosa continues, smacking Ligeia’s face without looking, making both of them fall quiet. “Trust me, the game is only starting. Don’t you want to know what happened to your beloved Papa?” Clutching the boat with her left hand, she stretches out her right one to touch me.

Her voice jingles against the stillness of the dawn with the sound of beautiful bells. I study her face and instantly know that I will become as bitter as she is if I cave in to my siren instincts and join them. I will become a man-hater, a love-hater, a hater of all things that I could never have. What good will it do me? It will consume me, just like her, guts and all. Still, it won’t give me an ounce of relief from my pain. As if to illustrate, her pretty face

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grimaces in the way a stunning woman winces when she senses that her usual charm failed to work.

This is it. Forget whether water or air will win. Within a second, I sway away from her touch, sit up straight, inhale with great force—as if I was suffocating—and push myself off the bench with both arms, turning midair to plop down on my stomach. I face forward, grabbing both edges, and become one with the nose of the boat. My chest expands and I exhale through my nose as I utter a loud humming call.

The lake responds like it was waiting for my command, obedient, happy to oblige. I feel its particles gather in an urgent uproar, beginning from the bottom, forming a current, picking up speed, and catching the hull of the boat in its wake. In one powerful lurch, we propel forward. Canosa's hands slide, ripping away from the boat's side. From the corner of my eye, I see her close her empty fists over the memory of where they were a second ago. She roars her displeasure, and Ligeia and Teles join her. All three are screaming and writhing in one spot, splashing at the foam that formed from the current. I stop glancing back and concentrate on moving us forward.

"Whoa!" Comes from behind. "Holy shit, Ailen! Not so fast, I almost fell out!"

I grin and hum some more, partially happy I finally made a decision and partially wanting to show off my power, to get another *Whoa!* I'm humming like mad, feeling the vibration of water atoms resonate to my rhythm, talking to me, singing with me, and making motion together.

The sky turns from black to purple, its very bottom alighting with a shade of lavender. Dawn enters the air, splashing my face with cold shower. It must be, what, after three in the morning? My jacket ripples in the wind. Seattle's usual clouds hang in a thick layer of weight over the lake. More and more cars

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come to life and make their way onto the roads, but there are no morning joggers or dog walkers yet. It's still too early.

We skim along the mostly empty boulevard to our left and, within minutes, we make it to the I-90 floating bridge. We pass under its onramp and keep speeding north, reaching another floating bridge, the 520. The boulevard to our left snakes out of sight and gives way to apartment buildings, boat piers, and sand. We quickly skirt Madison Beach, splashing through the Arboretum wetlands where I was so content with Canosa's company not too long ago. The boat's hull cuts through the blanket of water lilies, making them circle behind us with their sweet aroma as we dash into Union Bay. We near the green latticework of the Montlake Bridge and enter the usual noise of the city—no matter the time of day or night, annoying and constant in its everlasting presence.

Our escape is too good to be true. No matter how far I go, I won't be able to escape myself fully. As hard as I try to pretend I'm cool, like I'm over my issues and happy as a clam, I'm not. I hum and move us forward, but my thoughts keep turning back to the siren meadow. Sadness moves over me in waves; sadness for not being good enough, for leaving my father to die, and for staying alive myself. It seeps into my humming, no matter how hard I try to hold it back, and begins speaking to the rain the way I did when I parted it while riding on the back of our stolen Ducati motorcycle. Only, there is no rain now. But I feel as if it's coming to show me how I should weep properly.

We pass under the bridge and, at once, the sky opens into a downpour. In several seconds, we're both drenched.

"Damn it, it's pouring. Can you maybe stop it? I'm soaking wet!" I hear behind me.

I shake my head without turning it, knowing that I can't break now or we'll lose momentum again. At the same time, I

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don't want to withdraw from the melody that is gushing out of me, giving me some kind of relief and letting me shed my tears in the most grand way possible. I feel the raindrops as they pummel my face, and I'm content with that, soaking it all in. Humming. Purifying my aching, soulless void.

"All right, fine. Just wondering," Hunter mutters.

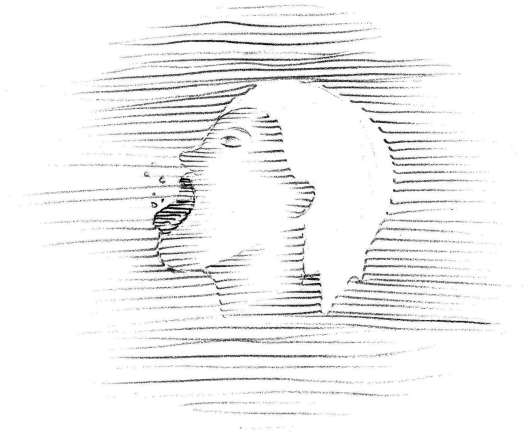
We keep gliding, perhaps at a speed of eight knots and no more. I slow the boat down, afraid to attract too much attention.

Red brick buildings flash past us on the right, student dormitories. Rain pummels the streets, slants at a diagonal against a patchwork of houses, doors, and windows. Tall streetlights burn the night's receding darkness away, their shining lamps blinking yellow in the mist. The rain makes me happy again. I watch the drops plummet through the sky and, on impulse, stick out my tongue to catch them, still humming but now sort of half-singing.

*"Look up,
The sky is gray.
Can you see?"*

In this moment, I'm back to being six or seven, with the sense of wonder and tranquility I had when my mother was with me, and, I mean, when she was truly with me and not spacing out in her daydreams or one of her songs. I don't remember much of my childhood, and every time I do, it's a treat. Elated, oblivious to everything else, taking a chance on the danger we're in, I let the memory carry me away.

Chapter 15



Fremont Canal

It was an early morning, still covered in darkness. My mother walked me to the school bus stop, it must have been winter. It was raining. I didn't like the rain and complained loudly, but mom said it was really sugar water because the clouds are really cotton candy. If I didn't believe her, she said I should try catching a drop and tasting it for myself. I looked at her in disbelief, but then my childish curiosity won and I stuck out my tongue. Mom did the same. So we stood there, waiting, catching raindrops and swallowing. I didn't detect much sugar, but it did taste sort of sweetish, maybe in a wishful sort of way. I dropped my coat's hood and opened my face to the rain, catching it. Those ten minutes before the bus arrived flew by in a glow of happiness and laughter, one of my few dips into exquisite treasure; a rare moment of love that transpired between us, etched forever into my memory before being tucked away, pushed deeply inside. Until it decided to float up and bother me with its utter affection and beauty, as it does now, ripping me apart. I wish it would stay where it was—in the dark corners of my forgotten memories.

Fremont Canal

I notice I stopped humming and the rowboat stopped moving. By some fate, or perhaps automatically, I ended up guiding us directly to the spot where my mother must have hit the water when she jumped, underneath the Aurora Bridge, across from the Fremont Bridge where Lake Union flows into the narrow canal that cuts through Fremont.

I pull myself up on the bench and turn around. My first impulse is to look for Papa's boat. Of course, it's not there, and I quickly glance away.

"Why did you stop?" Hunter eyes me quizzically, and then turns to survey the Burke-Gilman Trail and beyond, in the direction of his street. I know what he's thinking. He longs to go see his mother; it would be only a ten minute walk from here if we moored.

"You want to lead them to my house? No fucking way. Come on...let's get moving!" He licks drops raindrops from his lips and passes a hand through his wet hair. His gray hoodie is soaking again, nearly black in the faint glow of the street lights from the bridge.

I grin at him, oblivious to his sentiment, still in the throes of my memory with my tongue lolling out like that of a happy dog.

"Got one!" I exclaim, clucking my tongue with delight. The raindrop I caught tastes like sweet water. "Mmm."

"We're, like, being chased right now, and you're catching rain drops?" He slaps his knees and dog-shakes his head, sending spray everywhere. He leans over the boat and loudly blows his nose, wiping his face with his sleeve and sniffing.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Right. You're right. I must have stopped here automatically." I blink, shaking off the vision that's dominating my head.

Back to reality, Ailen, back to reality. You're not six, you're

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sixteen. Your mother is gone. Your father is...most likely gone, too. And you're dead. Do you hear me? Dead! You're a siren, and your friend here is a siren hunter. You've got two choices: avoid each other or kill each other.

There he is, right in front of me, and all it would take is a simple push, a tug underwater, and then...and then nothing. A siren hunter can't die at the hands of the siren, that's what Canosa said. He can be injured, yes, but his soul would have to be revived first, reignited to life, and then snuffed out of his body.

"So can we..." He twirls his hand, impatiently.

I suppress my desire to strike him and nod, realizing that this fight against my primitive instinct will wear me down sooner or later and I will simply give in when I least expect it. Perhaps the same instinct goes for Hunter.

I gaze into his steady eyes, cold and blue, unwavering. His mouth is pressed into a thin line, his knuckles white from clamping the oars too tightly. I must be right.

Rain patters softly on the lake's surface.

I take a big breath and try humming, but my voice breaks. There's too much emotional chaos going on in the background. Splendid. I force a cheerfulness that's simply not there.

"Hey, I'm trying, okay? Besides, I think it'll take them a while. Trust me, I can totally outrun them. Piece of cake, right? I'll hear them before they even get a chance to see us."

"Fantastic. Sounds like a plan," he says through gritted teeth. "And you'll be catching raindrops in the meantime?"

"Oh, come on, stop being such a bore. You used to love it. We used to do it together, remember?" I say and catch another one, not willing to let go of my spark of happiness just yet.

He studies me, his head to the side like that of a confused dog. I see a veil of understanding pass over his face the way a cloud passes briefly over the sun. His eyes flash with sorrow, barely

detectible, but it's there.

"Please? Pretty please? Just for a minute?" I plead. Then, I quietly add without pretense, "I need it. Really need it right now."

"I see." He drops his gaze. "Sure." He takes both of my hands into his. "So you wanna play it right now?"

I nod enthusiastically, grateful that he didn't ask me anything, aware of a slight change to his voice's tone. And maybe a whiff of his soul's melody? Or is it playing in my head again because I want to hear it so badly? It's hard to tell against the background of trickling traffic on both bridges and the sleepy soul-soup licking my hearing from deep inside the neighborhoods on either shore. I make myself smile.

"All right." He raises his head and opens his mouth wide, sticks out his tongue, retracts it back, clicks his teeth together, and looks at me with an air of some important business being completed, ready to move on. "I got two."

"Yeah, right. Like I believe you. You didn't even count," I say. "Watch this."

"Wait." He grabs my arm, eyes ablaze with a new light. "Are you going to show me a new siren trick?" His whole face lights up, expectant.

"I said, watch me!" I inhale, open my mouth wide, and sing a single note.

My voice folds into a column of wind and speeds past cloud layers resembling an audible blast being shot from the sonic gun. I feel it pass a mile, then another, tearing through layers of atmospheric foam—from the troposphere, to the stratosphere, to whatever you call the highest one. There, it pauses and solidifies, pulls on the surrounding moisture, then hardens crystal by crystal, scooping it up into a bucket of ice gems, ready to tip over and spill. My breath is exhausted and I break to inhale some more. The last of my note travels upward and adds to the abundance of liquid

in that one spot. Then it overflows.

Tiny shards of ice plummet down in a dazzling shower of diamonds, tinkling. It takes them but a fraction of a second. They fall, fall and melt as they go. Thousands of them, I can't quite feel the exact number, nervous to make sure it works and Hunter is blown away and says another *Whoa!*

A thousand feet over my head a small round spot of sky darkens and grows; and, instead of a few trickling drops of rain, all at once, my face is splattered with a shower, like a bucket full of water has been overturned. The boat shakes and I gulp, drenched. With some strange ability to calculate, that doesn't come from my mind, but rather from my skin—from feeling the speed and the force of impact at which the droplets hit me—I'm able to tell Hunter my number.

"Two hundred," I say, wiping my face. "Two hundred raindrops. Can you beat that?"

"*Holy cow!*" Hunter is impressed, his mouth hangs open. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Siren magic." I sort of sing it, *iiiiireeen maaagic*. "That means, no matter what you do, I win." I prop my hands on my hips, letting the rain streak my face.

"Wait, we're competing? Not fair!" Hunter glances up at the sky and then at me, pulling his hood over his head and hugging himself.

"Says who?"

"Hey! If we're playing, then it doesn't count. You're not supposed to use your siren powers or any other stuff. Siren magic? That's, like, breaking the rules." He theatrically sticks out his lower lip as if in defiance, and stomps his right foot for good measure. Cold water gurgles on the boat's bottom and we lurch to the side.

"Shit, I can't even properly get mad in this thing," he exclaims, grabbing the sides and shaking the boat violently.

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I hold on to the wooden bench I'm sitting on and burst out laughing. He joins me, and we're laughing together, swaying the boat, splashing each other with water, stomping our feet, shaking our heads, and drifting into a bliss of forgetfulness.

This is it. Not one minute of fantasy, but one minute of real life as it's supposed to be. A boat trip. A girl and a boy goofing off in the rain. They'll get wet and cold and tired, they'll moor their boat, hop out, and go get a hot drink at some coffee shop. Then they'll get warm and sleepy and go home, where breakfast is waiting, made from the loving hands of someone who cares. A pillow, a blanket, and a long, deep nap.

Hunter pats me on the shoulder and I snap out of my thoughts. "Hey, how're you feeling?"

"Better," I lie, studying the horizon that is rapidly turning lavender with shades of pink. Boats at the marina cling and clang their masts with regularity. A seagull shrieks, then another. It must be close to four in the morning.

"So, you think you're okay to get us...you know, to keep the boat moving?" He glances around, before looking back at me.

"Yeah," I say, distant.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care, as long as it's far away from here and we go now. Like...*now!*" At this, he pulls his sticky sweatshirt over his head and rings it out over the lake, shivering in his black T-shirt, his skin erupting in goose bumps. He flaps his hoodie once to get rid of any remaining moisture and pulls it over his head, grimacing at the wet, sticky cotton.

I gaze out over the bridge. The smell of the city washes over me. Gasoline, more gasoline, and rubber. I perk up and try to detect siren's singing or any other noise they could potentially make. Electric street lights flicker in the gloom of dawn. Dark

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office buildings blink to life, a few of their windows alight with a yellow glow, like a distorted glistening mosaic.

I squint beyond the Burke-Gilman Trail, to the thin trees and patches of grass, and I inhale acrid air. I scan the dark water in either direction of the boat. It laps lazily at the waking morning, in low waves. No sign of any disturbance anywhere. Nothing, except for extra patrol cars and police officers strolling into cafes for their morning coffee, no doubt prompted by yesterday's lake tsunami.

"I can't hear them, but that doesn't mean they're not close," I say finally. "Hold on, I'll get us moving." I tense to turn into position, then look at Hunter again. "Wait...you have absolutely no idea *where* you want to go?"

"Well, I was thinking...we could go to the Ballard Locks and hide there," he says with hope.

"That's not very far."

"Yeah, I know. At least it'll give us a break and we'll have some time to think about what to do next, right?" He glances back up and beyond the trail. Several blocks away, tucked into the Fremont neighborhood, on Linden Avenue, sunken deeply into her bed of cushions, Hunter's mother is being eaten away by cancer and her worry for her son. And I think that we're both so hopelessly lost and confused and scared that, if I don't get us moving now, we'll meander here until some cop starts asking what in the hell we're doing on the lake, in a stolen boat, when normal teenagers are dutifully reporting to school.

"All right, all right, Ballard Locks it is. Hold on," I say.

"Give me the ride of a lifetime, turkey," Hunter says, grinning, squeezing the bench with both hands.

"You got it," I say and turn around, pulling myself into position at the bow and humming, picking up the same song where I left off.

We jolt and glide under the Fremont Bridge, going west

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along the canal at double the cruising speed limit—close to twenty knots—and parting the water like melted butter. I hear Hunter's hair flip in the wind, in rhythm with the flapping of my torn silver rain jacket.

The rain stops. My hands trail across the lake's surface, soothing me into a tired slumber. Sirens don't need to sleep, but I suppose we need to rest once in a while. And, I've had an awful lot happen in the last forty-eight hours, from changing into a siren to upturning an entire lake into a tsunami. There's no remaining signs of yesterday's disaster; volunteers and Harbor Patrol have, no doubt, already cleaned away the debris. Astounding, but then again, this is Seattle, where even candy wrappers get recycled immediately after consumption.

A few more minutes and we'll make it to our destination. I hum, getting lost in the melody. It resonates through my skin, and I sing to the water in earnest, closing my eyes and feeling the movement of the water, commanding it to steer us. I let my arms dangle over the sides of the boat so that they get splashed in the waves. I lower my head and allow it to bob in the wind, nodding off. It feels good to be able to relax and let the momentum carry me.

A curtain of *déjà vu* swipes the images inside my mind back to my bathtub, to how it was two mornings ago—my head still underwater, arms up and out of the tub, hanging over the rims. It's a great daydream. I'm in it the way I was before Canosa sucked out my soul, before she made me a ruthless murderer, a femme fatale destined to crave living souls, cursed to love and hate every single siren hunter, especially the one I loved most before getting converted. I'm a normal, human Ailen Bright again, sixteen years old, dressed in my favorite jeans and my Siren Suicides hoodie. I see myself floating in chlorinated water, and holding my breath, but still alive. I want to turn it all back, badly,

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yet I can't move. Instead of blood, some sort of liquid lead flows in my veins, making me heavy and pinning me to the bottom of our marble bathtub, dragging me deeper, sinking me. My heart beats slowly, not in a healthy rhythm; rather, the way it does in someone who's about to give up on life.

Yet, not everything is lost. I hear something. It might be steps, might be hits on the wall or the door. Someone is banging on something, someone is nearing. I want to look, but my eyelids are glued together, made from a heavy cloth that is too hard to lift. I strain to open my eyes and moan, letting out a few bubbles of air through my lips and grunting to lift my head out of the water. It's too heavy; my body weighs a ton. My chest wants to burn from the pressure to inhale, and a shadow passes over me.

On sheer will, and with enormous effort, I split my eyelids open and peer through the slits. Everything is blurry. There is gray light that could be electric lighting in a bathroom, or the overcast morning sky. Either way, the dark shape looms above me, and I still can't move. I send every single thought and desire in a muted cry for help, hoping I will get noticed, floating all the way on the bottom, yearning for this someone to pull me out and save my life. I try to move my fingers, but they barely twitch. The person's dark outline leans in closer. I'm elated, and my chest rises in a mad desire to breathe. Two arms detach from the shape and reach for me, clasp my shoulders in their cold fingers, and yank me out of my haze, shaking me like crazy. Shaking me so hard, I think my head will snap off and roll all the way down the steps and out of my house, bouncing until it stops in the gutter, gazing out into nothing.

I still don't understand where I am when my shaking turns desperate. Someone is shouting something at me. It's slurry and warbled as if coming through a layer of water. I try to discern the words but I can't. I try to shout back but my tongue won't move

and my lips won't open. Until, finally, I find myself in a sitting position, shaking and swaying, being held fast by that someone. I manage to rip my lips open and inhale with a loud *whoosh*, gulping in air, gasping. Dizziness drips out of me with every inhale of oxygen, my vision clearing, my hearing sharpening, and my skin feeling the wind, of all things. A cold, biting wind. A tremor comes over me and I shake my head, trying to come back to whatever it is I needed to come back to, anything to replace this drugged-like state of total incomprehension.

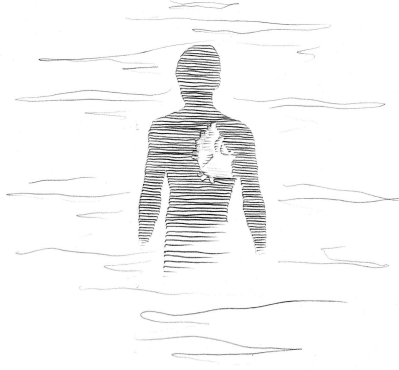
I blink and objects float into focus. It is the sky after all, not an electric ceiling light. It's gray and menacing, curling in restless tongues of clouds everywhere I look. I feel my head bob around and have no strength to stop it, trying to understand where I am and who is shaking me. Because this whole time, someone keeps threatening to dislocate my shoulders and bruise my skin with a deathly grip. Then, someone slaps me across the cheek and lets me go. I nearly fall back, gasping in surprise, and open my eyes wide to finally see.

It's Hunter. He's sitting across from me in the same rowboat, the one he talked me into "borrowing" on the Seward Park shore. His eyes are bulging and he plants his unbending fingers into my shoulders again like I'm his last resort in a matter of life or death.

"Shit, Ailen, snap out of it already! Wake up! Wake up, *damn it!* Look! We're in the middle of the ocean!"

"What?" I croak and turn my head left, then right, straining to stay upright in the swaying boat. I hear the drone of waves turn their volume up and then see them—gigantic, silky beasts. I inhale the salty air and realize that there is no land to see in any direction. The only thing there is to see is mad ocean water.

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Pacific Ocean

I'm at a loss for words, and then a flood of questions erupts in my mind. *How the hell did we get here? Was it me who did it?* I quickly rub my eyes, as if it will change a damn thing, like a child who's desperate to chase a nightmare away. Tough luck, this is as real as it gets, complete with a few gruesome facts that don't concern me as much as they concern Hunter who, even with his enhanced abilities, won't make it for longer than an hour in this freezing water if the boat gets overturned by a large wave. I don't feel like testing how long it takes for a siren hunter to die from natural causes. I squint into the distance, surveying our predicament. I chew on my knuckles absentmindedly to distract myself and focus on the task at hand.

We're floating in the middle of the ocean. Well, not exactly the middle, but miles and miles from the shore. And not just in any ocean, but the Pacific Ocean—the world's largest water reservoir spread sixty million square miles over a third of the planet.

Facts. Numbers, details, statistical babble—they always

calm me down. I let out all the air from my lungs in one sharp wheeze. Hunter continues shouting, near hysteria. For a moment, I ignore him and, thankfully, he lets go of my shoulders. It's like they tell you on airplanes: in case there is a breach in the body of the plane, and all hell breaks loose, put an oxygen mask on yourself first and then on your child. I don't know why this pops into my head, but it's my turn to take care of Hunter here, not the other way around.

"...will take us forever! Did you hear what I said?" breaks through to me from Hunter.

"Yeah, yeah, I did," I say, without listening, managing to nod occasionally to his tirade to assure him that I'm here.

A new sensation is about to erupt deep in my gut and, for a moment, I suppress it as well. I need to gain as much calmness from assessing facts as I can; a sense that terrible things are about to happen washes over me, but I'm not ready to give in to that idea just yet, trying to soak in the magnificence of this huge body of water first. This is no Olympic-sized swimming pool; this is a cradle for life itself.

"...listening or just simply nodding your head?" Another shriek from Hunter interrupts my thinking.

"No, no, I heard it. I'm listening," I say.

"Then tell me the last thing that I said just now," he demands, but I'm lost again, looking deeply inside, and feeling around for this unsettling change and its source.

The sensation that something's wrong grows rapidly, touching my diaphragm with its cold fingers and making its way into my throat, strumming it like strings of a broken lyre. A part of me wants to fight back, to squish it down; and that part is losing miserably. In fact, it has already lost.

The last protective, loving layer falls off my hearing. No, it's violently ripped off by this growing want.

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At once, and out of nowhere, born from complete silence—and I mean, Hunter's soul's silence—it's quiet no more. What the hell is going on? I hear it again.

It echoes all around in a terrible warble and it makes me mad, it makes me want to kill him or run away from him. Yet, I'm attracted to this broken melody like to a drug, knowing that one day it will destroy me.

"What the hell..." I start.

"That's not what I said. What I said was—" Hunter begins unevenly.

"*Shut up!*" I yell, putting both of my palms up in a gesture that asks him to keep quiet for a second. I press my legs up, hugging the bench to stay upright. Perhaps shocked at my sudden change in attitude, Hunter falls quiet. A wave rolls over the side of the boat and douses us both in cold, salty water. I grab the bench and Hunter curses under his breath, holding on to the side of the boat for dear life.

It's hard for me to tune out the drone of the waves, yet there it is again. His soul, distorted and breaking up like a badly transmitted radio signal. A badly performed *Summer season* by Antonio Vivaldi.

"What the fuck? I can hear your soul again!" I exclaim, licking water off my lips.

"What?" It's Hunter's turn to gape, which stops his teeth from chattering for a moment.

Another wave sends us both swaying to our right, but not strong enough to turn the boat over. It's still upright, its oars grinding wildly in the rowlocks, but on the verge of being torn off.

"Your soul! I can hear it again!" I shout over the noise to make sure he hears me. I gaze into his blue eyes, thinking that this promises to be an amazing torture, both of us being unable to be together or to be apart.

“What are you talking about?” He doesn’t understand me, scrunching his eyebrows and tilting his head to the side.

“YOUR SOUL!” I shout again. He shakes his head, holding on to one side of the boat with one hand, and pointing at me with the other, twirling it, demanding an explanation.

I know I need to move closer to him and tell him, but I’m paralyzed by the new knowledge that pierces me with an increasing understanding. *How very clever.* A siren and a siren hunter stuck in this rut forever, ensuring that one of them will obliterate the other. I feel for my father’s and Canosa’s pain now—their inability to kill one other, desperately trying each time and failing. Trying and failing. By now, probably unable to do it because they’re addicted to the game itself. Does this mean then... does it mean that maybe...

I’m afraid to finish my own thought; afraid to believe whatever it is I want to believe in, because it might not turn out true and the disappointment will be too much to bear.

Hunter blinks, and I realize that perhaps, like my father and Canosa, we won’t be able to succeed in this eradication of one another either. I wipe my face, still thinking. As it always does, my stupefied silence drives Hunter mad, middle of the ocean or not.

“What the *fuck*, Ailen? What’s wrong with my soul now? I have none, remember? Thanks to you! So don’t you start telling me...”

Hunter continues yelling at me in earnest, using his favorite repertoire of swear words that are meant to hurt. Finished with his temper tantrum, Hunter throws his arms in the air as if he gives up. He slides to the bottom of the boat so as not to be thrown overboard, rubbing his hands and blowing on them.

The waves fall still, in the way a tiger sits still before jumping his prey. The boat stops swaying, and I slide to the bottom facing Hunter. We’re both sitting with our legs almost

completely covered in water. The old wooden boards creak with our every move and I don't know how much longer it will hold. Hunter is hugging himself, his lips purple and trembling, his face ashen and his eyes cast into the distance.

"Are you done?" I ask.

"Did you even hear what I said?" he throws at me, without looking. "Were you listening? I mean, back by the bridge, when I asked you to get us *far* away? You weren't, obviously." He traces the vastness of the horizon with his right hand.

"Did you hear what I said? About your soul?" I interject. He ignores me, and I get a bad feeling of *déjà vu* again.

"So let me clarify, okay? *Far* doesn't mean the open ocean, all right? That's taking it a bit to the extreme. You follow me? I mean, look at it." He turns to pin me with his stare, and there isn't much compassion in it, just a lot of anger. "Let's get outta here before some shark swallows us, or some huge wave tips us over, or the boat falls apart, or some other shit happens." Hunter rubs his face. "Man, I'd give anything for a drag right now."

"Are you done, finally?" I repeat, irritated at every instance of noise that penetrates my eardrums and starts dancing the polka from skull bone to skull bone. Or is it Hunter's voice in particular? I can't tell.

"No, I'm done. Thank you for asking." His voice turns icy, his face agitated. He leans closer to me. "This is just wrong."

"What is?"

"Everything. You being a siren. Me being a siren hunter. Well, a fired siren hunter now, but a totally functioning one. Us, sitting here in the middle of the ocean—"

"We're not in the middle—"

"Whatever! All of this—it's just *wrong*. Two days ago I was happy as a clam. My life was perfect, well, close to perfect. I had a job, I was going to get paid, was going to get my mom her meds. I

got you tickets to the Siren Suicides concert, for Christ's sake. Everything was fucking *fantastic*. And now...this. We're stranded in the middle—"

"It's not the middle—" I raise my voice.

"I get it, all right? You know exactly what I mean, stop interrupting me. Jeez. How the hell did we get here? It's just... crazy." He finger-combs his hair and lets his hands rest there, frozen in a moment of thought, his eyes glazed, staring into nothing.

The ocean calms even more now, and it unsettles me.

I exhale. "I don't know." And then, almost timidly, "I can hear your soul again."

"What? Why didn't you tell me this before?" The incredulity on his face is genuine, and I deflate before erupting.

"I did, but you weren't listening." This answer sounds so much like what I would say to my father that it hurts me deep in my chest, to the point of physical pain. "I tried telling you when you were all freaking out about us being stranded here. What I'm saying is..." I pause, straining to listen. Yes, it's there, broken and torn, as if transmitted specifically to irritate me. "It comes at me like an echo, you know, like a distorted radio signal," I finish.

"What the hell?" Hunter says. "I don't feel any different. Wait, yeah, I guess I do. I want, err...well..." he winces. "I get this urge to rip your head off, you know, like for real, and it's scary."

"Yeah, I feel the same. It's like..." I pause, feeling my heart fall, gathering courage to continue. "It's like...this is what will ultimately drive us to kill each other, this super-strong love-hate thing or whatever you want to call it. Is this how you feel, too?" I ask with hope in my voice.

"Shit," is all he says, as he studies his palms, and then pulls his legs closer to his chest and hugs them, propping his chin on his knees.

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“What do we do now?” I ask. It sounds so stupid and childish, yet I can’t help myself.

“I don’t know,” Hunter mumbles into his jeans. “For one, I’m freezing my ass off sitting in this brine, and I want to get out of here. Before...you know.”

“I get it,” I say.

We fall silent. A seagull cries and a distant bray of a ship’s horn blasts in the distance.

“Since we’re not at the docks, and I don’t know if we’ll make it there or not, you need to tell me now, before we go to hell.” He looks up.

“What are you talking about?” I raise my eyebrows, genuinely unaware of what he means this time. Another bout of hate bubbles up, about to erupt and cloud my vision. I wonder if he also feels it in waves, like me. If he does, there is no indication of it right now. He’s sitting calmly across from me, as if he doesn’t feel a thing. Or, as if he’s made up his mind about something and doesn’t care.

In a way, the ocean provides a perfect background for stillness by being smooth as a mirror. The wind has died and even the seagulls have fallen silent.

“If you thought I’d buy your lie, you’re wrong. I know you inside and out, Ailen. I can read you, so there’s no use hiding. I know you don’t want to tell me. Well, newsflash, it’s fess up time. It’s now, or never. So come on, spill it. Looks like we’re not going anywhere anyway unless you decide to hum us all the way back before nightfall.” He sniffs loudly and blows his nose overboard.

“Fess up what?” I ask.

“All of it.” He wipes his mouth with his sleeve. “Why you did it. Jumped. Suicide. Not the bullshit you’ve been feeding me about singing beautiful songs, making the world a better place, blah-blah-blah. Tell me the actual reason. Couldn’t you just talk to

your father? I mean, he is a real human being, after all. It wasn't *that* bad between you two, was it?" He grills me, and, for the first time, I'm loathing the blue in his eyes—it's steel cold. I think I know where this question is coming from.

He *has* turned into a true siren hunter after all, emotionless and calculating, and now he needs facts from me to make a decision. And who did this? Me, of course. It's always me, screwing up other people's lives.

"Wait," I begin, uncertain. "Weren't you the one telling me that he hated my guts since I was born?"

"Look, all I'm trying to say is—"

A curtain of hate blinds me, coming out of nowhere.

"What kind of friend are you?" I scream at the top of my lungs. "You're supposed to support me, and here you are giving me a lecture in the middle—"

"You said we're not in the middle," he sputters.

At this, I scream and he promptly shuts up, breathing hard, rising to stand on his knees, both hands rooted firmly to the sides of the boat. His face is inches away from mine. Instead of swooning as usual, I detest his closeness.

"You have no idea, okay?" I hiss. "So don't bother trying to understand, you won't get it. Nobody *ever* gets it. It's always 'poor Ailen' or 'we understand' or 'why don't you see the school counselor' or 'there are coping techniques' or 'it gets better with time' or 'find some friends, be more social, go out.' It's easy for you to say, isn't it? But try living in my shoes for a minute, why don't you!" I stand and rock the boat.

Hunter shrinks back, raising his hands protectively in front of his face.

"Okay, okay, I understand. Honest." Yet he looks too much like a cold and calculating creature that's decided to retreat for a moment, serving a grander purpose.

"No, you don't!" I shout.

The ocean wakes up from its slumber. Sea foam sprays us with puffs of stinky wetness.

"You're a guy!" I yell.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He pouts his lower lip.

"When a guy has sex with a girl—no, when a guy has sex with *a lot* of girls—he's a rock star, right? It's like an admirable thing. And what about a girl? If a girl has sex with a lot of guys? Suddenly, she's a whore. You see what I mean?" I take a breath.

"I think so," Hunter says, in an unsure kind of way. But his hands come down.

"I'll explain. What if you were born with looks that made people think that all you want is to seduce, corrupt, and steal... when none of those things has ever even crossed your mind? All because you happen to look sexy and scrumptious to someone else? I'm not talking pretty here, I'm talking desirable. Why is it bad all of a sudden? Can you imagine living like this? Like a second sort? Being told that you're no good, no good for anything except hauling water?" I catch my breath again. The sky quickly darkens, rolling heavy clouds into a blanket of fog. The wind picks up and Hunter hugs himself.

"Um...I never thought of it that way," he says, his teeth chattering again. Strangely, I don't feel my usual urge to comfort him and make him warmer. Quite the opposite. I want to see how long he lasts, freezing like this.

"Of course you didn't. Nobody does. It's like a bicycle. I can tell you for hours how to ride one, but you won't get it until you actually ride one for real and feel the balance. You know where all of this is coming from?"

Hunter blinks at me with a confused look on his face. "What do you mean, all of it?"

"All of it. The stuff you called *wrong*."

“Um...”

I plop on the bench across him and move my face close, within inches of his nose. The boat rocks slightly.

“You have no clue, do you? Well, it’s fess up time, like you said, so I’ll tell you. I’m not sure this is what you had in mind, but here you go.” I prop my hands on my knees.

“We used to be free of this shit; we used to be hunter-gatherers. We lived in big groups of around a hundred to a hundred and fifty people, and everyone fucked everyone, and it was all right. Until we settled. Suddenly, you had to pass on your land to someone, and who would that be? A mother always knew her child, but what about the father? How could he tell? Why, own the woman, of course—and the child. Make her marry him, make her carry his name. You know what that’s called? It’s not marriage. No. It’s called *ownership*.”

“How do you know?” he retorts, moving slightly away from me.

I press on. “I read it in a book, all right? In many books. And I lived it, so I know. We’re like cattle to you, women are to men, no good for anything except to be fucked, give birth to your children, cook your meals, and scrub your dirty pants while you suck on your smokes and discuss worldly matters with each other.” I hiss. “Like you’re better than us or something?” My chest heaves up and down, air whistling in and out of my lungs at top speed.

“Wow, girl. That’s a bit drastic, don’t you think?” he offers, a look of surprise on his face.

“Think about it. What’s a siren?” I say.

“Well, in Greek mythology—”

“No! Not that. Remember, in the bathroom? You told me. Not the mythical kind, the real siren, the girl next door.”

“Oh, that? I was kidding. Come on, I was stoned out of my mind.”

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“Well, I’m not. I’m not kidding right now and I’m not stoned.” I pause, thinking back to Papa’s words, the ones I overheard in his car trunk. *You see, if it was only 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 spirit shine again, unvarnished. You hear what I’m saying?*

“Girls can be turned into sirens at sixteen, so that means at puberty, right? When they get their first period, or shortly after, when they’re—”

“—biologically ready for sex,” we both finish at the same time.

We fall quiet for a second after the word *sex*, perhaps both thinking back to all of those times we came *this close*, while being stoned out of our minds.

“And it’s only the prettiest girls who get converted, or the most alluring in terms of their sexuality, right? Like me. I’m not pretty in the *pretty* sense of the word. But guys would always look at me in that strange way, you know? At least that’s what I got from Canosa, in terms of an explanation. She didn’t exactly spell it out for me this way, I sort of concluded it on my own. So, I think it’s like our punishment for standing out. Do you get it now? The whole siren hunting business, where it’s coming from?” I ask.

“I think,” Hunter says through chattering teeth.

I both see him and I don’t, in awe of my own sudden understanding, having voiced it out loud. I try to imagine explaining this, bit by bit, to my father. I imagine telling him that he got it all wrong, describing how deeply this pain tore me apart. Explain how I missed my mother and how I hated him for driving her insane, for causing her to leave the house for weeks at a time, only to come home with her head hanging, patiently suffering his scolding, slapping, and, ultimately, abusing her behind closed doors while he thought I was asleep and didn’t hear a thing. That

is, of course, if by some miracle he's alive, if my theory about the relationship between him and Canosa is right. There are so many ifs, my head begins to spin.

I realize I would like to forget my resolve to let him live and, if he is indeed alive, kill him, slowly, inflicting as much pain in the process as I can.

I grin at the thought.

"You know why I jumped?" I say, using my toes to draw circles in the water on the bottom of the boat.

"Why? Hunter echoes quietly.

"It just seemed like the logical thing to do. It all led from one thing to another. Mom's suicide, Papa's controlling my every step, his wanting a son and not a daughter...He never came to hear me sing in choir, not once. I don't think he even knew I was in the choir." I fall silent, numb. "All I ever wanted was for him to hear me sing, if only once. For him to hear me, to hug me. You know, to tell me he loves me."

Tears roll down my cheeks in a sudden cascade, and I brush them off, infuriated at my own weakness.

Hunter's face softens, and he reaches out; but I turn away. "So you thought he'd listen to you if you turned into a siren?"

"No. I wanted to die. Simple as that."

"Why?"

"Because there's nothing worth living for."

"Yes, there is." Hunter takes my hand. I jerk it away.

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I'm empty."

"No, you're not."

"Like you would know."

"I do."

"I'm a dead, soulless creature, Hunter," I say and look away, staring at the ocean and the sky.

"So I heard," comes from behind, but I don't turn.

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"I kill people for food," I say.

"Aha."

"And I wanted to kill you." A sharp pain makes me cry this out. "I want to kill you now!"

"No, you don't."

"Stop saying 'no' to me!" I yell. "I'm not the girl for you, Hunter, would you get that into that stupid brain of yours?" I turn, all wild, eyes glaring, and tap on his temple.

"I'm not worth the effort, get it? I'm screwed up, broken, and cold. How many times do I have to tell you?" I begin raining my fists on his chest. It must hurt, because I'm strong. He lets me, until I get it all out, using his shoulders as support, leaning on him, breathing hard into his wet hoodie.

The boat shakes dangerously on a wave. I hear another bray of a ship's horn, raise my head, and see what looks like a fishing vessel about a hundred feet away from us. A trawler of some sort, its net drum is manned by fishermen in orange overalls, looking like fire ants from this distance. Sea gulls scatter away from it, screeching.

I want to turn my head to take a better look, but Hunter cups my face in his hands. He must still have warmth left in him, because I feel it spreading from my chin up to my cheeks and forehead.

"Feeling better?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say and mean it.

"Good."

Before I can say anything else, he kisses me. Just like that, in the middle of the ocean.

One second I strain against it, another I give in. His lips are cold, but his tongue is warm. His breath comes at me in waves of fire, searing my cries and spreading from my face to my neck to the tips of my fingers, making them glow and tingle. It feels like a

hot soak after freezing outside for hours, like some bubbly goodness that turns my skin all prune-like and rosy. I let go and hug him hard, braiding my fingers into his wet hair, feeling its silky texture and inhaling his scent—a little bit of pine and a little bit of sweat.

The echo of his soul sings the secret dream of my life. It's like it's meant only for me, to torture me. Somehow, this makes sense. I never heard my father's soul until I revived him, but Canosa must have heard it every single time, craved it, even. Is this the beginning of my daily suffering? Vivaldi at his best? The magnificent virtuoso, four violins thunderstruck with affection into the second movement, *adagio*, *presto*, or however you say *fast* in Italian? Will it be irreparably broken, reaching me through an annoying radio static, never clear and beautiful like it was before, forever teasing me and never fully satisfying?

A sigh escapes me. Movement in the water breaks my bliss. I glance behind the outline of Hunter's head and see the trawler cruise toward us at leisurely speed. It's easily four times the length of our twelve-foot boat. Its many outriggers stick out this way and that like legs of a giant insect that's gone belly up, holding its prey in a tangle of nets wrapped around the gallows on the deck. A scary looking metallic creature.

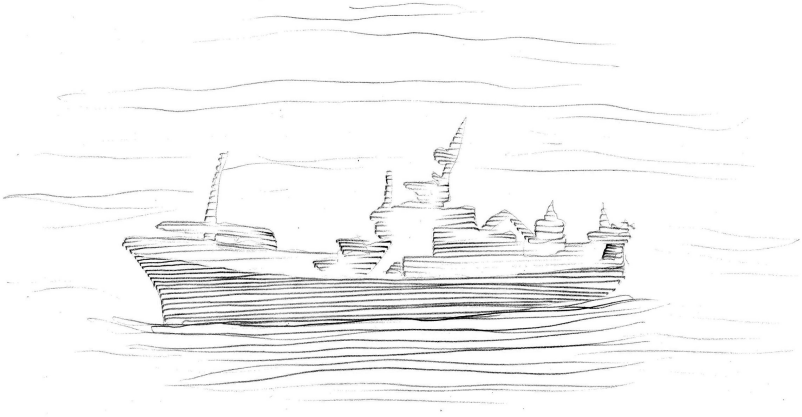
Its clunky engine revolutions and fishermen's souls interrupt the general buzz of the ocean. Mysteriously, I'm not annoyed. I decide, there is enough time to steer our rowboat away before they reach us. I close my eyes, perhaps making a decision that I'll thoroughly regret minutes later.

But not now. Now, I'm deep inside what I call a real kiss, a general melting into each other without time or worry or memories of any kind. I'm enveloped in Hunter's melody, broken or not. Nothing exists right now except this overwhelming warmth. And I want more. We sway, glued to each other. I dig my

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fingers deeper into his shoulder, massaging his scalp. My thoughts, my feelings, my everything that's good, that I dared to have for *one moment*, gets interrupted as the trawler draws closer. *I'm not breaking the kiss for you, go around, damn it.* Unfortunately, several very unpleasant things happen in rapid succession after that.

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Stern Trawler

I can feel her with my skin before I see her. Canosa seems to materialize out of nowhere. Surfacing next to the rowboat, she props herself up on its edge and pops her head close to our ears to deliver her message, grinning, whispering with her usual condescending drawl, “Ailen Bright, my favorite food kisser, I asked you to wait up, didn’t I? Was it so hard to do?”

We break the kiss and turn our heads, startled, but there is no time to react, and I’m slow, still enthralled in Hunter’s warmth. She grabs the left side of the boat, curls her fingers around its rim, and adds, “But no, you made me follow you for over two hundred miles! All because of some *boy!*”

She yanks the side of the boat up. I barely have time to register what she’s said. The old wooden boards creak with a sodden sigh and we tilt to the right. Our heads bump once mid-air, our gazes cross in that bewildered amusement that precedes a bout of fear. Another second, and we tip, dunking into the freezing ocean water. The boat follows, covering us with darkness.

Every single sound dampens. Water gurgles in my ears and

my gills unfold, grateful for the relief, gulping it and siphoning it out on instinct. I flap my arms and legs like mad and turn around to see something I've seen before, only it's not my father now, it's Hunter who's entwined in Canosa's hold, her arms and legs resembling the long white tentacles of an octopus. I almost expect her to expulse ink to make it harder for me to see. No need, the water is dark on its own, dark and thick like plasma brimming with salt. Hunter's face opens into an inaudible scream through the murk. Canosa's hands circle his neck, her fingers closing under his chin to suffocate him. She sports a victorious smile, her mad hair flowing around her shiny body in the crazy halo of a sea monster. I kick toward them and, this time, I know exactly what to do to make her let him go.

She doesn't flinch away, as if she expects my attack. She's confident in her invincibility, as if this is a game for her, to see how I will react, or even, to *make* me react. I'm now ten feet away from them, now five, now I'm upon them, twisting my body and making a u-turn to position myself directly behind her, away from Hunter's eyes lest he distracts me and causes me to do something stupid.

Canosa spins to face me, but I spin behind her. For a second or two, we spiral into a downward whirlpool, until I sense the perfect moment, her hair trailing around her in a silky helix and exposing her neck. It flashes directly in front of my eyes. I pull the sleeves of my rain jacket over my hands so that the sharp edges of the Velcro closures sit on top of my forefingers, then I raise my arms and stick both fingers into Canosa's gill openings, pressing hard, turning once, feeling the edges of her frayed skin rip.

She utters a high-pitched shriek that pierces me with its agony and travels for yards, scaring ocean life into crevices to hide. I yank my fingers out just in time. She lets go of Hunter, lifting her arms and covering her gills as she bends forward and doubles

down. I swim up and push her away by kicking my feet into her temple, doing a somersault, and twisting at the same time, ending up inches in front of Hunter's deathly pale face; his eyes bulge out of their sockets, and bursts of air bubbles are coming out of his nose and mouth.

I press my hand over his mouth and pinch his nostrils. He gets the message and stops exhaling, nodding to me once.

"Hold on!" I yell, not knowing if he can hear my voice underwater or not. He does, immediately reaching and digging his trembling hands into my shoulders. I seize him under his armpits and throw my legs into a speedy scissor kick, creating a powerful stream of water that propels us upward. We're not very deep, perhaps ten feet at best. A few seconds and we breach the tumultuous ocean surface, rolling into waves and gasping for air.

Well, I don't exactly gasp for air, not feeling deprived of oxygen in the least. But out of habit, I act the same way Hunter does and mimic his panic, gulping for air in quick, short inhales and shivering all over.

"She nearly killed me! She..." His teeth chatter. "Man, she's strong. Did you see what she did to the boat?" His lips are quivering, two purple lines across his ashen face. His dancing fingers stop shaking and clamp onto me like iron grips. "How the hell did she find us?"

"That cow," I say through pressed lips and turn my head around to look for Canosa. She's nowhere in sight. Instead, the annoying clickety-clack of a diesel engine looms over my back. I twist in time to see the trawler advance upon us.

"What the fuck is that?" Hunter mutters through dancing teeth, jabbing his fingers deeper into my shoulders.

"I dunno. Some fishing boat? A trawler, I think it's called," I say, cradling his waist to keep him from sinking.

An inverted creature, the thing glides on its hull like on a

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scaly back, the only image missing is its protruding outriggers twitching the way an insect's legs jerk when its body is upturned on a polished floor, not letting it tip back over and scuttle away. The trawler's black tire fenders act as its eyes, and the wire pattern of its rusted handrails look like the teeth an insect might use to tear you apart and eat you. It rocks forward, bobbing on the waves, closing in on us, barely twenty feet away.

In a split second, I narrow my focus and detect three human souls onboard, not necessarily appetizing; they're mostly salty like seawater, and reek of a fishy taste. One must be the captain, standing behind the wheel in the pilothouse. Another one crouches on the deck, and the third one is on the nautical bridge, hiding behind the railing like an inexperienced troublemaker. I only have time to see his orange bib peek out as he rises and throws his right arm full out, a toothy grin spreading between his beard and his knit beanie, his gloved hand holding a plastic loudspeaker aimed at me. Only it's not a speaker, and I've made this mistake before, identifying it wrong. I open my mouth in surprise when a shot rings through me.

Crack!

A powerful sonic blast hits my right side, the one conveniently turned toward the trawler. I go limp and begin losing my hold on Hunter's waist, but not before registering how the man who shot me throws both his arms up and jumps with glee, shouting, "I got it, I got it!" like he never shot anything in his life before.

"Ailen! Ailen, oh my God, are you okay?" Hunter shouts in my ear.

"Where the hell did you get that thing? Who gave it to you, you asshole? Who—" Hunter yells at the guy on the trawler. The rest I don't hear, turning inward.

A searing pain traces my throat and my eyeballs threaten

to pop, my eyelids drooping over them for protection. The world takes on a blurry quality as if viewed through a thin layer of dirty water—wobbly, muddy, discolored. Hunter's still holding on to me, shouting something in my ear, but it comes in as ringing noise, distorted by my momentary deafness. I move my legs weakly, struggling to stay afloat. I dip my head backward, pivoting my body into a horizontal position, hoping to relax and make myself buoyant, yet feeling the weight of Hunter's body pin me down and push me under.

Two of the three fishermen, both in knit caps and what looks like protective headphones on top, lean over the railing. The bearded one aims his sonic weapon at me, like the one my father used, only bigger. It looks like a gigantic plastic toy in his stubby fingers. He's short and squat, and the other guy is tall and scrawny, his soul sounding nervous. Before I have enough sanity to wonder where they got the gun and how they learned to use it, and more, who to use it on, we sink.

One second I inhale air, the next I'm under the surface, my gills beginning their steady pumping job, the clacking of the trawler engine subsiding into an annoying echo. My grip loosens completely and Hunter drifts out of my arms. I splash in a tangle of surprise and fear, too slow, too chaotic to move me in any direction. Flailing aimlessly, I drift around in one spot. It feels like being in a dream and trying to run through a pool, trying to control muscles that are not listening as if they acquired a mind of their own and are in no particular hurry, no matter how loudly you scream or yell, no matter how hard you try to kick, deathly in danger or not.

I struggle for a moment and then cave in to unconsciousness, weakened by the long journey and needing food to gain new energy. Alas, I'm empty, and the temptation to simply give up is too strong to resist. My eyelids close fully and I can only

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hear distorted noises through the thicket of the sea—some distant grinding and revolving and metallic crunching, first to my right and then above me. A feeling of dread takes hold of my mind and I attempt to move, even if for a little bit. The effort seems to take forever. I finally manage to lift my hands and force my eyelids apart. It's dark and I appear to be drifting directly under the trawler's belly. There's a pattern of some sort hanging in the water making it appear checkered. It takes me several blinks to will my vision into focus.

A net. It's a fishing net. I'm inside a net!

I grope around and feel a stretch of rope, multiple ropes, rough to the touch and slippery, covered with a layer of mold and some other oily grime. I glance around, moving my neck with difficulty. The net looks like a cone, with me slowly drifting into its narrow end. The checkered pattern shrinks rapidly and envelops me like a gigantic cheesecloth.

The noise intensifies and the net digs into my flesh, pushing something toward my back. I'm unable to move around to look, but I feel his warmth through the thin fabric of my rain jacket. It's Hunter, I can hear the barely detectable echo of his soul, my personal torture. Although, right now, his out of tune notes give me comfort.

We're inside a trawl net being pulled up like the catch of the day, together with a few fish trapped by accident, flipping their silvery bodies around me, desperate to escape. Another second, and we're lifted out of the water, crushed into one another like fresh cheese, me on top of Hunter, and a few fish on top of me, doing their crazy dance. The racket of the machinery erupts and intensifies, constant in its buzz, as if a cloud of bees decided to descend upon me all at once, their humming magnified ten times. I want to cover my ears but I can't move; my arms are pressed to my sides. My legs are bent with my face jammed into one of the

square openings of the net, its ropes cutting across my forehead and over my lips, and another two tracing vertical lines on my cheeks, with my nose sticking out right in the middle.

What worries me most right now is not how I feel, but what I feel behind me. There is no talking, no movement at all, only a limp body. I can't even detect breathing, only his remaining warmth. I don't know how long it will last, hoping Hunter can stay alive. I struggle to move but fail, so I open my mouth to sing, emitting a sad low croak.

A crane arm creaks, slowly lifting us up. From the corner of my eye, I see a drum turn winding on one end of the net, tightening it, like a gigantic spool on top of a floating sewing machine, ready to pass us under its needle and stitch us into a pattern of misery. There are shouts underneath. The two men in orange bibs are directing the guy in the pilothouse where to move the net and how high and more to the left and now a little bit to the right and now a bit forward. I smell machinery and this tangy electric stink coming from some sort of exhaust, straining under the load. I have no muscle strength to tear the ropes to get out, so I decide to make another attempt at singing, to move the ocean water like I moved the lake. I clear my throat, take in a deep inhale, and—

Boom!

Another shot passes through my ribs and I faint. Blackness is absolute and soothing.

The slow throbbing pain in the back of my head is akin to dipping in and out of reality, bumping your skull in the process—a small price to pay for this blissful quiet.

The net must be swaying. I feel its gentle motion from side to side, an easy rocking. Perhaps I'm small again—I'm a baby and my mother is rocking me in an old-fashioned crib, and she's singing me a lullaby. I hear it and I don't, drifting into that

twilight between wakefulness and sleep.

It's dark around me, like I'm in a bag made of the darkest, blackest velvet. I can't even see my own hands, although they're inches away from my nose. Can happiness be found in this gloom? Forget it. I'd rather suffer from blinding light, no matter how ugly it makes the things it illuminates, no matter how clearly it shows their imperfections. This is life, and it's never perfect. I guess I don't want to die, not just yet. I want to wake up.

I open my eyes and take a breath.

Not much has changed, I must have blacked out only for a few seconds. My body is still on top of Hunter's, firmly pressed together inside the latticework of ropes. The light assaults my eyes with its brightness and I squint to make it bearable. A migraine hits me, prompted by a combination of the blinding glare, the saw-blade noise of the net drum, the whine of the wind, the shrieking of the seagulls, and the shouting from the trawler's deck below. Did I mention that it stinks on top of this? It stinks in a way that would butcher your nose if you dared to stick it into a pile of rotten fish guts in the back of the fish market, right there, by the trash cans.

The crane's arm positions us directly over the deck, all the while producing a racket that punctures my eardrums with its intensity, adding to the strain and the creaking of the gallows, suspending us for our execution. The bright orange flotation work suits of the fisherman reek of mildew, the way rotten eggs do. The rough twines cut into the skin of my face. I ignore the discomfort, peering down, famished. My only hope to gain any strength is the sound of those three souls below. I don't care if they taste salty or fishy. They're food, and that's all that matters at the moment.

The gantry crane stops abruptly and lowers us. We jerk forward and swing back on inertia, dangling from the hook, moving down until we're about five feet over the deck's sole.

Another lurch and we stop, swaying in rhythm with the rocking motion of the trawler.

Two of the three men onboard, looking rather funny in their clunky headphones over their tight beanies, peer at me through the ocean mist with their sharp and sinister features. I sense a lurking fear in their bones; hear their souls afire with trepidation. It gives me immediate satisfaction, even a smile, which I do despite the rope cutting into my lips.

They're afraid of me, and they know that I know it. I'm a beast they've been instructed to catch, I'm sure, without prior knowledge of who I am or what I can do—and that thought gives them the shivers. I don't want to think about who instructed them, and chase the thought away.

The squat man points the sonic gun at me, holding it with both hands as if it was made of steel. The other one, the tall, haggard forty-something-year-old man with irregular stubble on his chin, points a flashlight at me. Blinded, I scowl. My elbows dig into Hunter's stomach and he groans. Good, he is conscious then. I let out a sigh of relief.

The echo of his melody never left me, only retreated a bit, and now it's back at half the volume, the distorted concerto of what used to be a divine symphony. It makes me loath his sound again. I manage to twist my hand, find his neck, and feel for his skin. It's cold. He's suffering from hypothermia. I need to get us out of here and warm him up before it's too late.

Somewhere, a heavy chain begins rolling with a terribly loud drone. It makes me wince and I try to cover my ears, but my arms still won't budge. Not that it would've helped any, it's too loud to ignore.

Focus, Ailen, focus. Find out who's manning this trawler, where they got the sonic weapon, and how they knew how to use it.

These questions swirl in my head one on top of another

like a pile of restless maggots. That's a good thing, I suppose. I'm gaining some degree of sanity, finally. When all else fails, facts are my crutch. Let's see, if I were to divorce myself from my emotions and apply logic...the logical thing to conclude would be that there are other siren hunters besides my father. In theory, there could be, right? I mean, what if there are other places with—wait, does this mean there are other sirens out there? Perhaps not one or two, but hundreds, or even thousands? It strikes me that the ocean is vast and I have no idea how many there might be. But it makes sense, doesn't it?

I curl my fingers around the ropes of the net, stretching my neck to listen through the racket. It's still the same number as before. There are three human souls—an auditory version of mixing different colors of paint into one ghastly brown mess. The one on the bridge, the skipper, promises to taste like stale fish. I stifle my gag reflex, wondering if they seem so rotten on purpose, like a protective measure from a siren. That would be clever; even cleverer would be if, once you swallow the soul of a fellow like that, then it poisons you from the inside out. I shake my head to concentrate on the task at hand.

Keep counting, Ailen, keep counting.

Three souls, and that's all. I hear nobody else. Could there be a siren hunter on board, the one I don't know and can't hear? Because if my father is alive, I would've heard him, since I've managed to revive his soul. This intense thinking takes me barely a second. Hunger overpowers the rest, and I open my mouth to sing, but I can't make a single sound, can't even cough to clear my throat. Great. I must look like beached fish.

I realize the tall man is staring me in the eyes, about six feet away, our eyes perfectly level, him standing on the swaying deck of the trawler, and me hanging in the swaying net.

He whistles, clearly astounded. I grin back, trying to look

sinister. It works. He blinks several times and takes a step back.

“Are you out of your *fucking* mind, Jimmy? You never whistle on a boat, it’s bad luck!” the squat man shouts at the tall one, sending one of Jimmy’s headphones askew with a slap from his meaty hand. The short, beefy guy is still firmly holding the sonic weapon in his other hand and pointing it at me. I’m sure this was done in an effort to make Jimmy hear what he just said. It seems like the tall guy is an amateur.

“Sweet Jesus, mother Mary, the blessed virgin, save me,” Jimmy says in a fast blur, sounding like *sweet-Jesus-mother-Mary-the-blessed-virgin*. “Would you look at that...” His soul jumps in fear as he points with his index finger in our direction. “God almighty, it’s just a couple of kids! It’s just...I didn’t sign up for this, no way.” He shakes his head and falls quiet. His long face turns gray. He gapes at me, massaging both sides of his open mouth with his thumb and forefinger, and scratches his stubble with the pallid resin of his glove.

The squat man pulls down his own headphones, letting them sit on his thick neck, and jerks Jimmy’s headphones off his beanie completely, sending them flying across the deck. He tiptoes to lift himself up and yells into his ear.

“You heard what the man said, he wants them alive. We get the cash and wash our hands. So quit your whining and stop being a sissy. Let’s be done with it.” He grins an unpleasant smile that cuts through the middle of his round face, scathed by ocean winds into the red muzzle of a beer drinker.

Jimmy glances around, perhaps to locate his headphones, and then sticks his hands in his pockets, kneading them. “He didn’t say they’d be kids, did he? If I woulda known...He said—”

“Never mind what he said!” The squat man cuts him off. “You want to repair the roof of your house or not? How many years has it been now?”

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"Since Tammy..." Jimmy mutters under his breath, takes out one hand and folds fingers into his palm, mouthing the numbers. "Three, I reckon. That sounds about right, three years."

"Hey, Glen, what's the holdup?" The third fisherman leans over the railing of the pilothouse, shouting and waving his arm for the guys below to hurry up. That means Jimmy is not important. I get the hierarchy. Whoever is paying these guys is the boss.

"Just a minute, Stevie! Getting her situated here," the squat man, Glen, shouts back.

"All right, you're worried about them, Jimmy? How about this. How about we ask them to quiet your mind, eh?"

He looks up at me, points the sonic gun again, and opens his mouth so wide I can see rows of yellowing teeth framing his purplish tongue. I try not to think about what his breath might smell like.

"Hey, kids, you all right?" he shouts. I try to pull myself up from Hunter, but my muscles give out, and all I can do is curl my fingers into fists of weak hate.

"There. See, they're fine." Glen slaps Jimmy on the back with his free hand and waves to the skipper, Stevie.

"But they didn't—" Jimmy begins.

"I said, they're *fine*," Glen says with finality, and I see Jimmy give in to his authority, averting his eyes and kneading his pockets once more as he studies his huge black rain boots.

The drums begin its rolling dance again, cling-clang, cling-clang. We descend another several feet, jerking, and now hover over the floor, nearly touching it.

"Unzip her," Glen commands with a wave of the gun.

Jimmy nervously steps closer, grabs the rope from somewhere underneath me, pulling on it, and then stops.

"Glen, I'm not sure about this."

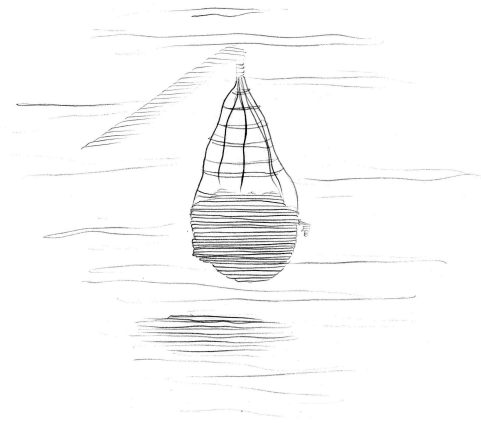
"I can't hear you, you idiot." He taps on his headphones

which he managed to put back on, then shouts into Jimmy's face. "You want your pay, you keep your mouth shut. Haul them in and be done. Let her loose!" By *her*, I suppose he means the net; must be some affectionate fishermen term.

Jimmy glances at us again, unsure. With a heavy sigh, he yanks at the rope. It unzips underneath Hunter like the loose thread of a sweater, loop by loop. Another jerk and we fall out of the net and onto the slimy deck with a sickening crunch and the sound of slapping on bare skin. Hunter moans when I land on top of him, then the floor begins moving. No, it's not the floor. It's the white plastic side of a chute of some sort, an opening on the deck that I didn't see. And it's not moving, the trawler is moving, causing us to slip into a square opening the size of a large manhole, cold and stinky. For a beat, we hang folded over its rim. It reminds me of the polished rim of my bathtub. Then, with an unceremonious rain boot shoved in my ass, Glen sends us both flying down.

Down the rabbit hole, crosses my mind. *Down the rabbit hole I go.*

Chapter 18



Fish Factory

We tumble into the freezing darkness. Hunter grunts and groans with every twist of the shaft. I don't have a chance to look at him, to make sure he's okay, as my head bangs against metal walls, unable to stop the work of gravity. It feels like we're going down one of those closed waterslides at an amusement park, except it has no water and it's covered with a fishy slime, no doubt having never been cleaned since this vessel started operating. As abruptly as our fall started, we stop moving, slamming into a flat surface. I land on top of Hunter again and he shrieks involuntarily. I shriek, too, feebly at first, and then coughing up salt water and finding my voice again, shaky but clear for the most part. Good, at least I have my weapon back. I cough again and raise my head to look around, blinking, afraid to talk in case it won't work.

A soft gray light emanates from the low ceiling painted a dirty beige, jammed full of pipes, aluminum chutes, and bundles of wires, with a few flickering fluorescent lamps in between. The light comes from them. I blink again and my eyes begin to water. We're both lying flat on what appears to be a three-foot wide

conveyor belt used to sort and process fish. Or sirens. Who knows what these guys are catching here.

Hunter's body twitches underneath me, his head face down and propped against the low metallic lip that prevented us from sliding another three feet to the floor. My legs are still up in the chute's opening behind me. I hold on to the slippery belt-rim, wiggle, and roll off to the left, scrambling to all fours and leaning to look.

"Hunter?" I try. It comes out warbled, in the low register of an old woman who hasn't used her voice in years. I clear my throat, feeling weak all over. "Hunter, you all right?" I shake his shoulder, the wet cotton of his sweatshirt clammy under my palm. My arm gives out from the effort.

"Huh...Wha...I...Sssss..." he mutters, his colorless lips flush with the conveyor belt. His head is turned to the left, hair bunching over his closed eyes.

"Talk to me, please. Are you—"

Before I have a chance to finish, a low whine of a motor comes to life and the belt jerks to the right, its rubbery surface squeaking under Hunter's sneakers. How he managed not to lose them in this chaos, I have no idea. Before my thought is finished, I fall over, not having expected the thing to move. By the time I gain balance and scramble on all fours again, the belt falls out from under us and we get dumped onto the floor, roll forward another few feet, and end up hitting a freezing wall, even by my standards. It's covered with frost and crunches lightly as my forehead rams into it.

I shake my head and manage to sit; trembling from the strain to stay upright, I rub my face and eyes, gagging from the stink of what smells like spoiled herring, on top of an oozing, condensed coldness. I fight my sudden dizziness and literally hold my head in my hands to prevent my vision from spinning.

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“Oh, my God,” I say, involuntarily. Because my hunch was right, this does look like a freezer. Worse. What’s directly in front of me resembles cells, sort of like cooling compartments for fish except they appear too large for that purpose. They remind me of tiny rooms, the likes of which you see in prison, complete with black iron grate doors that can be locked, judging from the heavy locks hanging by their knob handles.

“Jesus Christ,” I mumble under my breath, everything else forgotten. My eyes open wide, taking in the interior and digesting the information, conjuring up images of what must go on in here on a daily basis. I’m unable to stop myself from gawking; for a second, I’m not even aware of Hunter’s moans next to me.

Four, no, five units about six feet high and four feet wide line the wall; or, rather, they are *dug* into the wall, if you were to dig out cells in a mountain of ice, rounding the entrance corners in a rough way, because the walls are white and irregular, completely covered with rime in places. There are no lamps inside the cells, only in front of each, making them look gray like the open mouths of five toothless monsters. Underneath the ice there are places where paint is visible, white perhaps years and years ago, but now it’s dirty and peeling, reeking of iron. Rusty, eroded, tarnished.

A heavy thump from above yanks me from my horror as before I started thinking about how a siren might fit into one of these, or *how many* sirens might fit.

“Hunter!” I yelp.

He is curled up on the floor, shivering.

“Hey, look at me.” I lean in and cradle his face in my hands, attempting to lift it, when another thump shakes the ceiling and causes the lights to flicker out briefly. For a fraction of a second, I see the halos of after-images, before the light goes back on again.

“What the hell?” I glance up briefly, and then get consumed by my worry again.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” I keep his face in my left hand and shake him lightly with the right. His breath warms my palm in short, raspy gasps.

“Can you talk? Are you cold? Darn it, of course you are. It’s freezing here, and you’re wet all over. I wonder if I can...” I don’t finish, perking up at the noise coming from above. Hunter’s face slides from my grip back onto the floor.

It’s Glen—I can hear his soul. It’s a mix of loud chewing, fire crackers, and some annoying, mechanical whine on top of it, all promising to taste of raw fish and iron. He walks across the deck away from the chute hole where the net was unzipped. I tilt my head up for a moment, listening. Ragged breathing comes in. It’s Jimmy. His soul has a simple melody to it—the shuffling of hard paper, perhaps playing cards, and a tinkering with metal sounding tools or bells. He appears to be leaning in to check, to make sure we got swallowed properly into the depth of the trawler, yet still uncertain, muttering under his breath.

Then...

Bang!

...the lid over the opening slams shut, and all the lights go out at once.

“Hey!” I shriek from surprise.

It’s pitch black. Disoriented, my hands empty, I feel around for Hunter, calling his name frantically several times. My words sound hollow in the hushed silence. Slowly, my skin begins to glow, faintly. It’s probably because I’m hurt, but it’s enough to make out shapes that are close.

“Hunter! Hunter, you all right? Where are you?” Panic subsides as I find him a few feet away from me, stumbling right into his chest and groping it like mad, traveling with my fingers all

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the way to his face. He's sitting upright and coughing up moist puffs of air into my face.

"Never felt better, thanks for asking." This comes out weak, but with his usual sarcasm. It tells me that he feels awful, but is fighting it by trying to appear cool. "What about you, you okay?" he groans, more of his breath rolls over me in a wave of warmth. His face is barely visible, a gray ghost in the darkness.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Are you hurt?"

Now a stream of his distorted soul echo hits me square in the ribcage, especially pronounced amidst these walls—probably soundproof because every word I speak dies with barely a chance to escape my lips. I have an urge to circle my hands around his neck and suffocate him. It takes an enormous effort, and a deep exhale, for me to suppress it. How much longer will I be able to withstand the urge?

We perform mutual palpation, like in one of those kiddy games, where we're playing doctor, feeling each other, touching each other's faces, necks, and shoulders, not daring to let our hands slip down for more, but feeling tension rise with excruciating clarity, like it always does at the wrong moment.

"I was so worried, I thought you got hypothermia. That stupid cow. She has a thing for you, I swear." I break the silence, touching his cheek. Then I trace the smooth bridge of his nose, my hands shaking, every muscle jittering, as tired as a distance runner's muscles at the end of a marathon.

"Nah, it'd take more than her to nuke me." His usual bravado comes out. It's a good sign. "I'm surprised she managed to find us. I wonder how it works, actually. Can you hear her if she's miles away?"

At that, we dive into small talk, pretending as if everything is normal, in an effort to avoid our weakness, terrified of the impending danger.

“Nope. At least, I haven’t yet. I mean, I could feel her just before she jumped out, but that’s about it,” I say, wondering if I could detect her presence on purpose, to try and tune in to her as if she were a radio station. “I could try?” Small talk is working, I start feeling a sense of normalcy.

“Hmmm...interesting.” Hunter appears to be thinking, and then quickly changes the subject. “Man, it’s cold in here...” He shifts and rubs his hands, and before I can ask him if I can warm him somehow, he launches into another attempt to fill the silence. “Hey, did you see the gun? They used a sonic gun on you. The guy with the beard, the short one...” Hunter falls quiet, perhaps realizing that of course I saw the gun, felt it, too. His pause leads me to believe he’s as afraid as I am to breach the subject on who gave it to the guy and why.

My fingers trace his lower lip, and he nips on them lightly. “And the headphones?” I add. “Did you see them? Must be against my voice, right?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think fishermen use them all the time, because it’s loud on the trawler. You know, chains and engines and stuff.” His hands feel my shoulders through the thin polyester fabric of the rain jacket, and I want to crumble into his embrace. “What is this place, did you get a chance to see when the light was on?”

I follow the folds of his ears, from the outer edges to the inner cartilage, letting my fingers travel across their smooth landscapes. Hunter lets me, I can even detect him moving a bit closer and holding very still. Unbelievable as it is, touching him gives me comfort, makes me feel less fatigued. I sense that it gives both of us solace, not to the point where we can give up past conflicts and our yearning to kill each other for good, and not to the point of gaining strength to try and climb back up, to kick off the lid, or at least to go search for some door and try to open it.

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No. Not yet, but we're getting close.

"They said some guy hired them, did you hear that? I wonder who. I wonder if...there might be other siren hunters out there?" There, I said it. I fall quiet, scared of Hunter's reaction.

"Who knows," is all he manages, clearly not tuned in to the conversation, his hands slowly traveling down to my waist and under my jacket.

"That *bitch* Canosa." I relish the word *bitch*, usually afraid to use it in case I might offend someone, but thinking that this use is absolutely appropriate, after what she had done. I perk up even. "Oh, my God, can you believe it? I thought I could trust her. I still don't get it how..." I swallow, feeling Hunter's breath grow faster and shallower, blowing hot air against my cheek. "...she found us. By my voice, I suppose. I suppose I need to try it myself. I bet I can do it, too—don't you think?"

"Yeah. I think...This is so weird, you glowing like this... It's also kinda awesome," Hunter mumbles, his fingers counting my ribs, moving higher, my heart ramming against my chest.

"Jeez, you're freezing!" I get my own hands under his sweatshirt. "I wish I could warm you up somehow. God, I hate that I'm cold-blooded." I grit my teeth and begin rubbing his belly unceremoniously, exerting myself too much but not caring. As cold as Hunter is, my hands must be colder, because he abruptly yanks his arms from under my jacket and grabs my hands to stop me.

"Don't." I sense another word freeze on his lips, as if he bit his tongue at the last moment.

"Why?" I ask, taken aback, knowing that he must have meant to say, *your hands are cold*, and then thinking that he would hurt me with it.

"You're not helping, Ailen. Relax and enjoy the scenery, all right?" He's nervous and exhausted, his voice trembles, and I think

my eyes have adjusted enough to see the faint outline of his profile. He turns his head toward the freezing cells, no doubt wondering what the hell they are, yet not being able to clearly see them.

A momentary pause is all it takes. Our magic is sapped clean from the air, leaving only teenage awkwardness behind. I sigh, sad to feel it go; my hands are still in Hunter's, held tightly, but with no affection. Only with a desire to hold on to something, like to a steel pole in the middle of exploding chaos.

I quietly lean my head on his shoulder, he doesn't push me away. For that, I'm grateful. I'm scrambling for anything I can get, to gain an ounce of my strength back. Trying to remember how long the sonic blast rendered me immobile last time.

Instead, I think back to every single time we fooled around in the past, each lovely occurrence transpiring while being high on weed and not feeling much at all. Neither of us was brave enough to try anything when fully awake and alert, making feeble passes at each other and never going past kissing and some affectionate squeezing on the couch or pressing stomach to stomach against the bathroom door.

"I'm sorry—" I begin, into his sweatshirt, and then pause, not knowing what it is I'm apologizing for.

"Huh?" Hunter seems deep in thought, shivering.

"Wait, listen—" What dawned on me briefly before, blooms into full knowledge. "Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"Listen," I say and lift my head. "La-la-la..." I sort of attempt to sing, but my voice comes out dull. The usual sharpness and thrill gets sucked out of it the second it leaves my lips.

"It's soundproof! This place is soundproof. Holy shit!" I say.

"Of course it is," Hunter says.

“What do you mean, *of course*? How would you know?” I retort, wanting to yank my hands out of his, but curbing the urge, conserving my energy. I don’t know when I’ll have another opportunity for an intimate moment like this, bizarre as it is. We’ve both narrowly escaped death and now we’re freezing our asses off, locked up in an enormous ice maker.

“I dunno, just guessing. But it’s one hell of a siren hunter’s boat, I tell ya.” He glances at the cells and I think I see his lips crack into a grin, though it’s hard to tell for sure in this darkness. “Your father’s thing is a toy compared to this baby. This is how the big guys play. Yeah.”

There is a tone of admiration in his voice, badly covered up with deliberate sarcasm. On some deep level his comment pokes me in the wrong place, and I feel like defending my father’s boat and his hunting legacy. Plus, he bought it for my mom, which has a special meaning to me. I’m mad at both thoughts. Too late. They immediately make me angry and form the words before I can arrest them.

“I think my father hired these guys. There, I said it. Isn’t *that* what you were thinking?” I wait for his answer, suspecting that we had this same thought on both of our minds ever since we got here.

“How would you know for sure?” Hunter counters, without answering. I must be right.

“I don’t, but I’m positive it’s him. Who else would be smart enough to do this? Somehow, he has survived, he must have. Perhaps this trawler was his all along, and he simply never told me.” I notice a tone of pride in my voice.

Hunter must notice it too, lashing out at me. “Smart enough? You mean, you actually have to have a brain to hunt a siren? Look at you, Papa’s girl all over again, aren’t you?” Badly covered contempt seeps through his remark. It feels like he pumps

himself up to be angry on purpose. That's as far as my logic goes. Suddenly, fury pounds in my skull with blazing intensity.

"What, we're animals to you, is that it?" I throw at him.

"That's not what I said!" He raises his voice.

"Well, it's not what I said either," I hiss. "What I said has nothing to do with my father. I hate him, and you know it!"

"Awesome. Point taken. Agree." He exhales loudly. "Hey, I don't know about you, but I don't feel like arguing anymore. I feel like a nice long joint on my favorite couch under a warm fuzzy blanket, okay? So unless you object, I vote we try to find our way outta here." He scoots away, scraping the floor with his wet jeans. It must drain a lot out him, because he stops after a short while, panting.

"Oh, yeah? So *you're* the smart one here? Okay. Explain to me how exactly you're planning to escape. I'm all ears." I cross my arms and wait. I can't believe I was actually kissing this guy not too long ago.

"I don't know. *Just out!*" He bangs his fist on a wall in a childish move of frustration, and yelps in pain. "We'll figure it out when we get there." Despite the pain, he continues hitting it again and again, sending small sparkles of snowflakes flying at me. They stick to my face without melting like they normally would if I were still a warm-blooded girl.

"When we get *where?*" Since I can't beat him up like I usually do when upset, I lunge into hurtful words. "Let me see if I understand. We're somehow going to manage to pry open the metal belly of this beast, quickly, too, before those guys are back. Then, we'll swim out and fly off into the night sky, on magic wings, and we'll land on some paradise island with a loud splat. Am I right?" It's not the time to be sarcastic, but I can't help it. "Is that what you have in mind? That my siren magic will save the day? Is that what you're counting on?"

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“What do *you* suggest?” Hunter says angrily, and then sneezes loudly, several times. I can hear him wipe off the snot with his sleeve.

“See, you’re already sick. If it was just me—I can survive swimming in the cold water, even in freezing water. But you can’t, siren hunter or not, don’t you get it? Look at you, you’re shaking.” Not that I can see him, but I feel his vibrations come at me through the air.

“What do *you* care?” His voice catches at the end. I immediately feel awful.

“Why are you so bitter all of a sudden? Everything was fine just an hour ago.” It comes out wrong, of course. I grope for him in the dark, but Hunter scoots farther away. “What’s wrong? What did I say wrong?”

Heavy breathing.

“Nothing.”

I wait. Sometimes silence is the best answer. Sometimes knowing when to shut up is better than knowing what to say. Sure enough, it works.

“I’m just scared is all.” Hunter deflates, sniffs, shuffles his sneakers on the floor.

“So, you’re mad at me because you’re scared? First, you’re not scared, acting all brave and funny. Now you *are* scared. I’m confused. Scared of what? I don’t understand. If it’s my father who’s manning this boat, he’ll welcome you with open arms, I’m sure. He’ll give you a personal ride home, you can count on it.”

“It’s not that...” He trails off.

“Then what?”

“We’re stuck here. I can barely move, everything hurts, even breathing hurts.” I hear tears in his voice. “And I don’t know what will happen to us, what those people will do...” He pauses. “...to you.” Another pause. “You’re like a magnet. I can’t tear

myself away from you, it's just...Here I am, sitting and talking, doing anything I can to *keep* talking, to *keep* hearing your voice, when any other normal guy would pound on the door and cry for help." He catches his breath.

Contrary to him, I can't breathe. I seem to have forgotten how to. I want to say, *ditto*, but I don't dare, don't dare to tell him that snatching a moment of being together is more important to me than escaping my fate.

"I'm scared...of losing you, again," he says.

Thick silence hangs between us, broken only by the steady pounding of the trawler's engine, rolling ocean noise echoing from far above, and Hunter's occasional sniffing.

I don't know what to say. And I don't need to, because before I can say anything, a voice comes alive from behind us—no, two voices, in the corner of the lab. I twist around to look.

About thirty feet away, deep in velvety darkness, a lock turns, and then the door bursts open with a sharp metallic clang.

"Watch out!" Hunter yells at me.

"No need to look for a way out now," I mutter under my breath, squinting like an animal caught at the end of its hole, blinded with torch fire.

Chapter 19



Wet Lab

I rub my eyes and blink. Jimmy and Glen materialize on either side of the doorframe, their soul melodies assaulting my hearing and making me hungry. Good, maybe it'll give me some much needed strength. A waft of sea air follows the daylight that breaks through. I drag in a huge lungful of air and smell the stink again, taking in the cacophony of Jimmy's and Glen's souls, sandwiched together into a noxious duo. Repulsive, but edible. My chest agrees with a growl of famished void, ready to make me pounce. Pipes and wires stick out eerily this way and that in the narrow corridor that separates me from the fishermen standing by the door, mincing their steps. They must be afraid of me. The thought gives me pleasure and I hiss involuntarily, pumping myself up for a fight.

The sinister siren part of me is grinning, saying, *It's show time, Ailen. You can do it.* It nags at me, *Come on, eat them! It's what you were made for, isn't it? Admit it, you love it. Get back at them; get back at your father for all of the pain he's inflicted upon you. He doesn't deserve to live, nor do they. Suck out their lives, you can do*

it. Gather your remaining power...come on! Remember to sing at 130 decibels to make them lose their minds, bend their sorry wills with your voice, gut those babies, make their every bone pop and break. Like at Lake Union, remember? DO IT!

I know, I know, I want to answer, but I'm terrified that I can't do it at will, that I need a powerful emotion to kick myself into gear. This drives me insane, mad at my own constant self-doubt and the fear of accepting myself as I am.

Hunter glances at me, his mouth opening to say something. I press a finger to my lips, telling him to be quiet. He nods his head, eyes expectant, miraculously trusting me this time.

Ailen Bright, I tell myself, you're a siren. So, act like one!

There is muttering by the door, a few phrases exchanged in a hushed whisper, and then Glen, the squat bearded guy, takes a few tentative steps into the corridor.

"Hey, kids, easy now. Easy..."

Emboldened by our unresponsiveness, he crosses the rest of the distance, his resin boots squeaking on the floor. A sonic gun in one hand, pointed at me, he reaches for Hunter with the other. That's my cue.

"Uncle Glen, here, to take you kids upstairs. I have me a gun, you hear? Let's not—"

The rest gets lost unspoken. I shriek, lunging forward and pushing Hunter aside. Then I grab Glen's orange suspenders that hug his beer belly. Surprised, he loses his footing, kneeling forward like a sack of potatoes with a dull thud. That must hurt his knees, and he yelps to confirm my suspicion. Good. Before he gets control of his upper body, I straight-arm his chest and he folds back, falling flat onto the floor, his head smacking it in a juicy crack, without a beanie to protect it from the naked metal. He shrieks. I hop on top of him, pinning his right wrist to the floor until his fingers uncurl and he loses his grip on the plastic weapon.

The trawler rocks and the gun rolls away into the darkness. Hunter catches it and scoots into the shadows, out of sight.

I hug Glen with my thighs and squeeze hard, not allowing him to move. I press his other wrist to the floor and lower my face within inches of his nose.

“Hi there, fatty. Nice beer belly,” I say into his face, seized by a mad desire to scare him.

He gapes at me, speechless.

Hunter shouts behind me at the tall guy, Jimmy.

“What the fuck are you looking at? Get your sorry ass out of here while you can, you stupid dickhead!” he shouts. It’s his way of attacking, yelling obscenities before he gets scared or before his opponent realizes his fear. I smile. This is the Hunter I know. I also realize I love him so much it hurts.

“Hey, don’t point that thing at me, son, you hear me? Put it down, put it down!” Jimmy’s voice yelps back.

It doesn’t even cross my mind to interfere and help Hunter with the other fisherman. The vibrations of his soul escalate from normal to panicked, his body emitting a sick odor of sweat and fear, and I know he’s a coward who wouldn’t dare to interrupt me. If I try help wrangle him, I’ll hurt Hunter’s pride. So I focus on the task at hand.

It feels disgusting sitting on Glen’s belly, sensing his gas and intestine movements, like I’m on top of a water filled pillow that constantly shifts and sloshes underneath me. God, I hope he doesn’t pee himself from fear.

“Please, please,” is all he manages to say, his assaulting courage gone, replaced with pathetic mumbling. His eyes droop deeply into their sockets, a thin sliver of saliva making its way down his beard.

“You’re a piece of crap, you know that?” I say.

“Please...I didn’t do nothing. Please, let me go...I only...”

His muttering annoys me. Without thinking, I tilt my head back and hit him hard with my forehead, knocking him out and making him shut up. He promptly goes limp and lets his bladder loose.

“Shit!” I exclaim, sensing the warmth. I quickly jump off him, afraid it will touch me. “He peed himself!” I announce and turn around, looking for Hunter.

The place where he was a few seconds ago is vacant now, and I see him charge forward, a dark shadow in the gloom of the corridor, legs spread wide against the rocking of the trawler, left hand threading the wall for balance, right hand firmly clasping the sonic gun pointed at Jimmy.

“Who hired you? Who the *fuck* hired you?” Hunter yells.

Jimmy, on the other hand, seems to be frozen to the spot, clutching the door frame, either because he’s unable to move, afraid of what his boss will do to him for not fulfilling his orders, or mesmerized by my voice, I can’t tell. He stares at me, though, not at Hunter, that much is obvious. Then, it dawns on me. I forget that I’m glowing, that my skin is glowing in the dark. And my eyes stream the kind of blue electric light you see from fluorescent bulbs. I must be a freaky sight.

The boat lurches on a particularly large wave. We plunge with it, and I lose my footing. I grab on to the grille of one of the cell doors to my right.

Simultaneously, Hunter fires the sonic gun.

Crack!

The echo of the blast reverberates in a stream of hollow popping sounds, finally reaching me all the way in the back. Deafened, bending in pain, I curl my fingers around the iron latticework so I don’t fall. I emit an involuntary moan, feeling my feet slide apart on the wet floor.

“No.” I intend to yell it, but it comes out as a barely

audible croak. I attempt to focus on facts again, to distract myself, to function.

Hunter, I want to cry. Why did you fire, you stupid-head? That thing doesn't work on people.

My tongue won't move, my neck won't listen to me. I zero in on the iron bar in front of me and on my breathing, deciding that he didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident. Yes, that's what it was. It's easy to simply have your finger slip and push a button on that thing as opposed to pulling on a real trigger. Facts, facts will pull me out of this haze of oncoming dizziness. He is a siren hunter; he can fire a sonic gun now. Yes, that is correct. And yet it makes no sense. If this is true, then how could Glen shoot me? I can still hear his fishy soul intact. He is not a siren hunter, is he? Why did the sonic weapon work in his hand?

A bout of nausea passes and I raise my head, when another blast throws me off balance again. Its echo erupts around the room, bouncing off the soundproof walls once and hushing. Like the previous blast, this one was not directed at me, yet its ambiance seems to be enough to weaken me. I tighten every muscle in my body to power through the vibration of pain, feeling as though a hot metal spike has been rammed through my eardrums and turned. Once, twice, three times. It drives its sharp end deeper, piercing my brain in a thousand places at once.

I swallow a cry.

Another blast.

Bam!

What the hell is going on? I want to shout, but of course I can't. I can't even look up; my eyelids are closed, lest my eyeballs pop and I'm rendered blind. Agony threatens to break my skull and shatter every bone. It seems intolerable, as if my teeth are being drilled without anesthesia, past their roots, all the way into my jawbone. I retch into my hands, sort of half-hanging, half-

standing, clutching the iron bars for dear life.

Distant shouting emanates from the corridor. Without looking up, I have a pretty good idea about what's happening. The tall guy, Jimmy, appears to be fleeing with a wail, his boots paddling the floor and squeaking. Hunter shouts something after him. Both sounds come at me warbled, as if I'm at the end of a tunnel, perhaps a yard long. I cough.

Hunter, you all right? I want to shout, but wince as I open my mouth. It hurts. Everything hurts. The sonic boom aftershock buzzes with its hundred flies around my head, nagging and constant. A metallic tasting bile fills my throat, and I force it down. After a couple of breaths, I manage to raise my head long enough to look in the direction of the door. There, framed by daylight and facing me, stands Hunter. His face is gray in the dim light, stretched into a mask of surprise and horror. He yells something to me, something that has my name, and waves his arms. But my ears refuse to do their duty at discerning speech patterns and my head falls back down. I hear him drop the gun and run toward me.

A series of squeaky steps, and both his hands on my face later, I can hear him clearly from this close.

"Ailen! Ailen, dude, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Shit, I didn't think it would have this effect on you, I was pointing at the guy, I —" He looks into my face, and I glance back at him through the slits of my eyes, letting my head lean into his hands for support, my fingers still curled tightly around the bar, afraid I'll tumble if I let go.

"Hey, I know what you need." Hunter smiles and points to Glen's body on the floor, whose belly rhythmically moves up and down. He's breathing, he's alive.

I manage to nod.

"Okay, hold on to me. I'll help you get over. Here, take my

hand.” Hunter unclenches my fingers one by one, takes my hands in his, and leans me on his shoulder. I take one tentative step, then another, knees shaking and swaying, until he gently lowers me next to Glen’s face. I suppress a gag at the stink of urine, plopping onto the floor and not being able to move on my own out of weakness. Hunter sits next to me and embraces me. I lean my head on his shoulder, terrified that if I attempt to shift any more, I’ll fall face first into Glen’s breathing stomach.

“There. You need to feed,” Hunter says.

This shocks me into opening my eyes wide.

“Are you out of your mind?” I say, but it comes out more like, “ah...ou...offa...mannn...”

“You’ll need all the strength you can get to fight these guys, baby.”

I hold my breath, instantly doused in a rush of emotional melting. Hunter never called me *baby* before, it was always *brat* or *turkey*, or *dude* thrown in with my name. I want to freeze time. No, I want to rewind it and hear him say it again. And again. And again.

“You can’t even stand on your own. It won’t do. I should’ve...” He sighs, unaware of my inner turmoil. “Come on, someone is getting ready to run back here right this minute. That Jimmy dude is probably bitching about us right now, so...” He points to Glen’s face and pulls open his eyelids. “This is how it works, right? You’ve got to establish eye contact?”

I nod, speechless. A siren hunter helping a siren to feed?

“You realize what you’re doing?” It comes out more or less distinctly.

“Yes, yes, here you go.” He lets go of my shoulder, raises his arm and slaps Glen several times on the face, to which the guy groans. His eyes turn from glazed into some semblance of comprehension, still not seeing me yet seeing something on the

ceiling, studying it under furrowed eyebrows. He coughs. The sound of his soul does the rest.

I don't care how revolting it will taste. Hunger overwhelms me. I lean over his face, plop my arms on either side to support me, shaking. Hunter holds my waist. I root my stare directly into Glen's pulsing irises, then deeper into his pupils. It seems to be enough. They stop flexing. He fixates his stare at me, until his irises stop pulsing as well, shimmering with an eerie light of ignition. His mouth cracks open and a faint puff of smoke trails into the air. That's it, I ignited his soul. Now onto feeding.

"Come *on*, Ailen, we don't have much time!" Hunter rubs his fingers on my waist. Half-hanging in his embrace, I nod and produce a feeble first note. It sounds sad and weak. I cough, take a deep breath and sing another note, bolder, stronger.

This time it works. Glen's reddish eyelashes flutter like that of a shy boy, now bleached and thinned out with age. His pupils slowly widen, fully dilating. His gaze turns drowsy, then blank. The sound of his soul overwhelms me with its ugliness. In fact, it's so repulsive, I don't know if I can eat it; it tastes of rotten fish. Perhaps this is why he was able to shoot me, perhaps he's a special kind of a man, one of those woman haters who has been hating us for so long their souls have rotted out without having to be burned, without having to fall in love with a siren. Perhaps not being able to fall in love at all.

It's the last thought that crosses my mind. I wince and make myself eat, digging with my song deep into his slime, knowing that I need this for survival, if only to hear Hunter call me *baby* again. Maybe it'll give me the will to continue to live. Maybe, just maybe.

*"I live in the meadow,
But you don't know it."*

I link my first few notes with the melody of his soul, no matter how ghastly it sounds. They become one in tone and merge, in the way two different chorus voices merge, ringing into harmony, becoming a slur of life itself. There it comes, more of its divine essence, another rivulet of steam slipping through Glen's open lips. I gulp it. My arms stop shaking and my skin begins oozing its usual fog, nearing my temperature to that of the freezing room we're in. I continue singing, letting it flow.

"Why do you frown?"

There is a faint snap, an audible popping, and a thick soul vapor shimmers between us in the surrounding darkness, pumping from Glen's mouth to mine in a fast-flowing river. In that instant, his face softens with a childish glow. His wrinkles smooth out, his lips stretching into a smile, showing off his yellowing teeth framed by a reddish beard. And his eyes...his eyes glow with wonder and admiration, the type you see on a toddler's face when petting a puppy for the first time or getting a huge cotton candy at a street fair.

"Calm down and let go."

As I sing, I remember what Hunter said two days ago in the bathroom at my house, about a siren's victims. *What's creepy is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

It crosses my mind that sirens are most vulnerable while feeding, because of the necessary eye contact and time it takes to sing out a soul. I brush the thought aside, feeling Hunter's hands on my waist, knowing that I'm safe. My chest rumbles with

hunger, wanting more. Glen's soul wavers, the rest of it hinges on his lips, its hazy presence tender like spring breath—no longer revolting. This is the very end of his life, all of it, all of his bells and whistles and drunken tunes.

Overcome by the moment, I can't help myself and break the song.

"I'm sorry, Glen," I say, looking into his eyes. He doesn't see me, dazed.

"I will kill you now. But before that, I will make you happy. I promise. Because one minute of happiness is better than nothing. I owe you that much." I inhale and force my voice into the last string of notes, making them to come out loud and clear despite the soundproof walls that threaten to hush them into nothing.

*"Give me your life,
End in my song.
Because you,
Listen and love.
Listen and love.
Listen and love."*

The word *love* dies in the air, and my song ends. So does Glen's life, with a swift whoosh. I lick up the rest of it and burp. His life explodes in my chest, trickles its essence into my limbs, my head.

"You all right on your own now?" Hunter asks, unclenching his fingers.

Overwhelmed and gorging like I ate too much to the point of nausea, I nod, attempting to stand up. I promptly go limp, falling with my face directly onto Glen's beer belly. Too much food, too fast. Great, just what I was trying to avoid. The smell of

his sweat mixed with the stench of years of fishing and spoiling his gut with beer drinking, making me gag and roll over to get off from him.

“Ugh!” I exclaim, sitting up and brushing my face with my hands, sputtering. I yank on my jacket, attempting to get rid of the rotten stink. “God, I hope I can keep it down. It was so disgusting, you have no idea. It was like...do you remember when we were at the Pike Place Fish Market? You know how those guys throw the fish away, the spoiled stuff...”

I begin brushing my pants and stop, noticing an ominous silence. There is also an occasional almost after-thought of some noise, familiar to the point of a headache. I turn my head to look at Hunter and see him staring with his mouth open toward the door, his right hand groping for mine, finding it, squeezing it.

I squeeze it back and follow his gaze. On some level, deep inside, I always knew. I think Hunter did too.

“Papa,” I say and swallow. “But the sirens...” I lose the rest of what I wanted to say.

My father’s figure is dark against the hazy morning light, as if traced with a black marker on top of a rectangular door opening, each corner rounded so it won’t appear too sharp, illuminated from the back and making its edges glow. He’s dressed in the same orange overalls and jacket as the other fishermen, but somehow his suit smells new, of resin and synthetic lining and protective waterproof coating, as if he snagged it from the factory’s floor while still warm. I gag, doused in the chemical odor. Even his rain boots emit the scent of rubber latex. That’s not the worst of it. The worse is his soul, breaking through the ocean drone in bursts of static, incomprehensible in its beauty. It simply can’t belong to man like that. The distant trickle of a flute? The flapping of butterfly wings? Really? Does this mean there is good in him, after all?

“Wow, you’re alive. I thought you died,” I finally manage, translating my relief into words, letting out a big exhale, close to a moan. I gulp up air in an equally big inhale, sensing that his soul would taste burned and tart if I were to eat it. I suppress the urge and stand, feeling the blood rush into my head and Glen’s warmth giving me energy.

“I’m so sorry to disappoint you, sweetie. I admit, I was hoping for something...more than this. Oh well,” he says in his usual calm manner, as he steps into the corridor.

His boots make a whiny sound, like he’s rubbing a tightly inflated balloon. His face stretches into a knowing smile, just as my heart both soars, *He’s alive!* and drops, *He’s alive.*

“We’re fucked,” Hunter whispers to my left, standing.

“I don’t think so,” I mouth to him, squeezing his hand a couple of times to reassure him and myself. Of what? I don’t know exactly. I’m hoping for the best, putting my faith into my father’s good. There must be some left. I believe it, I can feel it.

“Hello, Mister Bright. Nice boat you have here,” Hunter says at full volume.

“That’s my girl. Good work.” My father ignores the greeting and points at Glen. “I was going to fire him anyway, though his kind is hard to find lately, I give you that. It makes me, in some way, very disappointed.”

He takes another few steps in, holding his right arm behind his back. I know for sure that he has a sonic weapon in his grasp, his fingers curled tightly around it.

Focus on the facts, Ailen, focus. He talked about Glen, so ask him about Glen.

“What kind would that be?” I ask and flex, casually, as if to suggest that my legs have become numb and I need to stretch them. I notice with glee that my father seems to be talking to me only, completely ignoring Hunter. There’s no usual *son*, or even a

hello. This is wrong to think—very, *very* wrong—but the little girl in me, that needy creature, is aglow with pride.

“We will save this discussion for later, if you please,” he says and takes a few more steps. We’re about ten feet apart.

“No, we won’t. I want to know right now. And whatever happened to Ligeia and Teles? How the hell did you manage to get away? Whose trawler is this, anyway?” I ask, and cringe. My questions come out like the demand of a toddler. All I’m missing is to stomp my feet and the impression would be complete. I need to be smarter than this. Sure enough, he ignores me, employing his usual treatment as an indication of I-won’t-answer-your-stupid-demands. The need for his approval overpowers my logic and dampens my siren hunger. The music of his soul, as burned and broken as it is, gives me hope instead.

“Ailen...” He levels his eyes with mine, pronouncing my name as if he struggles with each letter.

There is something different in how he says it. Something...human, in a way he hasn’t been able to say my name before. As if there is a trace of affection in it. I trust my intuition, letting go of the capricious little girl commanding my thoughts, trusting the siren within me, I know that no matter what he does to me, I’m stronger.

I try to read his facial expression, barely making it out in the gloom that’s illuminated only by my glow. Strangely, I feel calm, willing to see how far he’ll go, hoping that there’s some love left in his heart.

“Unless you want to bore your lover boy here, I suggest you save your breath. Don’t talk, just listen. What I’m saying is, I’m glad to see you, despite the fact that you abandoned me in your haste. It was very inconsiderate of you.”

He takes another step. I don’t move, don’t flinch. This is not defiance; no, this is a dare to myself, to finally face what I

must. Right here, right now, without my usual squirming. I look my father in the eyes, my heart open.

His right hand trembles slightly behind his back. His smile, even in this darkness, is all-accommodating and fake-welcoming. Yet he's nervous, stinking of fear and sick wonder.

Instead of being scared, I'm happy that he survived, happy that my fears can be put to rest. I know he's horrible, but he's the only parent I have. My only true family by blood. There must be still a chance...and I'm willing to take it.

"We'll talk when we get home." On the word *home* I know I guessed right.

"Sure, Papa," I say and pause. "Take me home." I spread my arms wide.

"What the hell, Ailen, wh—" Hunter begins.

But it's too late. My father takes his hand from behind his back and aims the wide muzzle of a huge sonic gun at me.

Boom!

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.

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. The main text is Adobe Garamond, while titles and chapter headings are 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.

In the second installment of the Siren Suicides trilogy, Ailen Bright finds herself in a sticky situation. Her new supernatural abilities haven't solved anything - in fact, they've royally messed up her life. She can't be with the one person she loves (though her self-control is wavering by the second), her old, well-dressed dog of a father hasn't learned any new tricks, and her supposed siren sister doesn't seem to have her best interests at heart. A pawn in the game between her father and the Siren of Canosa, Ailen is constantly searching for her next move. Through all the hardships, however, Ailen's self-doubt begins to dissipate as she comes to accept her new identity.

"Anske successfully inhabits her character, so that she lives on the page."

Michael Gruber
NYT bestselling author of THE RETURN



"Our greatest truths are often found in our works of fiction, and Siren Suicides is no exception."

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