

***SIREN***

***SUICIDES***

THE AFTERLIFE

BOOK 3 OF THE SIREN SUICIDES TRILOGY

***KSENIA ANSKE***

# **SIREN SUICIDES**

## **THE AFTERLIFE**

**ALSO BY KSENIA ANSKE**

Blue Sparrow:  
Tweets on Writing, Reading, and Other Creative Nonsense

I Chose to Die (Siren Suicides, Book 1)

My Sisters in Death (Siren Suicides, Book 2)

# **SIREN SUICIDES**

## **THE AFTERLIFE**



**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](mailto: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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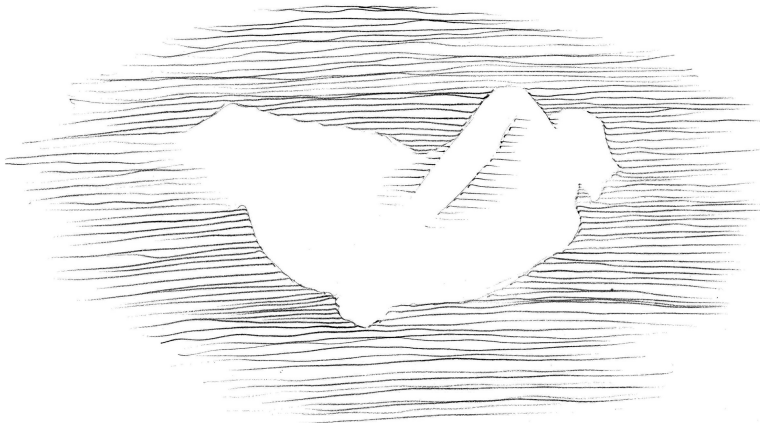
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*“...the Seirenes (Sirens) saw the quick vessel near them and raised their voices in high clear notes: ‘Come hither, renowned Odysseus, hither, you pride and glory of all Akhaia (Achaea)! Pause with your ship; listen to our song. Never has any man passed this way in his dark vessel and left unheard the honey-sweet music from our lips; first he has taken his delight, then gone on his way a wiser man.’”*

—Homer, *Odyssey* 12. 200 ff

## Chapter 1



### Dry Lab

It feels like my body is burning at the stake, my spine nailed to its post, my misery its fire. The darkness is overwhelming. I can smell my hair singed from heat, hear my skin crack as it starts to blacken and curl and split. The sweet vapor of my juices wafts up my nose, or is it the stink of linoleum? What's happening? Is this some sort of siren hell and I'm stuck in its hottest room as punishment? It's certainly *not* siren heaven. Perhaps I'm balanced in that divine fold between life and death, the one that rips open as soon as you enter. The afterlife. One of the three destinations where Canosa is supposed to bring those who pass.

The only thing I know for sure is I'm hot. Before my vocal cords dissolve in this brilliant blaze, I want to utter one final cry. It starts at the edge of my lungs, speeds through my trachea and larynx, and promptly dies on the back of my tongue, stifled by a wall. I'm gagged.

My whole body shakes in a burst of dry coughing. I'm certain that if I was dead for real, coughing would be the last thing on my body's agenda. My throat constricts in another spasm and I

## Chapter 1

make funny whooping sounds through a bundle of cloth stuffed into the cavity of my mouth. I press on it with my tongue and try to register the sensation fully, to make sure it's real. It tastes of saliva and bitter cotton, soft and rough at the same time, with a million fiber endings grinding into my tongue which, in turn, feels as if it's made of sand paper. My lips sting, stretched out to the biggest O shape they can make; the gag pulls the skin tight all around my jaw, unhinged to near breaking. There is tape over my mouth, and the odor of its glue tickles my nostrils.

I groan, breathing through my nose. It feels like I'm passing fire as each inhale and exhale burns with blistering air. My chest is aflame and my gills feel cracked and dry. They ache the way an open wound would, each nerve ending assaulted to the point of screaming. If I were a lobster, this is what it would feel like to be thrown into boiling water and cooked alive. Except, there is no water around me, not a single drop, not even the tiniest bit of moisture that I can pick up with my skin. None. This must be my own private hell.

The darkness begins to recede. I think my vision must be returning to normal. There is a grayness that comes to view, with a blue undertone. Sky? No, this must be my eyelids penetrated by light, because it doesn't feel like I'm actually seeing anything. My eyes *feel* closed. At least, I hope they are. My eyes are swollen shut, heavy and hot, and it takes a few tries to make a slit wide enough to see through. Blinking several times, I produce a smidge of a tear to moisten them.

I'm laying on my back, on the floor of a room the color of chalk, like it's been bleached and is now a bit dirty. My eyes hurt from being dry, so I close them, take another hot breath, and look again, determined to find out exactly where I am.

On my second try, I understand a simple truth that chills me to the bones and breaks my skin into goose bumps. It's not just

any room I'm in, it's padded. There are a series of square pillows covering walls the color of washed out sand, reeking of synthetic leather. I'm afraid to flex my arms or legs, not willing to discover whether or not this is truly my fate; a madhouse where crazies are locked up, bundled into straightjackets that won't let them move. I concentrate on one thing at a time. I have to focus on the facts.

The room. It's the size of a typical bathroom, or a prison cell, depending on how you look at it. It's six by six by eight feet, almost a cube, and I'm smack in the middle of it. At least it's not dark. On the ceiling, about six feet above me, a single round fluorescent light shines through a net of protective wires. The light it emits is soft, as if filtered through a cloud. Everything about this room is soft—the foam on the walls, the floor under my back, even the sound. Rather, the lack of it. Each of my coughs comes out hushed and disappears into the dead silence.

This room, no, this *cell*, is soundproof, perhaps specifically designed for locking up sirens. Yell all you want, nobody will hear. Not like I can test this theory, thanks to the gag.

I wheeze.

The floor shifts and I sway, noticing that it was gently moving all the time to a tender rocking motion, but I was too focused on the walls and the lighting to notice, mistaking it for my own dizziness. Does this mean I'm still on the boat? The word vaguely makes sense, pulled from the farthest banks of my memory and presenting me with an image of a trawler, a gigantic overturned insect gliding across the ocean's waves. Whose trawler is this and how did I get here? I can't remember.

I suck in air through my nose and cringe at the stench of fake leather. Enough diddle-daddle, let's see what's happening with my body. Breathing rapidly, I turn my attention to my fingers. They're stuck tight against my elbows in a cup hold, yet I don't feel like I'm holding them. I try to move one, then another, and can't;



## Chapter 1

they all feel numb. My whole body is numb, as if it's not there. I try to lift my head and look. Tough luck, my neck muscles don't cooperate. Shifting my gaze down doesn't help either, my eyeballs burn like they're about to turn to lava and I can't see anything beyond the faint outline of my nose and jaw.

Finally, I decide to try something else. I tighten my abdomen—those muscles seem to be working better—and, with an audible grunt, I tense into a string of will and tilt my head to the left, scraping the floor with the back of it until it's as far as it will go. There, in the distance, blurry, are my feet that I can't feel. The length of my body is shrouded in the semblance of a cotton sheet, several cotton sheets, layer upon layer. It takes me another minute to tilt my head back and to the right. Same thing.

*Great, Ailen Bright, you're the first siren pupa.*

Off-white cotton, perhaps the same material that fills my mouth, holds me in a cocoon. Imagining who did it, how long it took them to wrap me up like this, and whether or not I'm naked underneath, makes me want to puke. Forget about the trawler, I'm an insect here, an ugly larva cleaned with ocean water, washed with shame, and rinsed and dressed in layers of gauze. I flex my hands again, finger by finger, like I'm playing a piano. Though in real life, I never got a chance to try; my father forbade me because of his hate of noise and all things musical. I could only tap on the bathroom floor while locked up, pretending I'm a teenage virtuoso, one of those prodigies you see on TV. I would tap Siren Suicides songs and sing to them quietly, afraid that he'd hear.

My father. That's it! His face was the last I saw...where? Did he put me into some kind of floating asylum?

"Let's see here," I mumble into cloth, but it comes out more like, "Uhuhuheee." I don't mind it and keep talking, to feel sane.

"My name is Ailen Bright, and I'm a sixteen year old

siren.” That much I remember and, in my heart, I know I’m right. “I’m a siren and that’s all that matters. I have *awesome*—as Hunter would say—powers, and I can get myself out of this mess.” Pause. “My father is a siren hunter and he wants to kill me. We were on a rowboat wh—” Hunter? What happened to him? *Later. I’ll think about this later.*

I try to bend my right forefinger first. It won’t move. Pathetic. How about middle finger? No luck. All right, if I can’t move my fingers, arms, or legs, maybe I can bend using my stomach muscles? They worked well about a minute ago. I patiently wait for the boat to lurch, to coincide with my inertia, so that I can roll over.

Here it comes. The floor tilts lightly and I arch and contract like a leech pinned under a stick, gaining momentum, turning, turning, hanging on my left side in that moment of not knowing whether I will make it or not. The boat bumps on the wave and I flop face down.

My nose hits the padded floor and I retch into the gag, overtaken with hunger and revulsion at the smell. I strain my neck and turn my head left so that I can breathe, or at least avoid inhaling this synthetic rot.

It takes an eternity for me to repeat the roll. Again. And again. The padded cell revolves around me like a kaleidoscope, a cube of mirrors supposed to contain a multitude of colored bits of glass. Instead, they’re colorless and it’s only me inside. I’m in the land of “I don’t know why the fuck I’m here and maybe I don’t want to know.”

I’m mad, lying on my back again, staring at the ceiling. Being mad doesn’t help me get out of this situation. However, I can’t help it. I’m fuming and my mind’s blank, no thoughts in it, nothing, only fury at my helplessness.

A minute goes by, but it feels like an hour.

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Breathing through my nose is getting harder. My gills are dry to the point of lacerating. One more flex, just one more. I need to get out of here somehow, I need to!

*Facts, Ailen, facts, focus on facts.*

I take a moment to glance around. It's the same every which way I look, nothing new to see, no openings of any kind. Where is the door? Somehow, they must have gotten me in here. The wall on my right is within my reach, only a couple feet away; if only my arms weren't tucked in safely under the cotton bondage. The floor shifts once more, and I roll flush with the wall, using it for support to lean away a little, my back about a foot away. I bend my knees as much as the cocoon allows, and hit the wall with my feet. Once, twice, three times. I pause to breathe and nearly black out from the effort, noticing the feeble trickle of my energy seep away. But my legs moved, and it gives me hope.

I grunt in anger and hit again. Nothing. No sound, no movement. Not even the tiniest vibration. The smooth cotton on my feet slides over the equally smooth fake leather and doesn't give me any traction. I curse under my breath. How many layers of foam are there?

The constant rocking of the floor intensifies and makes me dizzy. It appears the weather outside is as mad as I am. I try reaching out to the clouds, but without my voice, I'm nothing. Maybe that's why we're both frustrated.

I lift my head off the floor and shake it.

I know what I hate—I hate these walls. I hate my cocoon. I want to break out. I bite into the gag and hit the wall again, pause to rest. Repeat. I ignore the ringing in my ears and the rainbow circles of my blurry vision; closing my eyes, I concentrate every ounce of will on making a noise, at least letting them know I'm here, I'm still alive, and I'm kicking.

A storm. We hit a storm. Its soughing wind gush walks

## Dry Lab

across my skin in a march of goose bumps. I can feel it even through these walls. For one strange instance, I like the fact that the cell I'm in is padded, because it shakes madly, throwing me from wall to wall, and all I can see is its imagined kaleidoscope in my mind's eye, turning, revolving around me, as if someone is peeking through its lens, amused but bored.

I roll away from the wall, now back to it again. Queasiness bears its sticky fingers into my stomach and I lose it in a series of empty puking spasms. Time turns elastic and I forget where it started, don't know if it will end. Maybe it's an unbroken circle. Another hour goes by like this, or two? What was it that needed to be done here?

*The wall. Hit the wall, and maybe try your voice again.*

But my throat sears with fire when I attempt to sing. So I bend and stomp on the wall one more time with as much force as I can muster. The shock from the hit pricks my feet with needles.

Something gives.

The temperature inside my cell falls a few degrees. I don't know if it's due to my exertion, or some control outside of this room. A foreign noise breaks through the matted silence. I don't dare breath as I concentrate on the noise.

An echo of...jingling keys? Yes, it's metallic, like keys on a ring.

I'm blank, tense, staring at the spot on the wall where the sound is coming from. It continues to amaze me and scare me with its clarity. It's definitely not imagined.

A turn of the lock, a click, and several revolutions of what sounds like the hand wheel you see on bank safes in movies. Maybe I'm wrong but, whatever it is, it's large and heavy. One more gentle, metallic din, and I see a vertical line grow from a shadow to a slit to a door opening inside. It swooshes against the high threshold of the room, reminding me of rubbery latex gloves

## Chapter 1

brushing each other.

I was hitting the wall on the wrong side. Directly across from me, six feet away, a door opens. It's a rectangle with rounded corners, set at about six inches off the floor.

There is no immediate soul melody, and the burned tang of butterfly wings on a flute solo enters my hearing. It's off-key. It floods me in a wash of memories, drowning me in images of being caught, the trawler in the ocean, Hunter's kiss, Canosa tipping our rowboat, the net, and the terrible drum rolling us out of the water and onto the deck. I see the image of Jimmy, the tall fisherman, followed by Glen, the fat one whose soul Hunter helped me devour in one of those onboard fish processing freezers. Papa. And then me, letting him blast me with his sonic gun, willing to see how far he intended to go.

There is hurt in him, I hear it. An old patina of pain. That means he still feels. It's what I wanted to see for myself before giving in to my overwhelming desire to rid this world of the siren I've become, since I'm unable to stop killing, and before I turn out like Canosa—hateful, bitter, grim.

A waft of cold air rushes in; I nearly choke on it as I greedily take it in through my nostrils. The dark rectangle of the door opening widens and I raise my head to look my father in the face, straight in the eyes, bright blue against the dimness behind him.

*Hello, Papa, you came to check in on me, I transmit with my eyes. What a treat. You'd be surprised to find out that, on some level, I have missed you.*

A mask of indifference planted firmly over his features, he holds my gaze, carefully steps inside, and shuts the door behind him with a clank. This is the first time I can't see what he's wearing, don't notice the style of his hair or the smell of his cologne. They don't matter anymore, not even his grimaces that I

usually try reading, to know how to behave to avoid his anger.

*I'm so afraid of you, Papa. I've been afraid of you my entire life. You're worse than my most horrible nightmares, because nightmares fade away in the morning. But you're real—flesh and bones—and you always seem to find me, no matter how far away I run.*

Perhaps he detects what I'm trying to say, because he pauses with his hand still on the door that has no knob, now flush with the wall and invisible. I don't exactly see his hand there, I kind of feel it, a skill I acquired from years of being slapped and hit, to know exactly where his hands are without looking.

There is nothing but his two dark pupils that burrow into my consciousness with vivid hate. This time, it's unmasked, borne from a deep place inside, perhaps one that's beyond mending and that was torn out a long time ago, maybe when he was child. A horrible, empty hole that he didn't know how to fill with love, so he filled it with hate, because keeping it empty hurt more than filling it with anything at all. To survive. Yet there is something, something that still kindles, and I latch on to it, holding his gaze, talking to him in my own silent way.

*You know what? There is something I never considered in my constant terror. It never even occurred to me until I died and was reborn as a siren. But I know it now for a fact.* I take a breath and swallow, which is more like my throat contracting because of the gag. He still studies me, unmoving, as if waiting for the punch line. And I deliver.

*As much as I'm afraid of you, you're afraid of me, too.*

At this, I exhale, feeling like I've just practiced a speech that maybe one day I'll be able to make in real life.

My father keeps digging deep into my eyes with regard.

Three seconds, that's as long as I last. I can't stand looking into his eyes anymore and avert my gaze. He wins, for now. The

## Chapter 1

air in the room shifts with both of our certainty on this account.

Grief floods me. To my horror, tears of understanding cascade down the side my face, staining my left cheek with rivulets of salted water, gluing my face to the fake leather on the floor.

He's afraid of me, but he has a lifetime of experience turning his fear into violence. No, it's not just me; siren or not, it doesn't matter. It's women, *all* women. He's terrified of women.

*Oh, Papa, I wish I could heal you somehow.* Hopping back onto the highway of sorrow, I close my eyes, willing my lids to hold in the running water. Good luck. Tears keep streaming down the left side of my face, pooling below my cheek in a tiny puddle.

That thing that's gone, that place that's been torn out of him, I know what it is. I've known it all along. It's his soul, even before it was stolen by Canosa. It was mostly gone before she made him fall in love with her. She simply put the last nail into his coffin. His mother...his own mother must have damaged him before that, the woman he never mentions, the grandmother I never knew. She drove him to seek the love of a cold undead creature instead of real live woman. What level of betrayal must a son feel when it comes from his own mother? What kind of hurt would that inflict on his ego, and how permanently would that screw him up? For life. I grind my teeth as far as they will go into the gag, wishing she was alive, wanting to tear her apart. I want to yell in her ear, "You bitch! You give it back to him, now! You give back to him what's his, you hear me?"

In this moment, I realize something else...the futility of my attempts. There is no use dying in front of him in hopes of playing some morbid joke on him or to hurt him. It won't work. He doesn't care and would rather see me dead, when he gathers his courage to actually do it. Because I represent his fear and, perhaps, I also look a little bit like my grandma. There is only one thing I can do—keep singing to him, and hope to rekindle more of his

soul.

I need to keep singing, despite my fear that he'll never hear, afraid that he's permanently deaf to me. He's not; he heard me once, on the boat at Lake Union, so he can hear me again. It's not that he doesn't want to. It's that he can't, on his own. He needs help. There is no apparatus that can receive my signal and transmit it into an intelligible wavelength that his brain can then transpose into a jolt of his heart so that he can, in turn, interpret it as a feeling. Into the one, and only, feeling that's worth living for.

Love.

I have to keep trying, even if it means dying in the process. I will know that I did everything I could and will pass in peace. He lets go of the wall and takes a step toward me. His eyes are empty. Finally, I know why.

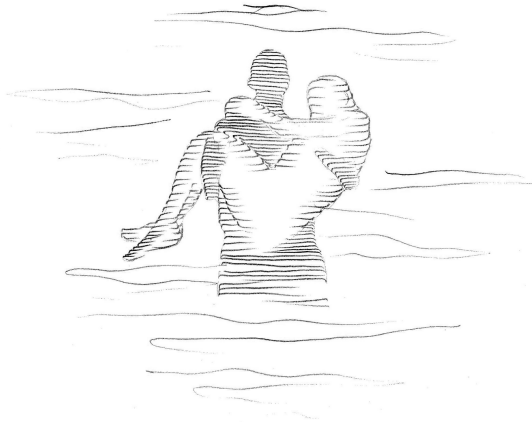
*Papa, I won't give up on you, I swear. I know everyone has in the past, and I'm sorry. I give you my word. I'll fight you, just to make you see that I mean it for real, okay?*

I don't know if he got my message or not, as he closes in on me. There is only one way to fight his emptiness: by reflecting his emotions.

He squats next to me and raises his hand.



## Chapter 2



### Padded Cell

I recoil on instinct but arrest it before closing my eyes, relaxing my facial muscles as much as the gag allows. I'm glad I do because, instead of slapping me, he gently traces the rivulet of tears on my left cheek, from the bridge of my nose to the wetness on the floor. This unnerves me even more than being slapped. I don't want to see his face, but I make myself, never averting my eyes. I see the familiar sight of graying hair pulled away from a strained forehead with an expensive gel, and those raised, questioning eyebrows, groomed with tweezers to perfection. To top it off, framed with almost girlishly curly eyelashes, two big eyes drill into mine. The emotional contrast on his face is incomprehensible, throwing me onto a precipice of terror.

*This is my father. Part of him is in me—his DNA, his biological build, his mad, sinister whatever—it makes me who I am.* I shudder, mentally noting to look in a mirror, if I manage to live, and see how much of him is really in me, and how much of my mother and grandmother, whose picture I'll have to dig up somewhere to know.

## Padded Cell

My father hovers his hand over me in a parental impulse to console. The air slowly fills with the chlorinated scent of faucet water, freshly scrubbed skin, and soap. I breathe in through my nose, ready to faint, noting a trace of his favorite cologne, Bulgari for men. Jesus. Even here, on a fishing trawler, he manages to smell clean and manly.

“There, there. Quiet now. So nice to have you back.” His voice comes across as soothing, his face blocking the lamp.

I shrink out of habit. My tongue is fat and dry, lips numb and sore. My limbs are still tied into the cocoon with my torso bent, its left side on the floor and my right side up—a nice target for his shoes, to be kicked and kicked.

*Whatever it takes, Papa, whatever it takes. Go for it. Feel it. Let out your pain.* Something in my eyes must unnerve him.

“You all right?” he asks, to mask it. I know my father that well.

*Eat my guts, I want to say. Like you care. Stop this game, for once, and tell me how you really feel. Come on.*

His face wavers with a hint of fear, and then it’s gone. I smile, if you can call stretching cheek muscles on an already ripping mouth, burning behind tape, smiling.

He leans a bit closer, mouth tight.

“Sorry, I couldn’t quite hear you. What was that you said?” His hand is curled over his ear, his favorite way of intimidating me, by asking me to repeat something that is obvious and making me feel like a fool. It doesn’t work this time, I ignore it.

Instead, I take deep pleasure in silently going through a repertoire of every single foul word I know, from bastard to asshole to creep, which, admittedly, is not much. I wish I could borrow some of Hunter’s cussing; he always swears so deliciously sharp. My throat still wouldn’t budge, but I think he sees the poison in my glare because he takes his hand away and stands up. Good,

## Chapter 2

stage one complete. I manage to stretch my lips a hairline more, smiling.

Now I notice he's dressed in a suit, immaculate as always, with a cashmere scarf carelessly draped over his shoulder as if he's about to depart for an outdoor opera performance somewhere in Italy.

He looks out into the distance, through the wall, focusing on something miles away from the cell we're in.

"My dear, Ailen, I need to tell you something important, and I apologize it has to happen in this...fashion." He glances at me, indicating my position on the floor.

"It seems as if my other attempts to explain why I'm doing this have not worked, which is a pity. We both know that I've tried, multiple times, over the last several days." I strain my neck to keep my head tilted up so that I can see him.

"What you don't understand is that your future is at stake. And, because we're a family, my future is tied to yours. I'd like to make sure that you get the message."

I glean the bottom of his shoe, made of the finest Italian leather, as he kicks right into my gills, swift and precise.

*Smack!*

I hear the sound of impact, like ripping paper, and yelp into the cotton. It hurts like hell. No, worse. It hurts like cutting open a wound that just started healing, over and over and over again, never letting it fully close.

I pant hard, snorting in effort, and manage to contain my agony without screaming, reveling in my mastery of suppressing the pain.

My father just stands and looks. Cold and calculating.

There is sickness in this, twisted and disgusting, yet I'm enjoying myself very much, perhaps rising to a level of masochism that can only match my father's.

## Padded Cell

*Mirror his feelings, Ailen, mirror them.* It's exactly what I do, turning my head to look, to show him that he can kick me all he wants, that perhaps I'm enjoying it as much as he does, curious to see what it will do to his psyche.

I see the sole of his shoe one more time, its tip slimy—marred in my own juice—and russet in color compared to the rest of the yellow leather.

*Whack!*

Stars explode in my field of vision and a rod of hot metal pierces me from neck to toes and back up, making me excrete whatever leftover water I have in my system through the skin in a layer of sticky moisture. Sirens don't sweat, so this evaporation must be as close as it gets.

A twisted neck and an arrested cry later, I'm back to our lovely exchange of familial gaze. This is a new level of love, beyond the one Hunter mentioned in one of our conversations. A brief dunk into my memory makes me wonder where he is, but I forcefully disregard it so I can stay in control, intending to win this new game with Papa. It is not passive-aggressive like Hunter explained. Oh no, this is violence to the point of mutual joy—a contest to see who is most absent of any feeling.

*It'll take more than that, Papa, you know that. Go ahead, do your best.* I attempt to smile, seeing my message reflected across his face. Good.

If he's disturbed by my defiance, he doesn't show it. Still looking into the distance, he drones, "What you don't understand is that life is hard. It's not all clear water, sand castles, and sun, none of these beautiful things, unfortunately. It's a mirage. The second you dip your foot in, you sink into a swamp." He pauses. "What I want you to learn is that good things come to those who wade all the way through, to the other side."

He looks down. Another kick. I hardly feel it this time. He

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can see it, because a muscle twitches slightly on his left cheek, freshly shaven, as always.

“Oh, did that hurt? Tell me how you feel.” He squats and strokes my right gill with one long and gnarled finger. I tense to stop shuddering so that he cannot feel a single vibration. The muscles behind his ears stretch his lips into a thin sneer, toothy and cold.

I look straight into his watery eyes when something extraordinary happens—something snaps inside of me and is gone. I don’t waver in an effort to withstand his scrutiny as I usually do; for the first time, I’m able to sink past this decade-long habit.

Have you ever looked your own terror in the eyes? There is doom there beyond imagination. But once you’ve stepped past the place where death is a scary thing, it’s possible to hold that gaze, unflinching and calm, knowing that it’s...*just eyes*, nothing more. Just a pair of anatomically round things that can be poked out with a needle or a sharp nail; two light detecting organs, sclera balloons filled with liquid and a lens on top. If you look long enough, that’s all there is to it, really.

Papa’s pupils widen for a fraction of a second. I’m mesmerized by their movement, like I made them inflate. Unperplexed, he continues. “What I want you to learn is that discipline is the answer. You need to learn to suppress the pain, learn to carry on *even* when you feel like you want to die.”

The kicks are over. With a grimace of repulsion, he stands and swiftly steps on my neck with his left foot. I notice a flash of his silk maroon sock, framed by the hem of his pant leg. I can’t breathe. Blood swells in my vessels, fills my eyes, pulses in my ears. My gills open and close like the gaping mouth of a fish thrown on the sand. Even though I know a siren can’t be strangled to death, I suffer the pain all the same. I will myself to be still and manage to

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suppress it, mentally departing from my body to observe it from the outside. It's like witnessing your own bones and sinew being crushed by an executioner, but from the safe distance of a spectator.

Since my mouth is taped shut, my cry for help dies before it's born. I push the pain deeper still, until my nerve endings are frozen as if stunted by a strong dose of anesthesia. There is a victorious glee that's spreading on my face, and I have no doubt my father can see it.

He presses down harder. A minute goes by, maybe two. The sharp-soled edges of his brand-new shoes cut into my jaw and collarbone. I don't flinch, don't make a single sound, and I never look away.

At last, he lets go, removing his foot.

"Good, Ailen, very good. I'm impressed. Continue pushing your pain down. Practice silence."

I take in a sharp breath. My nostrils flare.

*Do you want to play another round, Papa? I guess I won this one, wouldn't you say?*

His face contorts and he steps away from me as if I'm road kill that stinks.

"Listen to me, Ailen. Silence makes you think." He taps on his temple. "Noise is akin to chaos. It distracts you. Without discipline, you're nothing, just a piece of sweet meat. Think about it. Think about your life, about what you want to do. Think about your future."

*I want to sing!* I wish I could yell it out loud. I reminisce his words, the ones with which he hoped to teach me, to toughen me up, to raise me in such a way that I'd survive in this world as a woman. *Women are weak. Women were made to haul water.*

*No, we're not, Papa, you are. You're the one who is weak, because you've forgotten how to love, how to care,* I say with my eyes.

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He continues, perfectly latching on to the meaning of my glare.

“Contrary to what you think, I care for you. Deeply. That’s why I’m being so hard on you. I want to help you...help you carve out a place in this world. You’ve proven to me, Ailen, by being hard to catch, that perhaps...you’re worth more than just hauling water.”

I hold my breath involuntarily. Did that really just come out of my father’s mouth?

“Perhaps you are. I intend to test my theory.” He always takes his time to deliver the punch line, holding me in suspense, relishing my terror. Not this time.

“When we cut your vocal cords, sweetie, you’ll become useful to me, I think. Yes. You’ll help me with an important task...killing other sirens. There are only three of them left, so it shouldn’t be that difficult. As payment, I will let you live.”

A chill runs down my spine along with a sense of déjà vu. In my teenage naïveté, I’d forgotten. He told me this before—how could I have misplaced it? At the siren meadow, while being flattened face first onto the lawn between rows of benches, with the handle of his whip pressed between my shoulder blades, he said, *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 failed to mention exactly how he’d do it, but I get it now. By stripping me of my voice. The idea of it fails to fit into my mind, and before I can react or utter a moan, he pounds on the door with his fist. No, not on the door, it’s a viewing window.

A small rectangular sheet of glass glistens, reflecting fluorescent light, revealed from beneath a flap of foamy padding, hanging down like loose skin. I was right about the cube kaleidoscope then. Did I somehow feel it, feel him looking at my attempts to roll and hit the wall all this time? Was it part of his

game, to watch me squirm and squiggle, waiting for me to break? Goose bumps march up my skin.

Synthetic leather on synthetic leather, the door slowly opens to a soft swoosh and then comes to a stop, barely an inch ajar.

I try to gasp, wishing someone would pierce my eardrums for good so that I could not hear. Not now, not this. Not the distorted melody of the happiness I can never have. Canosa was right, this is torture. Double torture, in my case—to hear my father’s soul, partially revived by me; and now, to hear Hunter’s soul again, killed and resurrected as a special melodic ghost to remind me, to make me love and loath him. Both of them, forever.

I’d be better off dead.

I want to avert my eyes but can’t. The door opens wider. Hunter takes small steps inside, looking beaten and haggard in his dirty jeans and sweatshirt, matted hair hanging over his pale face. His head is down, lips pressed together. He holds on to the door as if he was a drunk trying to steady himself.

“Come in, come in,” my father urges him. Hunter doesn’t move. His left hand stays on the door, the right one kneads the pocket of his jeans. There’s a brief moment of awkward silence, and I know it’s about to erupt.

“Don’t just stand there, pick her up!” Papa raises his voice, and then lowers it again. “Please.” At this, he throws his hands in the air and rubs his temples. An angry fit is about to begin. It’ll only go downhill from here.

“Mr. Bright...” Hunter bites lower lip and looks up, still avoiding me. “Do we *really* have to do this? I mean, isn’t there another way? She ca—”

“I said, pick, her, *up*.” This comes through pressed lips, and I know inside my father is boiling.



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I'm shocked into numbness, processing the transpiring conversation as if it's a bad dream. Another minute, and I'll wake up and it'll be gone, no big deal.

"But you could simply send her away without—"

"*Pick her up!*" A vein pulses in the hollow of my father's temple, his hands curling into fists.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter's lips barely move.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore, is that understood? We've discussed everything there was to discuss already, end of story." He turns his back on me and makes for the door.

*End of my story, you mean? Will you really go this far, Papa? It's a final test for you, to see if you can do this to your own kind, to eradicate your nightmare. And I'm the one who represents it for you, aren't I? I understand, but you know what? You're no more than a stinking coward, making someone else do the dirty work for you. You're weak, with all of your false bravado. I'm calm once more, not willing to give up, still madly hoping for the best and fueled by an insatiable belief in human goodness.*

Hunter takes a small step, and then stops.

My eyes dart to his face, searching. *Oh, Hunter, what did he do to you, what did he tell you to make you do this?* The ache to feel Hunter's warm hands on my face once more overpowers my longing to twist off his head and finish him, because the off-key echo of his soul serves as the perfect irritant and I have to constantly fight my desire to silence it.

Hunter avoids looking at me directly as he takes a few tentative steps and bends over me.

He rolls me onto my back, sits on his haunches, slides his right arm under my shoulders and his left under my knees, and then heaves me up with a grunt. Hunter's heart beats over a hundred times per minute; his muscles shake in effort; a faint odor

of sweat mixes with his natural smell of pine, linden flowers, and sugar. I melt into his body, happy.

I pretend I'm a swaddled baby, hungry and distraught, needing care; to be held by someone I love, someone who loves me back. One second stretches into an eternity. My head plops on his shoulder, and I close my eyes and glow.

There is, perhaps, an understanding that travels through our skin, touching through layers of fabric. On purpose, I'm certain, Hunter barely makes a step toward the door before following a lurch of the boat too perfectly and losing balance. His arms let go and he drops me on the soft floor, and then falls down on his butt, hanging his head in theatric humiliation.

"Shit!" he says too fast, his tone a little too convincing. "Sorry, Mr. Bright. Man, I don't think I can do this, she's just too heavy for me." He raises his head expectantly, and I know what he's fishing for.

*Nice try, dude.*

"What's the matter, son? I'm sure you've fantasized about carrying her over the threshold, haven't you? Here's your chance to practice, go ahead. Or is she too much of a burden for you?" I can hear my father from behind the open door. He must be waiting there for Hunter to carry me out.

"No, no, that's not what I mean. Man, you got it all wrong," Hunter nearly stutters. He never minces words, so this tells me he's scared out of his mind. "I mean sh—"

"Do me a favor, stop talking and do what you're told. Now. Unless you want to break our agreement?" I don't need to see him to know that Papa's eyebrows fly up in question. *Wait, what agreement?* Did he hire Hunter again, or something? No, I immediately know what it is. He bought Hunter's help in exchange for keeping me alive, I'm sure of it.

"Course not. I'll try again here in a minute. Just...

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stretching my legs is all,” Hunter lies again, leaning over to hoist me up, his face a tight mask of strain.

*Hunter, don't believe him, he's bluffing!* I mumble into the gag. *Don't do this, please. He won't dare kill me, trust me, he's too weak! He's a coward underneath all of this yelling and anger and...* only a hushed mutter comes out. I growl, frustrated.

“Don't talk, Ailen, please.” Papa appears over both of us and promptly puts his shoe on my neck. I choke. Hunter raises his arm and lets it fall, resigned.

“It's better this way. Learn to be quiet,” Papa says, looking at me with a strange sadness. “Carry on, son.” Although the last remark is directed at Hunter, I no longer feel jealous at the word *son*. I only feel pity.

My father steps aside and disappears behind the door again. Beads of sweat prickle Hunter's forehead. He squats, spreads his legs apart for added balance, and, with a strained groan, heaves me off the floor, a siren pupa. Hunter springs up lightly for momentum; and I jump in his embrace, caught for a fraction of a second free, in midair. Hunter catches me by my waist, rotates me upward and folds me over his right shoulder.

My nose hits his back. I inhale the smells of sea, dried sweat, pine with sugar, and turbulent emotion. This is different from how I'm usually carried, from how my father carried me before placing me into the trunk of his Maserati not too long ago, shoving me inside like a sack of potatoes. There is gentleness in Hunter's hold, and his movements are fluid and soft, akin to a waltz. The swaying trawler only adds to the illusion.

Habit makes me escape into a vision of something else, because no matter how brave I try to be, the idea of my father removing my voice horrifies me, and my intuition tells me that we're not going very far. There is, after all, only so much room on a trawler and, judging by the furious swaying of the boat and the

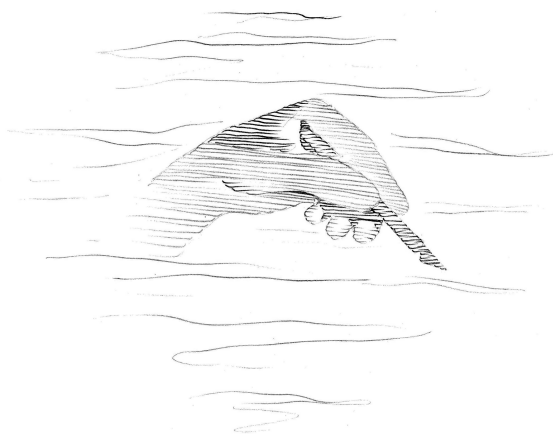
## **Padded Cell**

prickling sensation on my skin, we must be hitting pretty large waves that can only occur miles and miles away from shore.

Panting, Hunter squeezes through the door opening and into the narrow corridor. My father slams the door and rolls the hand wheel to lock it.

I shut my eyes, searching for sanity.

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### Chem Lab

Prom. This is it, the prom I never had, and never will. It's every teenage girl's dream—a beautiful dress and a beautiful date, right? I imagine that this is mine, and I'm having it now. I may be wrapped in cotton, but to me, it's a pearl-white gown made of ivory silk. Hunter hugs my knees to keep me from sliding off his shoulder, but I feel as if he hugs my waist and pulls me closer, to the glances of other couples. He sports a shaky gait to keep moving forward and avoid hitting walls, but I pretend he's leading me to the ballroom's entrance. He hobbles ahead through the ugly, dimly lit corridor, but I know we made it inside, on time, and he's carried me away into a magnificent dance. Every move is exquisitely performed. Left foot, right foot, step promenade. It's a waltz!

“In here, please.” My father's voice yanks me from my vision. Hunter hesitates. I feel his chest expand with air as if he's about to say something, then it falls. I smell the stink of machine oil, glue, and decay.

What sounded like music is no more than the loud

staccato of the trawler's engine and the ocean's rumble outside. I squint, glancing up. Fluorescent tubes and pipes fill the low ceiling like a bunch of trumpets cramped together. To my left is an identical door, complete with a hand wheel, protruding from the wall. The old whitish paint is peeling, and it sports a yellow sign that reads *Chem Lab* in black letters, two-thirds of the way up. Below it is another sign. *CAUTION, Hazardous Materials Beyond This Point*. The picture of what it must look like inside shakes me up so hard I nearly slide half a foot out of Hunter's grasp.

A quick blow to the back of my head makes me hang still. My father delivers it with his usual quiet precision. "Watch it. She's sliding."

"Sorry." Hunter heaves back me up onto his shoulder.

My nose hits his back, again. I swallow shame and turn my head to sneak a peek at my father. There he is, the man who gave me life and who's battling his desire to take it. His hand snakes into his wool pant pocket and is out in a flash, holding something shiny. Keys. Brand new, too, tinkling together, one of them pinched between his fingers, smooth on insert. The turn of the spindle follows, then the click of the bolt and the spinning of the hand wheel. Old hinges groan and, at the push of my father's hand, the door opens into a pitch-black room.

A damp, cold waft of chlorine hits my nose.

My father reaches inside without so much as a glance to flip on the switch, most certainly knowing its location by heart. How many times has he done this, how many times has he been here? Who was here before me?

Bright light blinds me as if it was a thousand suns. My eyes water, making everything blurry and causing me to squint.

Hunter carries me in. His sneakers squeal a few sad steps on what must be a polished steel floor. He slides me gently into something hard and cold and hollow, holding the back of my head

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in his hand and then letting it slide in with the rest of my body. It's a round container of some sort.

I blink like mad trying to make the afterglow vanish from my vision so I can take in the room. The light is unforgiving, blinding me with its fierce mercury vapor, streaming down from the low ceiling in shafts of brightness and buzzing like an annoying cloud of flies. It takes a moment to stop seeing the floating blotches of glow. When my vision finally adjusts, I wish my eyes were gagged instead of my mouth.

I'm inside my daily nightmare gone terribly wrong. And here I thought it couldn't possibly get any worse.

Ever since I can remember, nearly every day I was being punished for something. I was sent to the bathroom to sit in there for hours, contemplating my wrong-doings, and also because it was the only room in the house that my father could lock from the outside. At first, when I was very little, I tried screaming and slamming my fists on the door, but I quickly learned that such behavior only made my containment longer and added pain served on both of my cheeks, on the back of my head, on my butt, and on any other place that got in the way due to my unfortunate twisting, trying to avoid the blows. It wasn't all that bad, now that I think back on it. At least I could move around. I had water, I could pee if I needed to, and I had my sirens to talk to—my four marble sisters and the big bronze boss, my big sister, Canosa.

This is different.

There are bathrooms that lock, like the one in my house, and then...there are bathrooms that nail you shut in their bellies like funerary caskets gone mad.

*This* is the latter kind.

I'm in a chamber about fifteen by twenty feet in size. It looks like a hybrid between an old-fashioned lavatory, a surgery room, and a communal shower. Its walls are gray painted on top of

metal, most likely steel; its decor consists of operating tools hanging from hooks on the walls like you see in bad horror movies. They are a shiny mass of oblong metal prongs, none reminding me of any specific surgical instrument I can recall. I didn't know that my blood could chill any more, yet it does, freezing my veins to icicles.

I also notice my father's usual arsenal of whips and sonic guns hanging in a special spot right by the door.

The chamber's central feature is an iron claw foot tub that's smack in the middle of the room, and I'm in it, my feet sticking out one end, my head propped on the other. I'm only guessing it's an iron claw foot, mainly because my father is in love with them and its rim curls in that standard way. It must be standing on some sort of a raised platform, because they're not usually this high. If I wasn't constrained by the straightjacket, I could reach out and almost touch the ceiling, which is very low, at about six feet high, covered with fluorescent lights.

I tilt my head a little. There is no faucet that I can see. Instead, a round pipe opens directly over my head, the end of its opening roughly three inches in diameter. I notice something else on the sides of the tub. Several tightly linked metal chains curl down like dead snakes with eyes long gone, jutting into my cocoon through the layers of cotton. My gut fills with lead.

It takes me a second or two to observe all of this.

My father closes the door shut, rolls the hand wheel to his satisfaction, and waves at Hunter. "Please, proceed." His voice echoes dully off the walls. This room seems to not be soundproof, perhaps because what happens here leaves no organ to scream with.

There is a pause. I only see the back of Hunter's head, unable to keep my eyes open. Tears roll down my face from the burn, because there is so much chlorine in the air.



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"How..." I hear Hunter's heavy breathing. "How do I know...you'll hold to your part of the deal?" I can hear Hunter cracking his knuckles, he must be tightening his hands into fists.

"How do I know," he says, and pauses again. It's as hard for me to hear this, as I'm sure it's hard for him to say it. "How do I know for sure that you won't kill her after it's done? Huh? For all I know, it's just another one of your sick experiments." He spits loudly. This is bound to irritate my father who is pedantic to the extreme, especially when it concerns *his* things and *his* places.

Now I can see Hunter's bluish profile. The fluorescent lighting throws sharp shadows under his features, making him look scary—scary and mad—a vein pulsing on his temple.

My father stands by the door, looking over him coolly. "You think you have a choice?" The expression in his eyes turns my bones to glass, brittle and ready to shatter.

"I need a guarantee," Hunter throws out, desperation in his voice. "Some sort of contract or something. With your name on it. And signature. Can I get that?" His voice catches at the end, the agony of a childish demand.

"Oh." My father sticks his hands in his pant pockets and rocks on his heels, back and forth, producing a leathery creaking. "Let's see if I understand you correctly. You value a piece of paper over my word, is that right?"

"No!" he nearly shrieks. "That's not what I said. I s—"

"I'm asking you a simple question, Hunter. There are two very simple answers to it. Yes or no. Which one is it?" My father has this amazing ability of making people think they're idiots.

"You're twisting my words, man. It's n—" Hunter begins, but gets interrupted again.

"I'm not going to argue with you. I have no time for this. Once again, yes or no? Or, I can remove you from this equation."

"Is that a gun?" Hunter exclaims.

The tub's rim blocks the lower part of the room for me, and I can't tilt my head far enough to see exactly what is going on, but by my father's arm position, it looks as if he's pointing something at Hunter.

I have to close my eyes to lessen the burning and let the tears wet my eyes again. There are several steps and I feel a plastic nozzle touch my forehead. So, it's not a real gun Papa was pointing at Hunter. He's got it pointed at me right now. He must have taken it from the wall by the door in the middle of all of this talk.

"No!" Hunter yells. "I mean, yes!" His voice shakes. "I mean, no, I don't value paper over your word. Okay, okay, I agree. Don't touch her, please. *Please*. I'll do it." I slit my eyes open. He brushes his fingers through his hair, as if to hold on to something, his face contorted ashen under the harsh light.

"Good, I was starting to get worried. She's all yours." My father steps away. As much as he tries to sound cool, there is trembling.

I take in air without realizing I was holding my breath this whole time.

Hunter leans over me, his hands quivering as he reaches for the straps, pulling them from beneath me and circling them around me, fastening me into the tub, tight and secure. Every once in a while, he glances at me, hot tears dripping from his cheeks and onto the cotton of my straightjacket, blooming there in roses of wet warmth. I cry in return, suppressing nothing, not knowing if I'll ever see him again.

*I'm sorry. I love you,* he shapes on his lips.

*No need to be sorry, I understand. And I love you more,* I say with my eyes, hoping he can read them.

Hunter's body is tight with tension under my father's watchful eyes, his hands shaking badly. The steel locking loop-hooks of the chains clink against the painted iron tub. He keeps

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missing the holes, struggling with separating the prongs from the loops to latch them, and then slowly succeeding, one chain at a time, buckling about a dozen.

I study Hunter's concentrated face, his lips are pressed, but he turns sideways, purposefully avoiding my gaze. I choose not to moan, not to make any sound indicating that I'm in distress. I'll show my father who's winning this game here—me again.

He studies his nails and I burn a hole in his forehead with my gaze, until he finally steals a glance.

*Why, Papa? Why are you doing this to me? I know deep inside you still love me, don't you?* My father quickly glances away. Another victory. I sigh, blocking other senses and letting myself hear.

Hunter's soul echo penetrates my being, so horribly off-key, a mix of sad sweetness from disjointed violins and clanking dishes. It's designed to haunt me for the rest of my life, as long as we're close. For a moment, I let myself get lost in it, retreating from reality to the sound that only I can hear, making me both loath him and desire him. Over time, it's bound to turn me into a bitter, broken creature like Canosa. I wonder where she is now, wonder what kind of deal she struck with my father to help him catch us.

*Canosa, I hate you. But I understand your pain, now. And it sucks royally.*

A hand reaches in to check the straps.

"Good job." My father gives Hunter a quick pat on the shoulder. "You can start."

Suddenly, the trawler lurches and the lights flicker. Both Hunter and my father grab on to the tub for balance. The boat must have hit a big wave.

"We don't have much time. Do it. Now!"

"Okay," Hunter says under his breath. He then steps away to the wall and stretches out his arm, groping for something I

don't want to see. I close my eyes, as if that will make it any better. It doesn't.

An overwhelming helplessness buries me from head to toe in a sour acid of frustration. I'm a siren, for God's sake, there must be something I can do even without being able to use my voice. Something! I hate this cocoon I'm in. I hate this room, this ship, this everything. What I want is to kick the damn tub. I want to destroy this boat, tear it apart, beam by beam, panel by panel.

I grunt in effort. A thousand escape plans form in my head in rapid succession, draining the rest of my mental energy. This is final. There is no way out. It's the terrible knowledge of being locked in a cellar of doom, when hope slides against hope, in a last ditch attempt to grab on to something, knowing it's too late, and sliding down, down.

*No! I can do this.*

*Focus, Ailen, focus.*

I cast my thoughts aside, like I did at the lake, but without humming this time, because my swollen vocal cords can't produce even that. I'm charged with a desperate wish alone, trying to concentrate on the distant souls of marine life, anything I can stumble upon. I feel with my skin and hear the souls of fish, whales, animals on the shore, and people on their boats. Any living, breathing being. Their pitiful melodies are joined into the chorus of life itself. I want to take hold of the fibers of fate, tear at them, break them, connect with them. Something!

*Now! Right now!*

My heart threatens to jump out of my chest, every nerve ending sings with the pressure to perform, to work their asses off, to cast out my inaudible cry for help, making it ring, reverberating across miles and miles of space. The dull echo of something else besides Hunter's soul rolls gently on a buzz and pierces through my chest. It seems as if some souls have answered me, or maybe I

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imagined it.

I feel someone leaning over me and open my eyes. This was wishful thinking, of course. Nothing happens in terms of me doing anything to get out. Preparation for my surgery is over. The world attains an elastic quality to it, shimmering with my primitive animal fear when I see what's above me.

My father's face blocks the light. He stinks of disinfectant and anticipation, wanting this so badly sweat prickles on his forehead.

"Ailen?"

I force myself to keep my eyes steady.

His pupils widen. A hideous smile greets me with his typical words. "Listen to me, sweetie. Hunter will fill the tub with chlorinated water, for hygienic reasons, and then he'll cut open your throat and remove your vocal cords. Easy. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes, and you won't feel much, I promise. Nice and clean. I can hold your hand, if you want."

His last phrase makes me want to die. I'm empty.

*You're not my father, you're a butcher, I want to say. Why in the hell did you make me? To torture me, to become your favorite toy to kick and slap and torment? Just so you would feel better from whatever shit that's eating you from the inside? In that case, I wish I was never born. I wish I never saw your face. I want to erase it from my memory, forever.*

I detect a hint of genuine worry in his voice, indicating that he wants this to go well, wants to keep me alive, after all. Why? What will I become then? Ailen Bright, not a siren anymore, but a gutted fish? Lying on a bed of her steaming entrails, iridescent in their beauty? If I can't sing anymore, what will I do? My song is my life. If he takes it away, will I be able to live? And what would be the point if I won't be able to revive his soul fully with my song? I don't know the answer to this question

and simply close my eyes, ready for the worst.

“Let me know if you’re uncomfortable, okay?” my father says from above. “Hunter, we haven’t got all day, and the weather doesn’t seem to be playing to our favor. Please.”

For a second, I wonder if the bad weather is my doing, but then I cast the thought aside. It can’t be, not without singing or at least humming. And it’s not like I can move the whole ocean, can I?

I open my eyes again to see Hunter wipe sweat off his face, pull on resin gloves, and reach up to turn a lever on the pipe. A gush of chlorinated water floods my face. I suck it in through my nose, not minding the burning, happy to have moisture in my system. It’s ice cold but it assaults my lining with a concoction of disinfectants. The tub quickly fills, soaking the cotton and me in the process. It reaches my stomach, rolls over my face, and covers me like a sheet of clear water. I can breathe through my gills now; slowly, but it’s some relief. There are two inches of water above me, then five, and then a foot. I’m submerged.

I vaguely remember Hunter dragging me into the public bathroom at the Pike Place Fish Market, repeatedly telling me that we need to get rid of my voice because my father can track me that way. Is that why he dragged me into the restrooms, because they had water? Could it be that cutting a siren’s skin is easier underwater? Is that why they covered me? I actually feel my skin getting thinner and more supple, never having noticed it before; never having a moment to relax and simply reflect on being a siren. It doesn’t seem as if I’ll have another moment like this, ever.

Hunter hangs over with me a scalpel in his hand. No, it’s not a scalpel. It looks like a beer bottle opener, with a loop of sharp metal at the end. Its sharp edge shines in the bright light, shimmering through the layer of water.

I think my heart stops beating. At least for half of a

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second. This is the point of no return. I watch the blade, wondering when it will descend.

One second goes by.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

The wait is maddening, but nothing happens. Hunter's arm shakes as he lowers it.

"I'm waiting," comes warbled through the water. Though amplified and distorted, I understand every word. I see my father's hand grip Hunter's shoulder.

"Steady, son. Relax. You did this before. Just like we practiced, remember? Breathe."

Hunter passes a tongue over his lips.

"You can do it. Reach in, make one simple slit, remove the cords, staple the gap, and be done."

I want to sink deeper, but there's nowhere else to retreat. At the same time, a new energy passes through me, my skin sucking it in from the water. Because there is no way I can be more afraid than I am already, terror leaves me. Maybe this is how people feel in their last moments of life when they know they're about to die and there is nothing they can do to stop it; so they accept it and wait, empty of feeling. Except, I know I won't die. Though it feels the same, this is only about removing my voice.

Hunter nods, dips his hand in, and begins carefully cutting the cotton that covers my neck. Gently, not touching my skin, not leaving a single scrape.

I hold my breath and dissociate myself from my body as if I'm a casual observer. This is what I'm good at, due to years of practice with my father. This is what let me survive his assaults, let me learn how to stop crying and drive him mad with my silence, no matter how hard he hit. It was my weapon against him then, and it's my weapon now. My mind is clear. My breathing slows down. This is tolerable. In fact, I'm strangely curious about what

will happen next.

"There. Now, cut inside. It's easier under the water, it softens their skin. Mysterious, isn't it?"

*Bingo! I was right.* The glee from this gives me another jolt of energy, rushing up my nerve endings and tingling.

Hunter hesitates.

"Go on," my father urges.

Hunter throws the scalpel onto my stomach and straightens. I hear the instrument slide off my body and float down the side of the tub and into the gap between my back and tub's bottom. It lands with a quiet metal clank. Hunter steps back.

"I can't. Can't do it. Sorry." I hear tears in his voice.

"Well, that's truly unfortunate. I thought we closed this topic. I suppose I'll have to do it myself." My father's voice has a barely hidden irritation in it.

"How can you?" Hunter breaks into hysterical shrieking. "You're her father! What kind of a monster are you? This is your daughter. *Your daughter!*"

"And your girlfriend, am I right? Would you like your *girlfriend* to die because you're a coward? Is that what you call love nowadays? Perhaps you need to reevaluate your values, son. Per—"

This time Hunter interrupts him. "Then *do* it! Go ahead and fucking do it already!" He breaks into crying.

"Pull yourself together." A loud crack echoes in the room as Papa's hand connects with Hunter. "I thought this might happen. What a waste of time." Hunter whimpers.

The boat lurches, hard. The lights go out for a few seconds this time. I hear more struggling. When the lights go on, the water is still shaking above me and all I see are two distorted figures, one of them leaning over the side of the tub.

It's not Hunter. It's my father, and he has another scalpel in his hand. No, it's not his hand, it's Hunter's hand. My father is

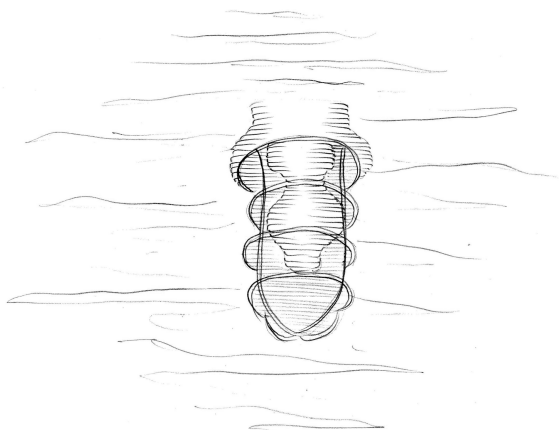


### Chapter 3

holding his fingers over it, forcing the instrument down, the blade aimed at my neck.

He's making Hunter do it.

## Chapter 4



### Iron Tub

What do you do when the one who's supposed to love you, betrays you? What do you do when the one you trust most yanks your trust out from under your feet with a violence you cannot grasp with your little childish brain? And what if, after all is done and you're finished crying, you're told that it was done in the name of love? How do you continue to function? How do you continue giving, loving, believing? These questions gut me as I watch the blade approaching my throat, tiny air bubbles framing it like gems. I have no answers. The only thing I know is that I have one or two seconds at the most. My eyes bulge in fear. I tighten my muscles and hear the fabric give. Not enough. *Try again, yell. Do something! Hum! Scream! Sing!* But I can't, so I shut my eyes tightly, not wanting to see this.

"Ailen. Please...forgive me. Forgive me...if...if you can," Hunter's voice trembles between sobs, and then my father voice barges in with its gleeful baritone, full of sick wonder.

"Look, Ailen, look," he says.

I feel my eyelids being pried open, his fingers pulling at

## Chapter 4

my eyelashes. I squint harder, fighting him.

“It’s a state of the art procedure; you don’t want to miss it.” Heavy breathing and soft crying come at me in distorted sound waves.

I have ignited my father’s soul back to life but I seem to have failed to make it truly reborn. It must’ve gone on the wrong circuit, twisting him along the way into a horrendous creature that doesn’t know any boundaries in its reign, similar to a child who thinks the center of the world is his navel.

He pinches my cheek hard and I utter an inaudible yelp. My eyes fly open, just in time. I see every single detail of what’s being performed like a patient who suddenly woke up from anesthesia in the middle of a surgery and can’t quite phantom what, exactly, is happening.

Hunter’s hand is inches from my neck, the scalpel held firmly between his fingers with my father’s fingers on top of his, in an iron grip. With one sharp shove the tip of the blade is pushed right beneath my chin and traces a vertical line down to the concave spot where my collar bones meet, cutting through remaining cotton layers, smoothly, with a whispering ripping noise. I relax a little, until another swing of the blade slices through my skin and goes deeper into the muscle, as a butcher’s knife would make a groove into a chunk of meat. A crunch of parted cartilage rips through my ears. I don’t know how deeply the cut goes, and I can’t know, because the agony of pain overwhelms me. I spasm and shudder and thrash as much as my binding allows me, screaming a muffled cry. From a long distance—what seems like miles and miles away—Hunter cries, too.

A clear, viscous slime oozes out of the hole in my throat and floats up in a cloud of goo; it looks like a mass of frog eggs. My heart deserts my chest and hikes up to my larynx, pumping madly. This feels similar to when my gills split open into being for

the first time, only a thousand times worse. Fingers reach into the cavity, probably Hunter's because they are gentle as they palpate their way around and finally stumble on what must be the tissue around my vocal cords. I can't see what's happening and I can hardly feel anything except the hot pulsing insanity of pain.

Then he touches them. He touches the two protruding nubs at the edge of my glottis—the space between my vocal folds—the very membranes that produce my voice with their vibrations.

At first, nothing happens.

Then, a mini earthquake shakes the trawler. No, it shakes what feels like the entire ocean. It starts with small oscillations and reaches a crescendo with a seismic tremor of water all the way to the sea bottom, making everything around me expand, close to exploding. Surgical instruments fly off the walls and fall to the ground in a succession of metallic clangs. Lights flicker and hiss, threatening to go out completely. The water sloshes out of the tub in rhythm to the boat rocking wildly from side to side. My body turns to liquid as if someone threw a stone deep inside. I'm a circular wave that grows amidst gigantic ripples, rising to the horizon and shimmering in its wake, a tsunami in the making.

*Buzz!*

The impact is clearly audible.

It must feel, to Hunter, like he just stuck his hand into an electrical socket that's at least 1,000 volts, because he jerks his hand out of the water with a loud yelp, and I hear him collapse to the floor. A weird succession of images percolates in my mind, from a working hairdryer dropped into the water, to lightning striking a solitary figure on the road, to Hunter touching an open wire in the rain. It turns out, a siren is like an electric eel, happy to shock anyone who dares to touch her voice. This explains why my father was so bent on having Hunter do it. Is this why he staged it

## Chapter 4

in the middle of the ocean, because of the destruction it would have caused on land? Another spasm takes over me and blots out all thought.

Chaos ensues.

A mechanical alarm brays its penetrating drone across the trawler. Fluorescent tubes feebly struggle to get back to life, flickering blue one last time and going out. The bright red bulb of an emergency lamp bursts its bright eye above the door, pulsing, making reddish reflections on top of the remaining water I'm buried under.

The space of the room turns from a clean, surgical crispness to a surreal liquidity, almost like a nightclub, with its red light pulsing in unison to the blasting bray of an alarm.

I nearly black out from the sensory overload.

"Get up! I said, get up, you fucking son of a bitch!" This is my father swearing over the mechanical whine of the alarm, his mannerisms gone bye-bye, and his simple, vulgar primitive self, for once, rising to the surface.

Something is happening to my body, but I'm not entirely sure what it is. The sensation is pleasant—it's the touch of the water directly to my core. Chlorinated or not, it's still my life force, and it seeps inside of me through the rupture and fills me with strength. I try to block out the discord of the disaster I caused, to understand what is happening to me and what it means, to look inward and help it if I can.

"Be a man and finish the job! I said, finish it! Did you hear me? Are you deaf?" My father's voice is on the verge of a shriek, coming at me dampened by two feet of water and blaring alarm signals. The water is no longer cold. It heats up on contact with my torn tissues, and the source of the heat is my growing anger.

"Get up, I said! Get up! Now!" There is a kick and a moan, and the shifting of steel and plastic rubble sliding on the floor.

Then there's a creaking of wooden boards, and steps pounding somewhere above the ceiling. More kicks, more moans. The pattern repeats. I feel like it's me he's kicking, not Hunter. It's me who hurts, me who wants to cry.

Broken, torn apart, and left to die.

"Get up, you little piece of shit!"

Hunter's words flash through my mind again, the ones he said when we had our joint on my birthday, when he asked me if I ever met a real siren. I joked back, saying, *You call this real?* I pointed at the marble Ligeia. He said, *You know what I mean. Not the mythical kind. No. I'm talking about a real siren. The girl next door. The killer kind.* I realize, in retrospect, it was me he was talking about. He meant me, my stubbornness and my ability to move forward on sheer will, when other girls would've given up. I am the killer kind, and it's time to show it.

*I'm not a little girl anymore, Papa. You can't do the things you did to me when I was little. You can't just take my voice away by force. It belongs to me and me alone. I'm my own being, capable of living without your constant control, and I'm not a thing to play with. I have a name. My name is Ailen Bright, and I'm a siren. And I'll show you what that means.*

Two bodies slam against the side of the tub and it tells me that Hunter is miraculously still fighting against my father.

*I'm coming, Hunter, hang on!*

With this, I gulp the moisture from the water through my skin, not exactly inhaling it, but absorbing it the way a sponge does, directing it through the cut in my throat. At the same time, I strain to expand, to break from my cotton cocoon, to snap off the chains, to bend open their links and make them fall apart, and wiggle from the gripping belts. Several seconds of my effort amounts only to the sound of metal grinding, and the chains are as rigid as ever. I grunt from the effort; grunting is good, it means

## Chapter 4

I'm starting to produce noise. The chains are good too, at least for the moment. They're holding me in place against the tumultuous swaying of the trawler, as water sloshes left and right out of the tub.

I cease to react to the annoying crimson light, cease to hear what is going on in the lab, or above it. I concentrate on my breath and on the fabric of the straightjacket, picturing the fibers soaking with water, becoming soft and more elastic; at the same time, I tense and make the tissue in my body expand. It works. A few threads tear, then a dozen, and then a hundred. But it's not enough, not nearly enough to break out of this whole thing.

There are heavy footsteps, shouts, and a slamming of the open door. Then, there is more shouting.

I will myself to ignore everything, hanging on to the sensation that's brimming inside of me, quickly escalating into strength. It's now or never; I might not get another chance.

With my eyes closed, I tune in to dissolving the cotton's very atoms into liquid. There is no tub anymore, no lab, no people, no trawler—only this effort. It fills me with the sense of growing a new spine, an anchor for my quiet, concentrated rage. There's nothing left within me but this. It gears me into action.

My skin cells begin regenerating, multiplying at an alarming speed, eating away the fabric like acid while mending and closing my throat, knitting it shut. Within seconds,

I'm fixed, I'm whole, and my voice is back. I hum, sending reverberations up the walls, through the ceiling, past the trawler's deck, and under the stars of what must be a night sky. I don't see it, but I can feel it. The night is full of drizzle and it hears me.

Pounding steps are reaching the tub, and someone leans in. I snake out my arm, now free of cotton, and close my fingers on the neck of my victim, pulling him down into the water. Jimmy. Poor Jimmy utters a cry in a bubble of air and slides out of the

## Iron Tub

water and onto the floor, unconscious. I mentally note not to automatically kill him so I can snack on his soul later.

Though the cotton is gone, the chains still hold me fast.

I'll take care of them later. For now, I keep humming, directing my power upward and into the atmosphere. This is the beauty of sound—it can penetrate the walls. There, in the expanse of velvety darkness, first a few feet and then miles away, droplet to droplet, rain carries my hum all the way into the cloud. Slowly, it begins shrinking, collapsing in on itself like a giant magnet and pulling moisture from miles around into one spot, hanging heavy over the trawler and racing across the sky to follow it. There is a rumble of electricity and a crack of lighting, caused by the force of my voice. I feel like the conductor of a giant orchestra called weather, hushing the background music and bringing out the front line, the heavy artillery, and making it charge.

I hum more, adding intensity.

Something ruptures from above. It has reached a critical mass and water gushes down in one focused stream, similar to those two hundred drops I caught on my tongue when I competed with Hunter, only on a much grander scale. As an overturned shooting geyser, it falls on the roof of the pilothouse first, then slides down and breaks through several feet of deck material, denting it and forcing its steel panels apart, like it's no more than dirty sand packed into a castle by a child on the beach.

I no longer hear Hunter or Papa, or any of the remaining noises. I'm in the zone, humming *Rain* by Siren Suicides. I pull and nag and coax every single water drop in my vicinity to move, calling on the ocean itself. Now even the rascal glow of the emergency light flickers, the boat careening dangerously to the left and sloshing most of the water out of the tub, together with the first scalpel, before righting itself. The tub must be bolted to the platform it stands on, which is in turn secured to the floor, because



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neither moves. But the chains slacken from the force of me being jerked around, and I hear the links begin to give.

The red light pulses again, but not with the regular rhythm of a signal, but with the sputtering of a failing electrical circuit. It goes dead and the wail of the alarm breaks into abrupt silence. Something must have malfunctioned above. Darkness is absolute and I can't see anything, relying solely on my hearing.

I feel pressure on the boat's hull, from all sides, as if it's about to be squished between two mighty Greek mythological monsters, Scylla and Charybdis. I imagine their evil faces from the books I've read, opening their toothless mouths, wanting to swallow the trawler in an almighty whirlpool, sucking it to the bottom of the sea. There is loud rumble and fizz, followed by the cracking and groaning of wood and metal before bolts begin shooting out of the walls and the ceiling, landing on top of me like empty bullet shells. Dust from the ceiling's splintering wood covers me in a thin layer of powder. After a few seconds, the trawler seems unable to withstand the enormous force of water pressure. It starts to collapse and I win.

Water spurts through every crevice it finds and begins flooding the room. I can't see it, but I hear it rising quickly, with a deafening determination. I twist around in my chains and manage to break my feet free; I pound them against the tub's end, hoping the friction will let me free the rest of my body. The cotton straightjacket finally falls apart to mere threads, freeing my arms at last. I want to call out Hunter's name but I'm afraid to break my humming, wanting to cause as much damage to the vessel as I can, holding on to the hope that I will have enough time to get out of here, find him, and flee together.

I work my fingers, clenching and unclenching them, and then finding the loop-hooks and breaking them one by one. They're holding me suspended like a floating bridge, about ten

## Iron Tub

inches from the bottom of the tub. I undo every chain hook along my body, starting from my shoulders and getting all the way to my knees, my clumsy fingers slipping and my body sagging into the tub as I go. After unhooking each chain, I yank it, along with its fastening bolt, out of the tub, unceremoniously throwing them on the floor, one by one, until, at last, I'm free.

A loud crack traces the floor above me and water begins falling down in freezing sheets. The first pangs of panic begin to rise and my humming stops at once.

I rip the tape off my face, together with a few hairs tearing from the back of my head. It takes three tries to get off every single layer, until I reach the ball of cotton, now soaked through with my saliva. I grasp it with unbending fingers and pull it out, coughing. I take another few seconds to bend my head down over my knees and retch, buried in a sudden wash of nausea. Whatever juices I have in my body, they hang out of my open mouth; at last, when I force myself to wipe them, I find to my horror that, along with the cotton of the straightjacket, my clothing has also dissolved, leaving shreds of rainproof fabric stuck to my wet skin. I'm stark naked.

I quickly touch my throat, it's as smooth as it's always been, not even the sign of a scar on it.

"Hunter!" I croak, coughing and sputtering water out as I sit up in the tub. "Hunter, where are you? Answer me."

Shaking, still weak, I awkwardly climb over the side of tub. My foot hits something soft and warm, and then I remember. Jimmy lays unconscious, slumped against the tub platform. I consider sucking out his soul quickly and decide against it. It's a pity, but there's no time. I have to find Hunter and get him off this sinking ship before it's too late. And my father...what will I do with him? Leave him to sink? Rescue him too, hauling them both on my back? It's impossible.

I'm momentarily perplexed, remembering the promise I

## Chapter 4

made to myself to find the good in him, to try and revive him all the way. Yet, somehow, I can't find the motivation after what just transpired.

There is, however, one more thing I need to do. I squat next to Jimmy, dipping my hands into several feet of freezing water on the floor, and feel for his jacket and pants, swaying together with the rocking trawler. I try to find a zipper or button of some kind. It seems to take an eternity, but I finally manage to pull both rain boots off of his soggy feet, strip him of his orange overalls and jacket, and drag them over myself. The ensemble is huge on my petite frame and sticks to me with its rubbery coating inside, but I don't mind. It's a thousand times better than being naked.

The boat lurches again and I fly to the other end of the lab, hitting my head hard on one of the protruding hooks, yelping. Jimmy moans as his body slams into the wall next to me. Though his head stays above the water, he won't be able to keep afloat and will soon drown.

With a sigh, I lean over and stick my hands under his stinky armpits, pulling him in front of me and carefully stepping backward and up, because, at this point, the trawler stopped lurching from side to side and is steadily careening in one direction.

"Hunter!" I yell, making my way to what I hope is the door. "Hunter, answer me!"

The door is open, and I can feel the rush of water and air with my back. At the speed it's rising, I think I have ten, maybe twenty minutes before the trawler sinks.

"Hunter!" I try again.

A motor whirls to life somewhere above—must be some sort of an emergency generator. At the same time, the red emergency light turns on again, not to its previous pulsing beat,

but to a steady glow this time.

“Hunt—” I begin and bump into someone with my back. I turn around and gawk. “Papa?” I hate myself for uttering this involuntary greeting.

No matter what he does to me, no matter what I decide the night or day before, in the most critical moments—when I think I’ve lost him—my inner child comes out. For a split second, I’m happy to see him alive. My father’s wet face grins in the sinister blood-red glow of the emergency light. He’s standing in my path, blocking the doorway and holding on to the frame with his right hand. Hunter is slumped against Papa’s left shoulder, half-standing and half-hanging in his one-armed embrace.

We lock eyes and he smiles.

“I thought I might find you here,” he says.

“You. What...” I breathe, suppressing the urge to cradle Hunter’s face, to call out his name, to ask him if he’s okay. This is when I need my siren self to take over.

“Let go of him. Now,” I say, squatting, ready to attack.

It takes me a long, painful moment of rapid blinking to believe that what I’m seeing is true, reminding myself that these are not two actors in a movie, but two people from my life. My father holds something in his right hand—something that was hidden behind the doorframe.

It’s a gun.

He points it at Hunter’s head. It’s not the plastic sonic weapon he uses on sirens. No, this is real.

“One more step and your boyfriend dies,” he says in a level voice, though I still detect a hint of fear behind it. He knows that time is not to his advantage.

“You wouldn’t dare,” I whisper, curling my fingers into fists.

“Who are you to tell me what I would or wouldn’t dare?”

## Chapter 4

A childish note creeps into his voice, and I have a feeling it's not me he's talking to.

"How dare you talk to your own father like this? How dare you to doubt me." There's an echo of his soul that mixes into the conversation, and I feel it waver. It's uncertain; he doesn't want to do this. I want to reach out to it and hold it, but I don't get the chance.

"What you don't understand is that men and women were made differently. *I* was made differently." I notice how he switches from his usual generalization of men to talking about himself. I must have cut deeply into his wound.

"*I* don't hesitate. *I* control my emotions, I control *things*. I *do* things. You must learn from me if you want to live. Move."

Fast as lightning, he straightens out his arm and shoves me to the left, causing me to stumble and lose my hold on Jimmy. He slides out of my grasp and my father shoots him in the head.

"Jimmy!" I lean over him, ignoring the ringing in my ears. When did I decide that saving his life was my responsibility? I don't know, but I failed. "You shot him!" They say your whole life flashes in front of your eyes, in a split-second, right before you die. A lucid dream composed of moments of love, if you had any. Afterward, you see some sort of a dark tunnel with a light at the end; it's so resplendent, so beckoning, you want to go there and be at peace forever. You take a step—forgetting you have feet, legs—and transcend into a sense of levitation, of complete dissolution, of serenity. What they don't say is what happens when you watch someone else die a senseless death. It flashes before your eyes in just the same way, only double. Everything held in your memory spills out in a myriad of pictures, silly snapshots of life, making you wonder what it would feel like to be in this person's place. I've killed people before, for food. And I've watched Canosa kill, too. This is

different. What my father just did is mindless murder.

I sense the sound of Jimmy's soul moving up and out, toward me. Involuntarily, still bent over, I suck it in, letting the much needed strength course through my chest, to my heart, and throughout my body. I raise my head, wondering if my father knew this soul would feed my strength.

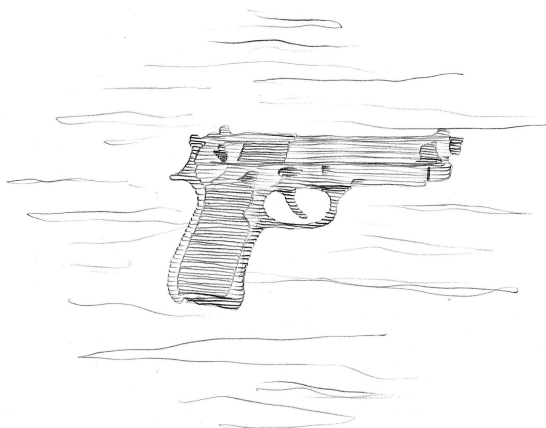
Papa continues to point the gun at Hunter's head. "Do we have an agreement?" he asks, coldly.

"Yes. Yes, please..." I say, sticking out my hands in a protective gesture. My defiance evaporates in an instant. "I'll do whatever you say, just *please*, don't...don't kill him."

The floor shifts and slides out from under our feet.

I fall forward, on top of my father, and we crash into the corridor, slipping on the wet floor and sliding toward the narrow stepladder—the only way out of this metal beast before it's consumed by the ocean.

## Chapter 5



### Lifeboat

Thoughts course through my head as we fly with incredible speed toward the ladder, bumping into pipes sticking out here and there, and then come to an abrupt stop, draping over the steel bottom rung like three heavy sacks filled with sand, one on top of another. Darkness throbs in the red flickering light. The boat's tilt must be close to a thirty degree angle now. I remember reading somewhere that once it careens past forty-five degrees, sinking is inevitable and happens within minutes.

I find my face pressed into my father's chest, hearing his beating heart, his warmth touching my forehead.

"No!" I weep into his shirt, soaked and smelling faintly of fabric softener. Why Jimmy's death has hit me harder than my father blowing up Raidne on the shore of Seward Park, I can't fathom. I don't even know the guy; he was supposed to help Glen kill me. Why it makes me weep from grief instead of getting mad like it did when my father killed Pisinoe, I can't comprehend. Perhaps because I was so close to it, watching Papa execute him without a purpose; perhaps, it's because a part of me has agreed

that sirens are indeed monsters and, hence, deserve death; or, perhaps it's because a woman's lower rank has been so firmly ingrained in my mind by my father's constant lectures, that it's now ruling my emotions?

I swallow.

My father jerks up, attempting to sit.

"Off! Get off me! Get—" he yells over the rumble of the creaking trawler that's about to give up. He pushes his free hand into my left shoulder and shoves me away, like I'm the most disgusting creature that's ever touched him. I remember him dropping me into the trunk of his Maserati Quattroporte. This is as close as we've ever gotten to a hug, and I wish he would drop his gun and drape his arms around me, letting me sob into his shoulder. I need him to tell me that we all will be okay, and everything that's happened in the past will be forgotten. We'll start new, and it will be always sunny, warm, and loving. Only life doesn't work this way, and neither does Papa.

Life has a way of reminding you of its fragile balance, just when the future looks rosy. It sends me that reminder as it dunks the trawler another foot down, digging sharp fingers of panic into me, siren or not.

"Hunter!" I yelp over the rushing water, reaching for him. My father intercepts me and pushes my arm away, yelling in response.

"You touch him, he's dead, understand?" His eyeballs bulge, two white, ethereal spheres of hate amidst the pounding darkness. "Help me get him up. There is a lifeboat on the deck. Move!"

I glance at him. Impulse makes me want to circle my hands around his neck and choke him, choke him to his natural death, yet I know it won't work. Not at my hands, no matter how strong. It's like a cruel joke, a joke on this whole siren hunting



## Chapter 5

thing; we are forever destined to torture each other, both armed with unlikely weapons—sirens with the sound of their voice, siren hunters with the sound of a sonic boom.

I'm helpless, barely detecting the off-key melody of Hunter's soul, but not seeing him in the dark. My quiet rage completes a 180 degree turn. It aims at me, wild, because it can't just evaporate, it has to go somewhere. Tears burn my eyes and my muscles scream for action, yet I hold still. The rubber of my fisherman suit drums to the mad patter of leaking water from the ceiling. My arms hang loose, unsure if they can move or if it's best not to stir. Several feet of swirling water ripple with the momentary agony of disaster, splashing around me.

Hunter's body is slumped against the ladder, hugging its very bottom like a torn rag doll dropped into a puddle by its owner. All I can see in the darkness is that his eyes are closed and his nose is bloody. Half of his face floats in and out of the water.

"I said, move it! Get him up, now!" Papa yells, pressing the gun into my left shoulder. "You want to keep your boyfriend alive, don't you, sweetie?"

Papa's manner of mixing a cute name that indicates affection, into a furious tirade, hits me with its ugliness. My helpless rage blooms into a carnivorous flower, its balloon-like chamber ready to swallow me whole. I'm supposed to move the entire ocean. In fact, it was probably me who screwed up the weather in the first place tonight. So what exactly is wrong with me right now? My tongue won't move, and I only manage to nod.

"One arm on the ladder, one arm on the waist. Here—" My father points to direct me, grabbing the ladder with his free hand and pressing his back against it to stabilize himself; the ladder is nearly vertical, so Papa leans against it as if it were a wall, while the trawler continues tilting.

He shoves me toward Hunter. I fall to my knees and lift

Hunter's face. He moves his lips, coughing. There is dangerous cracking noise above, one of the riggers must have been torn off by gravity.

"Do it!" my father directs me. He doesn't like to dirty his hands, always finding someone else to carry out his commands. This time, it's me. It's my job to carry Hunter to safety, and I'm glad to do it. So I hold my mouth shut, lest something unpleasant slips out. I pull Hunter up by sticking my hands under his arms and trying to make him stand. He moans and his knees buckle, so I rely on my strength alone. My father watches me struggle, his gun at the ready.

For the next several minutes, I fight the flood and haul myself up with one arm, holding Hunter with the other, carefully stepping up with my bare feet, curling my toes around the metal bars. I leap up to grab the next rung, and the next, until I make it to the upper level and pull us both onto the floor, covered with fishy smelling litter, metal trays, bags of melted ice, and other debris that got washed down. One more level and we'll make it to the deck.

The boat groans and we slide to the side. I desperately try to hold on to something, but everything I touch is slimy slick, and there is no light here except the rectangular opening in the ceiling several feet to the right, oozing in the early morning light and fresh ocean smell.

I turn and see my father emerge from the hole as well, first clamping his hand with the gun over the edge, then the other one, yanking himself out with an agility I didn't think he possessed, and sitting on the edge a little sideways, his legs dangling down.

"There. Go!" He points at the opening, propped on all fours for balance. There is a moment of quiet, of no movement, a brief stillness before the eruption.

"Now!" he barks, and I move. The water gurgles above in

## Chapter 5

splashing waves, and there is another tug down and a dangerous sounding metallic moan of the boat's hull. In my haste, half-way up the second ladder, I don't notice how Hunter's head lolls to the side and hits one of the protruding pipes on the wall with a wet smack. He shudders in pain and yelps loudly, suddenly fighting my hold.

I let go from surprise and hear him collapse several feet down, splashing into the shallow puddle with a crack of the back of his head against steel.

There is a moan and a kick.

"Fucking klutz. Get up!" Another kick.

I scrunch up my entire face, trying not to react to what I hear—not let the commotion, the slapping, and the cursing take me to a place of no return, where red rage will obscure my reasoning and turn me into a monster. My helpless rage is close to driving me insane. Surely, in this chaos, I can easily snatch Hunter away—right from under my father's nose—and escape with him. But the risk of having him killed in the process is too much to bear, so I slowly make myself go down to help both of them.

I ignore my father's insults in an attempt to get me moving, and I try to block out Hunter's moaning. I touch the floor, lean, and scoop up Hunter. Methodically, I make my way back up, step by step, hearing the resin of my new overalls squeak, gripping the rungs with my toes, and my arm firmly around Hunter's waist. I hear him mumble something into my shoulder, but concentrate on making it to the deck.

I grab the edge of the hatch; someone, thankfully, must have left it open. I tense and leap out, landing on top of the open cover, Hunter firmly in my lap. The wind slaps my face and whistles through the gaps of my fisherman suit. Heavy-laden clouds hang low over the horizon. It must be the dawn of day three since I jumped from the bridge.

## Lifeboat

Lightning strikes, briefly illuminating the storm's angry rain. A few seconds later, the rolling thunder deafens me with an earsplitting accord. This might be the last day I'll see Papa and Hunter alive. I feel a push in the small of my back and turn, watching my father struggle to stand on the leaning deck without sliding, holding on to the railing, wrongly clothed for this weather. Curling his shaky fingers around it, he aims his gun at Hunter and urges me to get him up and into the lifeboat.

I nod, indicating that we're still good with our agreement, lifting and draping Hunter over my shoulder and carrying him like a baby to the aft part of the deck where the orange capsule of the lifeboat gleams in the grayness of the early morning. Suspended from ropes attached to one of the galleys, it careens at a dangerous angle, about to snap and fall. I turn to look behind me. The other half of the deck is fully submerged in the ocean now, and as far as I can hear, there are no other human souls on the sinking trawler.

I pause, taking in the scene.

Its predicament, its terrible beauty, arrests me for a moment. A colorless background of dull water meets the dull sky, and I'm precariously balanced on its edge, with only a drop of orange acting as my salvation. It occurs to me that I can leave them both, Hunter and father, right here, right now; I can leap into the waves, swim away, and never come back. But my feet won't move, and my limbs won't listen. I can't run away anymore.

I grab on to the ropes that are stretched in a pulley mechanism designed to lower the lifeboat, and with a powerful yank, I tear at them, breaking the elaborate on-loading system. I hop away and watch as the lifeboat drops on the deck, screeches, and slides across its remaining twenty feet and into the water. It's roughly the size of a small car, shaped like a sandwiched plastic boat little kids play with during bath time, the wind-up type with two concave oval halves, both orange, the top and bottom

## Chapter 5

identical; a welded ridge runs along its middle. The lifeboat has an orange waterproof cover, hatches in its roof, and a series of circular windows adorning its front, each large enough for one person to peek through.

The trawler growls and tilts, rapidly reaching the forty-five degree incline. Yelling into Hunter's ear to hold his breath, hoping he'll come to his senses and hear me, I let him slide to face me, hugging him tightly. I dive from the trawler's deck, emerging a second later; I hear his breathing to my satisfaction, and circle about the bobbing lifeboat. Leaping into the air with Hunter firmly pressed to my chest, I plop right into the middle between both of its hatches on the roof. Feeling it shift to the side, I have time to rip off one of the hatch's lids and push Hunter into the opening, feet first.

He moans and grabs hold of my ankles, but I have no time to explain what is going on.

There is a deafening explosion of gunfire, my father no doubt thinking that I broke our agreement and decided to take off with Hunter alone. And I could, right? But I won't. I'm simply unable to leave my father stranded in the middle of the ocean, letting him die of hypothermia or exhaustion, or both. I hate myself for feeling this way, but I can't help it. Deep inside, under protective layers of loathing and revulsion and teenage defiance, I still love him. I love him the way every little girl loves her father, idolizing and adoring him no matter what.

"Get in there and wait for me!" I say into Hunter's ear, shoving him into the hole and diving back into the ocean.

I land in a froth of turbulent bubbles, white foam on the ocean's surface created by the sinking trawler. A few life preservers float around, the only things left to indicate that, only seconds ago, a fifty-foot trawler was here. The whole thing is gone, victim to an enormous body of saline water.

## Lifeboat

About twenty feet away I spot a bobbing head.

I swim across the whirlpool, held back by the clumsy fisherman suit that's catching on the water and not letting me move fast enough. Diving under, I emerge directly beneath my father, grabbing his shifting torso and surfacing with him in my hold, willing myself deaf to his threats and shouts and two more gun shots in the air, which is just a pointless waste of ammunition. I repeat my trick of leaping out of the water and landing on top of the lifeboat, managing to turn midair to hit it with my back, protecting Papa like I did Hunter from the fall. The impact makes the boat rock dangerously and we begin sliding. I reach out and hold on to the protruding contraption that was secured to a hook before I yanked the lifeboat down from its hold.

My father is shouting and motioning me in, shaking from the cold. I'm in a daze of suppressed rage, moving automatically and focusing on the task at hand so that I don't lose it. Crawling on top and worming inside, my father urges me in. I descend into what looks like a small bathroom with a low ceiling and tiny circular windows. No, it looks more like a sauna with those shelf-like seats stacked on either side of the boat's interior, four in total, strapping belts hanging loose across them and contrasting their orange color against the walls' white. My bare feet touch the smooth surface of the floor. Papa hops down next to me and pushes me into a seat to the left, positioning himself in the top seat to the right, the one next to all kinds of controls and knobs and a couple sticks.

Hunter is slumped into a seat below me, his eyes open, studying me, clearly uncomprehending and dazed. He is mouthing something, shivering and wet, his arms crossed over his pulled up legs.

I open my mouth to talk when, incredibly, the first thing I hear in the relative quiet of the lifeboat is my father's voice,

## Chapter 5

complaining—not about losing his trawler, no—about his outfit.

“Do you know how much I paid for this suit?” he mutters. “Finest Italian wool. Look at it now, it’s ruined.”

An incredible thought passes through my mind. Is he embarrassed by having to accept my help? Because that’s what it sounds like. I’ve never seen my father embarrassed before, so I can only guess. He lifts his eyes and there is stunned wonder there, a question in them. I know what it is, without him having to say it aloud. He’s wondering why I didn’t leave him, why I saved him when I know that he will make it hell for Hunter and me.

“Thank you,” he says, gun in his lap. Then clears his throat and repeats again, explaining. “Thank you for sticking to our agreement. I admire the fact that you held to your word and did as promised.” But I know by his face that the first thanks was not meant for this. The first one was an important one that slipped off his tongue before he could catch it. He thanked me for not leaving him out there all alone, and I smile, returning the favor.

“You’re welcome.” I lean in with the urge to...I don’t know what. To touch his hand? To hug him? A second later, I’m sorry I did.

A contortion of repugnance crosses my father’s face, wrinkling his forehead. He points his real gun at me, simultaneously groping behind him and yanking a sonic weapon off the wall with his left hand and pointing that at me, too. How considerate, now I know that this was indeed his siren hunting trawler after all, stocked with the necessary supplies to do the job. He even had them stored in the lifeboat.

“Stay back!” my father shrieks.

I freeze, studying his eyes. Rain softly patters on the floor, falling inside through the still open hatch, breaking up the white noise of relative silence.

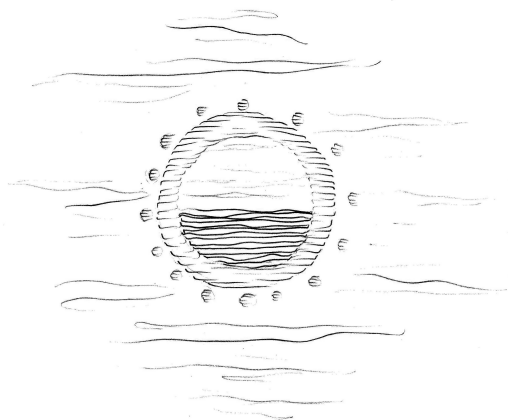
*He’s afraid of me.* After a second or two, I slowly lean back

## Lifeboat

against the smooth wall, feeling my legs dangle over the seat and my feet catching on warm drifts of Hunter's breath below. I suppress my anger by turning it inward, and now it's eating me inside. It's tearing me apart—one part of me loving him, the other hating him, both not being able to peacefully coexist.



## Chapter 6



### Pacific Rim

The worst part of hating your parent is looking in the mirror and seeing that parent in your face. In my case, my father's big blue eyes are the eyes I inherited, so are his pointed nose, angular cheekbones, and lanky limbs on a lithe body. I wish it didn't go farther than looks, but it does. Whether I wanted it or not, I was raised by him; I soaked up his atmosphere, his way of living, his teachings, his mannerisms, his way of talking and walking and even thinking. His fears are my fears, his fury is my fury, and his memories are my memories. We are one, yet we are two, like the vast sky and endless ocean, separated by a horizon line. Therein lies our constant struggle to split apart. Yet we can't, forever bound as father and daughter.

There is mumbling and shuffling below, indicating Hunter's unrest. At least I know he's conscious enough to realize that anything he says might not be to his advantage and he's better off staying quiet.

"Stay where you are and don't move," my father says to me, lowering the sonic weapon to rest on his knees in such a

manner that its conical end is pointing directly at my chest. His upper torso sways slightly to the movement of the waves.

I raise my arms to push myself deeper into the seat.

"I said, don't move!" He raises the gun again, his voice mechanical, his words minimal on purpose. I can tell he's covering up his unrest, but he's not doing a very good job of it. The thought, nevertheless, gives me pleasure. And sadness.

I realize, he's weaker than me, and it's me who must make the first step, to show him that it's possible to heal, possible to extract his pain no matter how encrusted with age. We engage in a staring contest, sizing each other up. I feel like his equal, if not his superior, and I know that he senses it.

"You don't need to threaten me, Papa," I say, looking him directly in the eyes. "I won't hurt you, I promise." I want to add something else, but he jabs the muzzle of the gun in the air with a threatening force. I don't flinch, knowing he won't shoot me.

"Don't you dare talking to me like this!" His breathing comes out in sharp wheezes, blotches of red blooming on his cheeks.

"Look what you did!" Here comes his usual attempt to make me feel guilty. "My trawler. It's gone now! Do you have any idea how much it costs? Do you—" He's visibly shaken. The full extent of his loss must have sunken in just now. "You," he says, jabbing the sonic weapon at me. "You keep destroying my property. You..." At first, he searches for words, and then he proceeds to explain how much it really cost him to get it and have it all equipped, but I'm not listening anymore. What fascinates me is the fact that he's sharing this information, deeming me worthy of knowing it, which he has never done before.

"...over, you hear me? Your diddle-daddle outside of the house is over. Now, listen to me. Here is what will happen. We will go home and you..."

## Chapter 6

I tune in and out of his monologue, taken by his eyes that seem to cast me into an acidic bog of misery and elation at once. He's talking to me, actually taking to me, for real, like an adult to an adult. Does this mean I have proven something that makes me worthy of his bother? His face grimaces, spelling out each word that I don't hear. He lost his jacket and his pink shirt sleeves are carefully rolled up and wet, forming two elaborate rolls around his bulging triceps, smeared with dark lines of machine oil or some other dirt. His fingers curl around the two guns, his knuckles white from strain.

I don't know if it's the rocking of the lifeboat, the soothing patter of the rain combined with the ocean grumble, or the fact that my adrenaline—if sirens have adrenaline—is retreating, but I enter the zone of after-shock. Whichever it is, it's causing me to imagine myself as a swaddled baby, in need of a change. The sticky, moist fisherman suit adds to the illusion.

Three days since my death.

Three days since my birth.

This is my lucid dream, my one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, worth every second, paid for with suicide.

I'm in a crib, in a soothingly swaying crib. Papa is coming to change my clothes, to swaddle me up, to sing me to sleep with a private solo, for me alone.

He keeps talking and moving his arm about, forgetting to aim the weapon at me and pointing it at the boat controls instead. I imagine him lifting me and putting me on the changing table with a soft smile, stroking my face, telling me what a bad girl I am to wet myself from head to toe. The lifeboat bobs on a wave and I hit my head on the low overhang, but I think it's Papa throwing me into air so high that I brush the ceiling with the top of my head. He points with the gun at the buckle straps and then at me, explaining that, siren or not, I need to buckle up. I daydream that

he's about to give me a warm bath, gently shampoo my hair, hug me in a towel, help me with my pajamas, and tuck me in to bed, kissing my forehead good night. Something my mother used to do, but something that he never did, not once, in his life.

"...again, do not open your mouth unless I ask you a question or tell you that you can. Do you understand?"

Does he feel the effect of my voice on him? I wonder and nod, feeling the poison of self-hate seep back into my veins. "Excellent," my father says, lowering both guns to his lap again, glancing down. He hangs his head, knowing he has no choice but to believe me, and I can almost feel his hysterical outburst leave him, yield to a sense of being lost.

At this point, the nausea caused by my father's barely audible soul, and my sudden hunger, overwhelms me. I draw a deep breath and convulse in a series of coughs, each threatening to tear me apart.

Any noise I make irritates Papa to no end and makes him yell at me to be quiet. He yells at me to stop and slaps his knee in frustration, but it doesn't have the typical desired effect on me, nor does he have the conviction. We both follow our routine scenario, the behavior that's been practiced for years and years, but we both know it doesn't work anymore, and it's on its way out.

He's like a little child throwing a fit because his favorite toy has been taken away. I watch with a mild smile playing on my lips, which he notices after a while, falling silent.

"I'm tired of you being noisy. Can't you keep it down? Is it so hard to do? Always fidgeting, always talking, asking questions, scratching, coughing. I can't stand it! Can't you be quiet for a minute? It irritates me, you know that. I need you to stay put, to let me concentrate on making it back to Seattle," he says, and I'm stunned again.

He talks to me like I'm a teenager, as if nothing happened.

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We simply ended up in the middle of the ocean for some odd reason and now we need to make it home. The whole siren hunting thing evaporated.

"I can hum. It'll make us move faster," I say, before I can stop myself.

"Did I give you permission to talk? No." There goes the gun again in my face. "And, no, no humming. I forbid you." He clears his throat. "No humming on this lifeboat, no talking, no singing. I just told you this. Unless I ask you a question or I tell you it's okay to talk, you're not allowed to open your mouth. Nod so that I know you understood." The metallic coldness is back in his voice, he's recovered from his lapse into vulnerability and is no doubt mad at me for being the catalyst.

I nod.

I won't cry, I won't cry, but I almost do.

"Good. Remember this." He shakes the gun at me and falls quiet. It's like he lost his ability to threaten me and express his anger clearly, sounding mechanical and broken. He reaches up, closes the hatch cover, and then leans forward to study the controls.

The waves drone on, licking the lifeboat. Papa pushes a few buttons and shifts a long stick that's got a round black grip on it, and a motor comes to life. He grabs on to the steering wheel with one hand, places his guns on his lap with the other, gives me a meaningful look, and tilts his head down, glancing at Hunter.

"Are you all right, son?" he says.

Considering it safe, I lean a bit more to the right and peer down to see better.

I'm sitting facing the round windows of the upper level of the boat, but Hunter reclines in the seat below in the opposite direction, so I can make out his face in the shadow. It has a dead look about it. He lifts his eyes to both of us as if to merely register

where the voice is coming from, seeing nothing, glazed over and passive.

“Yeah, fine,” he says.

“Good.” The upper sides of Papa’s cheeks pull his muscles into a grimace that’s supposed to look like a smile. He’s back to his nasty self, but not owning it like he usually does, forcing it. I have changed something in him, I think. Yes, I’m positive. And him calling Hunter *son* doesn’t bother me anymore, either.

His attention is on Hunter right now, and on steering the boat. Its engine purrs quietly, and he shifts gears to pick up speed.

“It’s unfortunate. Your failure,” he tells Hunter without looking, turning the steering wheel and occasionally glancing at me. “We will have to try this again. Three times is a charm.”

My heart falls. So he made him do it once before me, and is now planning to remove my voice, even after everything that’s happened. It’s like he possesses some kind of stubbornness that gives him reason to go on no matter what. To hold on to, so he doesn’t fall apart.

I want to pinch myself. Do I really understand my father’s motivations now? What will happen if I simply ask him? I’m still not sure, afraid to inflict pain on Hunter in the process. So I keep my thoughts to myself, looking out the window into the gray expanse of the Pacific.

*Despite everything, I still love you, you know,* I want to tell Papa, studying the low hanging clouds and the brightening day.

My father jams the wheel in a set position and turns sideways to face me. His gray hair glistens in the growing light, his eyes sunken.

“Well, we’re on our way back, which will be another four to five hours, possibly more. I take it you’re both comfortable, because we have a lot to talk about. Let’s start with an explanation of your behavior, Ailen. Please. I’m listening.”

## Chapter 6

This is the father I know and I automatically flare up.

“What? What behavior? You were about to kill me, and you’re asking me for an explanation of *my* behavior?” I say incredulously. This sounds so much like our discussion over his sunken yacht in the siren meadow that I almost want to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.

His fear of me is gone, or suppressed, and the sonic gun is no longer wavering in his hand, its aim is steady. He has this pained expression on his face, then a shudder of disgust, as if digging in a pile of rotten fish with his bare hands. We’re back to ground zero.

“Shhhh. Talk quietly, please, you give me a headache with your voice. Where do you get your ridiculous ideas? It was an operation to be performed for your benefit, which you, as is typical, made into a mess. We will get to that part. Now, answer my question.”

I gawk, unsure of what to say, and glance at Hunter for support. He shrugs, looking at me and through me at the same time.

“Come on, Ailen, it’s just a question,” he says. I think I hear a trace of tears in his voice and such finality that it makes me shudder. Like he’s decided on something serious and doesn’t give a damn anymore. It wasn’t me who sucked the life out of him. It seems as if he’s feeling the impossibility of getting out of this predicament, and that he’s given up.

Without thinking, I turn and look Papa in the face.

“How about *you* answer my questions first? How about you explain to me *your* behavior? Your incessant need to hurt. Where, exactly, does it come from? How about you open up and admit that your mother never loved you, she hurt you, she yanked your trust right out of your little chubby hands, just like you yanked out mine, when I was little. Because you don’t know any

better, because everything has been taken from you by force and this is the only way you know. You don't know how to give, because nobody has ever given you anything, have they?"

His eyes widen; I press on.

"Wait, I don't need you to explain anything, I got it. You simply never grew up. You stopped maturing at that age when grandma hurt you. You're like this little boy forever stuck in his childhood, playing with expensive toys, making rash decisions, enjoying your games, feeling entitled—like a proper asshole. No, wait, it's worse. At least assholes mess up their shit. But not you, oh no. You don't like to do the dirty work. You always hire someone else to do it for you. Am I right? So tell me, how much did it cost you, Papa? Your heart? Your soul? What will it take for you to wake up and admit your pain and stop running away from it? It's what you do. It's what you taught *me* how to do. You taught me to suppress it, and I grew up a coward, just like you, afraid to face it. So how about it? Did I get this right? Why don't *you* explain my behavior to me? I would very much like to hear your perspective." I pause to catch a breath.

As soon as I'm done talking, terror raises its ugly head in my chest. I dared to talk back to him. I watch his face, frozen.

He winces as if in pain, but he never interrupted me. He tightens the grip on his gun, but I think I detect a flash of surprise and a hint of fear.

"Are you finished?" he asks, his face ashen.

"Yeah, for the time being," I say, licking my lips, suddenly afraid I hurt him.

"Alright. Let's go through this again. Here are the rules. I talk, you listen. I ask, you answer. What part of the word *answer* do you not understand, Ailen? Take a lead from Hunter, now that's a smart boy right there."

I glance at my father, no more than a tired, shrunken man,



## Chapter 6

resigned to doing the only thing he knows how to do. Mechanically, he raises the sonic gun and points it at me.

I stare at the muzzle, wondering how many shots I can withstand at will, realizing that even if I can last for a while, Hunter won't last after a single blow. I steal a glance down and lower my arm, inconspicuously, I hope. Hunter shifts forward and grabs it, clasping his fingers tightly around mine. He squeezes three times, as if trying to pass a message. My mind reels, but it doesn't make any sense. Three is my favorite number, that's a start, but there's nothing else I can think of.

Papa's voice drones at the end of the tunnel.

"...again. Remember, noise is akin to chaos. You have to organize your mind, learn to obey. Now, one more time, answer my question." He makes himself say it, stubbornly pressing on.

I drop Hunter's hand and sit straight as a rod. A stream of words pushes its way out of my mouth in a stutter, before I can arrest it or even realize what I'm saying.

"That's it! It's what you did to mom, didn't you. She loved you, so you brainwashed her, to control her. Because you couldn't stand the idea. No, you couldn't *understand* it. Nobody has ever truly loved you before, so you didn't trust her. You thought she had some kind of a hidden agenda to make you lose your mind and then use you and dump you, right? So you decided to protect yourself, to..." I reel with words, stumbling, not knowing what to say first. It makes perfect sense.

"You..." I begin again, staring at him, shaking from sudden understanding. "You pathetic piece of shit, you thought you could—"

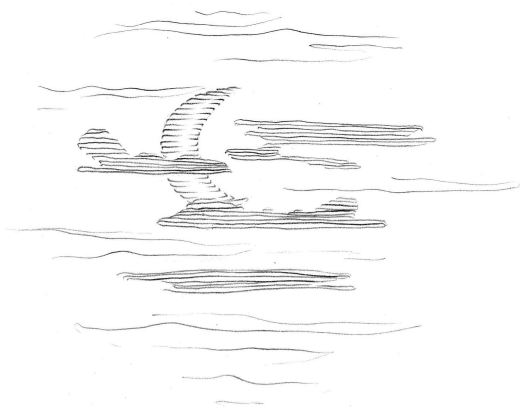
*Bam!*

I get my answer. A sonic shot fires in my belly and I'm

## Pacific Rim

momentarily deaf, sliding down into the reclining seat, clasping its side to prevent myself from falling. The lifeboat rocks wildly side to side and I think we will turn upside down.

## Chapter 7



### Strait of Juan de Fuca

After what seems like an eternity, the boat rights itself, but I'm hardly aware of the world around me, swimming in agony. I made the mistake of exposing my father's pain, in front of Hunter, and I expect he'll never forgive me. But I know that I struck gold, that my hypothesis is true. I saw it in his eyes before he shot me. I saw it in his broken posture, in his trembling hand, in his slack mouth, as if his teeth have been kicked out and his lips sank in, making his cheeks hollow and his eyes dead. It's like he's sorry he's being this way yet he has no choice; it's far too ingrained in his nature to change things, and it might take years and years, decades, and only if someone out there would be willing to put up with his shit, to let him spew it out and revive his soul all the way. That would have to be me. He has no one else left.

I'm not sure I'm up for the job. I watch Papa pull back, his eyes wide with surprise, as if he's conscious for the first time of what he's doing, conscious of hurting his own daughter, of what he just did. Then the mask of this is gone and he's back to steel.

"Quiet!" he yells. "I will use the gun, if I have to."

## Strait of Juan de Fuca

I'm numb all over. My vision is blurry, my hearing echoes, and bitter saliva fills my mouth. My right arm hangs loosely over the side of the seat and I feel Hunter grab it again and squeeze it three times. I wish I understood what he wants and curse my brain, wanting to kick myself. Tears spring from my eyes. I hate it, I hate it.

I hate it!

The slow purring of the motor reminds me that we're still floating somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

"Let us continue. We have a lot to cover, like I said before. I would prefer that you don't interrupt me again, is that understood?" He looks at me.

I manage a nod.

"Good. I'm sure Hunter is eager to hear the details of this particular job, aren't you, son? You want to go home and check on your mom, am I correct? It's been a while, she must be very worried."

My father is a pro at hurting people.

"Yeah, I can't wait," Hunter says through his teeth with a quiet contempt that's barely detectible.

The thought about putting Hunter in danger cools me, and I know that my father knows it too and is using it to his advantage.

"I want you to understand that siren hunters don't make mistakes. Because if they do, they find themselves dead." This is said to Hunter. "I decided...since you two are so inseparable, I'll send you both on a job. Yes, I think it will be a good lesson for you to learn."

Hunter squeezes my hand three times again. I raise my head, nauseated and reeling.

"You what?" I say, but it's so feeble that my father doesn't hear me. He doesn't look at me; he directs his eyes to the seat

## Chapter 7

beneath me.

“Hunter, you’ll be in charge.” Now he shifts his gaze up. “Ailen, you’ll do what he tells you to do. Is that clear?”

“Wait, you—”

“Do you want another taste of this, or shall I try one on your boyfriend this time?” he asks, and whatever trace of his vulnerability was left, is gone.

Hunter squeezes my hand again, three times. What does he mean? Three is my favorite number. Okay...It takes three minutes for an average person to drown. Does he mean for us to drown together or something? No, it doesn’t make any sense.

“You’ll go to the siren’s feeding ground, the one under the Aurora Bridge, remember? They love fresh suicide jumpers, don’t they? I want you to get rid of the two remaining ones, Ligeia and Teles.”

*What about Canosa?* I want to interrupt, but catch the words just in time before they roll off my tongue.

“If, for whatever reason, they’re not there, or if they manage to escape you, you’ll track them down, all the way to their siren meadow or any other hiding place, and you’ll finish them there. You will go as far as you need to go to succeed. If you manage to complete this,” he looks at me, “Ailen, I’ll let you keep your voice. You have my word.”

He didn’t mention Canosa. Canosa was the one who found us, who flipped our boat. They must have made a deal. She must have helped him catch me so that she can remain untouched. She bought herself her freedom.

A pang of pain pierces me, one that’s worse than the physical pain from the blast. She betrayed me.

“You got it,” Hunter says from below. I open my mouth, but he squeezes my hand again, and I close it without saying anything. All right, I’ll play along.

"Ailen? Do I hear your agreement?" My father raises his eyebrows in question.

"Yeah...sure...we'll do it," I slur.

"Excellent." I detect irritation in my father's voice, the sweetest sound in the world, second to Hunter's soul.

"Any questions?" he says.

"What if we fail?" Hunter asks.

"You're asking the wrong question, son. I thought I made myself clear. Siren hunters don't fail. I hope you understand that I'm giving you a second chance. Please, don't prove me wrong."

The message is clear. Do it or die.

Hunter squeezes my hand again, and I think I get it. Three minutes under water. He really does mean it. He told me how he'd die, if he had to—the whole motorcycle racing and crashing thing. I squeeze his hand back three times, to indicate I understood.

"Don't forget, siren hunters don't leave witnesses," my father throws out, while steering the lifeboat wheel and shifting gears. He continues droning on.

"Let me repeat the rules for you, one last time." His voice blends into the ocean rumble, and I let my head hang off the side of the seat to watch Hunter.

He adopts a cheerful expression and nods with enthusiasm. The gleam in his eyes is feverish, akin to someone ready to die who doesn't give a shit anymore. It makes me mad. If he doesn't care, that means he's decided to make a spectacular exit. I want to scream, to grab him and shake him and tell him that this is serious, tell him to wipe that smirk off his face, but I can't. Papa's watching. And I'm afraid to make another move, because I don't want to be rendered into a vegetable, and I don't want Hunter to get hurt any more.

Father finishes his speech with a few broad strokes of his hand and a gallant tilt of his head.

## Chapter 7

“Remember, Ailen.” His eyes rest on me. “If you complete this job, your lover boy will live.” He smiles, the impenetrable mask of indifference back on his face, his body tense.

I don’t know if I can muster enough hate to radiate out of my eyes, afraid to utter a sound, because he points the sonic weapon at me again. Its muzzle imprints in my retina, I stare at it so hard.

I nod and close my eyes.

Weakness takes over me and I let myself drift off into a near slumber, pulling my arm up and rolling to the other side of the seat, like into a cradle, pressing my face into the cool wall and quietly humming, seeking to reconnect with the water for strength, feeling it answer me, speeding us up little by little, so Papa won’t notice, wanting to get out of this enclosure, and...

And then what? I don’t know, I’ll think about it when I get there. Right now I’m tired, so very tired, that for once, I don’t care. I’m *tired* of caring, tired of everything.

Evening light streams through the circular windows, a dusty shade of periwinkle, getting darker by the minute.

It looks like it took us all day to reach the shore and weave our way through the Strait of Juan de Fuca and into the Puget Sound. I suspect it’s a good thing that we’re about to arrive in Seattle under the cover of night, because I’m sure the Harbor Patrol would want to investigate what a lifeboat is doing, floating freely along city canals. We come to a halt, back at our marina, under the Aurora Bridge.

My father kills the engine and I stop humming, holding my breath.

“We made it, faster than I thought,” he says.

I let my breath out. He didn’t notice.

“Alright, I’ll be watching you two. Off you go. Use one of my rowboats, if you need to,” he says into the dark, because at this

point, the inside of the boat is rich with black velvet, punctured by street lights poking their way through the windows.

“W—” Hunter begins from below.

“We’re done talking about this. I want you out. Now,” my father says impatiently.

“Sure,” Hunter mumbles. He cracks his back, and pulls himself up to my level. “Ailen? You all right?”

“Yeah,” I say. My tongue feels wooden, my arms and legs stiff.

“Now!” Papa yells, and that makes me move.

Hunter positions himself between our two seats, grabs the sides of the opening and worms out of the hole, his feet dangling down for a second before they’re gone. He leans in and sticks his arm inside, offering his hand.

I take it, not because I need help, but because it feels good to pretend to be a real girl, so I allow him to assist me with my exit, plopping down across him over the hole in the boat’s top cover, swaying to the lake’s gentle waves, and studying each other in the dark.

I inhale the tumultuous city air and look around. The noise of the busy neighborhood hits me square in the chest. To my left, at eye level, people scurry across the Fremont Bridge as if they’re trying to beat the crawling cars to the other side. To my right, traffic darts across the Aurora Bridge, a good 160 feet over Lake Union, the world’s second most famous location for suicide jumpers. It must be close to eight o’clock, just after sunset on the 10th of September, 2009. Three days after my birthday, if my calculations are right.

I tilt my head up. Dusk spray-paints the air in rivulets of lilac haze, seagulls squawking their hungry calls and darting around at random. The smell of fallen leaves mixes with an impending wetness threatening to gush from the scattered clouds.



## Chapter 7

The air is cold, yet not freezing, pleasantly tasting of early autumn.

I stand and glance to my right again. I jumped off this bridge three days ago, into what? Into this. Into being trapped again, worse than before, with no foreseeable end to my torture.

Hunter takes my hand, and we hop off the boat onto the wooden pier, barely visible in the descending night. We land in the middle and fall over.

"We'll be all right," Hunter whispers into my ear, pulling himself up and giving me his hand.

"Oh, yeah? What the hell was that about, the whole hand squeezing thing?" I whisper back, now standing next to him, my face touching his. An electric current of warmth passes through me and sears me to the spot. I don't want to move, and don't want him to move, hoping to stretch the moment longer.

"Oh...that." He falls silent, and the gap between us widens.

"What, you forgot already? Well, I think I know what you meant, and I don't like it. Not one bit, do you hear me? I think..." I take a breath to tell him what I think and realize that I don't really know, it could've been just a convenient number, just a friendly way of squeezing someone's hand three times.

Hunter looks at me quizzically, waiting.

"You'll have plenty of time to talk later," my father calls from the boat, and we both turn around to listen. His head pops up from the open hatch, a sonic gun in his right hand, pointing at me.

"I forgot to mention one little detail," he continues. "About timing, just so you don't think you have a whole year ahead of you. You don't. In fact," he checks his fancy Panerai watch, "you have till the end of tomorrow. That's when I expect you to come back. Back here, understand?"

I suddenly think about how in the blue sky will he know

that we actually did it?

He must be reading my mind, because he says, "In case you're wondering, my handy little radar here will indicate to me whether or not you've done the job. Amazing technology, isn't it? Now, get lost." He quickly darts his eyes to the sides, I'm sure the real gun is tucked in his pants. He points to a couple of rowboats bobbing on the water, tied to a slip post. I suppose because the sonic gun looks like a miniature loud speaker, he's not afraid to brandish it in public.

I squint into the distance. Rare yachts break up the slow drone of the freeway, and the night darkens fast. I realize my father wouldn't dare shoot Hunter here, in the open. The water steals my mind with its welcoming lull. Nothing prevents us from swimming away, into the open ocean, into freedom. Nothing.

His head disappears into the hatch.

"Come on," Hunter says. He tugs at my hand and steps carefully along the edge of the pier, sliding into one of the rowboats and helping me hop in after him. I let him.

We plop into a familiar position, me on the front bench, Hunter on the rear one, automatically grabbing the oar handles, ready to paddle. We face each other through stretching time, for a second or maybe a whole minute, not talking, just staring, until the sky opens up into a rapid drizzle. Raindrops trace our faces, but neither of us makes an effort to wipe them off. With the last wave of his hand through the window, my father's face disappears into the darkness of the lifeboat; its engine purrs and the whole thing lurches forward. There are no goodbyes, no last minute instructions, not even yelling. We're two puppies dropped into the pond, to survive on our own.

We silently watch the boat maneuver out of the marina and into the canal, drifting at first, then picking up speed and making its way west, toward the Puget Sound.

## Chapter 7

“Strangely enough, I feel sorry for him, you know. There is not much hate in me left, mostly pity. What about you?” I say and wait for some reaction, but Hunter says nothing, pressing his lips together into a straight line.

“You have decided something and you don’t want to tell me,” I say.

Hunter sits motionless, obviously ignoring me. This is so unlike him that at first I stare. I want to make him talk, but then decide to let him be, for once.

“Fine, I understand, I get it,” I sigh and shake my head, attempting to untangle my thoughts into some coherent stream of logic. “This just doesn’t make any sense,” I say quietly.

“What doesn’t?” Hunter speaks up, like the previous part of the conversation didn’t happen.

“Nothing does. None of this...*stuff* that’s happened to me—to us—from the morning of my birthday until now. I mean, I feel lost...and confused.” I glance up.

“And I’m sorry,” I say, hearing the sound of the lifeboat engine trail off into the distance. “Whatever it is, this thing, it’s my fault you got dragged into it. I should’ve never—”

“Ailen, stop it. One way or another, I would’ve ended up doing this. You only accelerated the pace.” Hunter sighs. I feel like he wants to say something else, but he doesn’t, perhaps embarrassed. Instead, he unties the ropes and pushes the rowboat out of the marina, post by post.

“What do you mean, pace? You didn’t plan on becoming a siren hunter all along, did you?” I ask, breathless for a second. I sense an oncoming grip of hunger stirring my hate, fueled by Hunter’s off-key soul blaring its echo at me. My gut is doing it against my will, according to the laws of our imminent ending. One of us will kill another, as long as we stay together. We’d have to avoid each other to survive this incessant need to eradicate, to

tear, to pillage and scream and stomp. My hands curl into fists involuntarily and my heart rate spikes a notch. I keep it down.

"You know what I mean, so stop asking," Hunter quips. There's that teary look again that he's trying to control, and a grimace of irritation lurks somewhere beneath it, too. I wonder how hard it is for him to battle his need to twist off my neck, but I decide this is not the right moment to breach the subject.

"You almost cut out my vocal cords," I throw back, unable to hold it down.

"I'm sorry about that," he says quietly.

I feel bad that I reminded him of his pain and quickly try to change the subject. "Can you at least tell me why you squeezed my hand three times? Back on the boat?" I ask, but I think I already know the answer. "And wh—"

He drops both oars and places his hand over my mouth. It burns with his warmth that's somehow on fire. The rowboat gently bobs and we drift under the blinking street lights, gliding over their reflection in the water.

"It's very simple, okay? I'll say it one time only, 'cause it's very hard for me to say it, so don't ask me to repeat it again." He licks his lips.

"Okay," I say quietly.

He takes both of my hands in his and looks me in the eyes. "If you go, I go. I can't live without you, Ailen, would you get that into that stupid brain of yours?"

I know he's serious, yet I'm afraid to let the real meaning of his words sink in. I launch into the first thing that pops in to my mind, to fill the silence with something, some small talk. "But your mom—"

"Shhhh." He places a finger on my lips, shushing me. "She'll understand. She was in love once, too."

"So, you meant it?" *Do you seriously wanna die?* I want to

## Chapter 7

add, but I don't say it aloud, still clinging to the hope that I'm wrong.

"Yeah, that's right. Only I changed my mind," he says.

I want to scream at him that this is not funny; it's not a good joke, it's mean. But it doesn't feel like it's the right thing to do. What he says feels important, serious, real.

"You changed your mind?" I manage, hoping it's a good thing. "To what?"

"Okay, so if you knew you'd die, in like, ten minutes, what would be the last thing you'd wanna do, right before your death? What?" His face is close, his eyes ablaze with sick fervor.

My heart drops. It's my turn to stare and not answer, holding myself still, wanting to leap at him, bury my nose in his scent, stretch him all around me like a blanket, curl up inside and never come out, living on his aroma of pine and the off-key melody of his burned soul.

"Exactly. So forget about the motorcycle. Who cares about that; it's just a toy, a bunch of metal parts on wheels." He presses his hands on my face. It's already dark, but an even darker shadow from the bridge covers us completely as we pass along, slowly drifting.

"When we were in the lifeboat, it crossed my mind—no, earlier, in the lab, when I couldn't cut you—I'm...I don't expect you'll ever forgive me, and I'm...so very sorry I didn't fight your dad harder, I tried."

He pauses.

I briefly shake my head, indicating that it's okay, I don't mind, wanting him to continue.

"Anyway, I thought that I might not come out of this alive, and neither would you. So I thought...before it's too late, I...um..." He licks his lips again, and I can tell he's very nervous.

## **Strait of Juan de Fuca**

“I want you.” He spits it out in one slur, kind of like *awantoo*. So it takes me a second to understand what he said.

My mouth slowly hangs open.

## Chapter 8



### Fremont Bridge

The rowboat bumps its nose into the latticework of the low wooden fence that runs along the bank underneath the Fremont Bridge. The bridge itself looms about thirty feet above us, groaning and rumbling each time a car passes overhead, tickling me with a human soul concerto. A cold breeze ruffles my hair. I barely register any of this, enthralled by the idea of what Hunter said, hearing the blood rush to his cheeks, and feeling his eyes burn me with light in the velvety darkness. My mouth is dry. First, the impossibility of his proposition renders me speechless, then it turns into a vivid image of the *possibility* of it actually happening and my eyes widen to the rapid beating of my betraying heart. A myriad of memories of awkward attempts at making out while stoned stir my chilled muscles.

“If I could choose how to die, I’d choose to die from loving you. From...feeling your skin under my fingers. Like this.” He places his hands on my shoulders, then changes his mind and pushes both sides of the clumsy, oversized fisherman jacket apart, tracing the lines of my collar bones underneath; and a different

## Fremont Bridge

type of hunger sears me from neck to knees.

"Of course you want me, I'm a siren, right?" I swallow. "That's how it's supposed to be. It simply means that the charm is working, or the magic, of whatever you wanna call it." My voice comes out in the feeble shaking manner of a schoolgirl who's been called to the principal's office.

"No, no, no, you're missing the point. It's not like that." He takes his hands off my neck and holds my face, cupping it.

"I know it's hard for you to believe, and I understand why, but please, for the umpteenth time, *please* believe me when I say this. I don't care what shape you're in. You're Ailen to me, always have been, always will be. *Always*. I just want to feel you, all the way, at least once, before I die. Is that so hard to believe? Don't you want the same?" His voice catches at the end, his head tilted to one side, childlike and earnest.

"Me?" I suppress the urge to dive and hide under the boat. "You really want me, *really*?" I whisper, beginning to shake like a sick person shakes from a high fever.

"Yes, *you*, silly. Really." He looks at me with those blue eyes of his, and I lose it.

A catastrophic yearning to be held, to be loved, boils over and sweeps away my hatred, anger, anxiety, guilt, all in one smooth swipe, sending them up into the sky in an invisible stream, as if the lid held over my heart flew open. I tip forward and place my lips on his in answer.

Slowly, like a man who's dreaming, he takes me into his arms. Then he's kissing me. Wind gusts throw raindrops under the bridge and onto my face, but I hardly feel them. And before descending into an ache of falling that's sweet and final for both of us, the last feeling I register of this world is the peculiar sensation of being watched.

I ignore it.



## Chapter 8

Nothing matters right now. Only this closeness.

With Hunter's help, I shed the sticky, unpleasant jacket, then the pants, and then my logic and sanity, all together. I throw them on the bottom, as I try not to tear Hunter's hoodie off, wanting to feel the warmth of his energy.

"You want to do it right here, right now?" The last of my doubts escapes when we break the kiss to take a breath, Hunter wiggling out of his pants, goose bumps springing up on his skin and making him shiver.

"Yes, right here, right now," he says, and chucks his sneakers.

"Okay," I say, and then I can say no more, because we tumble in a bind between the boat's benches, our legs twisting on top of each other in an awkward dance of finding a comfortable position. The front bench begins cutting into my neck under Hunter's weight, so I twist my head, breaking the kiss, muttering, "Sorry, just a second."

I turn around and punch my fist into its wooden boards, breaking them clean in the middle with a crack that echoes down from the belly of the bridge. I twist back and ask, "Can you move out of my way for a sec?" Sitting up, I break the back bench as well, tearing at the remaining pieces with a fervor akin to one trying to break out of a coffin after being buried alive. Sodden wood creaks under my fingers, but it doesn't puncture my skin—I'm too tough for it.

"Whoah!" Hunter exclaims. "I like it. Do you always break stuff when—"

"Shut up!" I slap him, lightly. He grins, openly ogling me. We both grin like lunatics, naked, sitting in a boat in the middle of a lake canal, risking being discovered at any moment.

I gather the remaining wood chips and throw them overboard, clearing out as much space as I can, quickly, in the heat

## Fremont Bridge

of rushing blood, not wanting Hunter to get any splinters or to lose the magic of the moment, like it's happened before. I'm determined for this to go all the way, before shame grips me in its paralyzing bind.

"There, that's better," I say. "One more thing."

Hunter throws his arms up with a sigh. "What now?"

I ignore him and pick up the fisherman's jacket from the bottom, tear off a long strip of the resin fabric with my teeth, and hum to move the boat closer to the fence, because we drifted away a few yards. I tie the strip loosely, pass it through the ring on the very tip of the bow and around a slimy wooden post, fighting off Hunter's hands groping me from behind, yet secretly liking it. "Just let me finish!"

"I'm sorry, I can't help it," he whispers.

As soon as I'm done tying the knot, he turns me around.

"Let's spread the jacket on the bottom so—"

"Fuck it," he says, falling over me, pinning me to the bottom of the boat. Its rows of ridges bite into my back and butt but I'm too feverish to care. Without another word, we descend into a tangled mass of kisses, sighs, and awkward searching that quickly grows into deliberate holds.

A few seconds go by and I feel so good in his embrace that I can't accept it and simply relax. It's too perfect to be true. My mouth betrays me, as always.

"Dude, you're so warm," I say, when Hunter's face leaves mine, tucking into the fold between my neck and shoulder. I guess I'm unable to stifle the reflex to talk-talk-talk, anything to shoo away my clumsiness.

"I was gonna say the same thing," he says from below.

"Me? What—"

"Wrong choice of words. In the opposite way. You're so *cool* to the touch, I like it."

## Chapter 8

"You're weird," I whisper, willing the last of my resistance to go.

"So are you. Now, will you shut up already?"

He buries his face in my stomach and I let my mind go.

Waves sway the boat gently, creating a steady rhythm, letting me float in it, beat in unison, feel alive, feel *together*. This is the very thing parents hope to prevent their teenagers from doing, and I get why. Without alcohol, without weed or acid or any other kind of bravery enhancer, without it all, lovemaking itself is like a drug—it gets you so high, gets you obsessed, and you can't stop doing it. But why can't we be addicted to it? Why is it looked so down upon, as something dirty, something forbidden, or to be ashamed of?

It feels like love. What's so bad with being addicted to love? It *is* love; it's body poetry.

I feel it fully for the first time, without being dizzy or high or drunk, and I grow divine.

If I could part into a million fingers, only to entwine with Hunter in a million possible ways, I would. If I could turn into wind, to penetrate our connectedness in every gap, to fill it with my hushed exhales, I'd do it in a heartbeat. If I could trail his kisses to draw a map of our love, I'd stare at it every day until I'd go blind. Even then, I'd still stare, tracing the paths with my fingers, immobile, dwelling on the memory of our final doom, beautiful and humid, filling every space inside my dead heart with life, with love, with music so heavenly, it has no name. Only an exotic sound—outlandish in its timbre—that explodes in your ears with a splendor of pleasure beyond which immortality fades into nothing.

"I love you," Hunter whispers in my ear. "It was great. It was fucking awesome."

"I love you, too. Yeah...it was," I whisper back, barely

## Fremont Bridge

conscious of both our bodies collapsed against each other, slick with Hunter's sweat and a sheen of salty moisture on my skin. We're panting into each other's hair, tired.

The low moon shines on us with her watchful eye through a break in the clouds, creeping to the edge of the bridge's shadow where we hide.

Shivering, we help each other get dressed. I stick Hunter's head into his hoodie and help him wiggle in since his fingers fail to find the neck opening. He hugs himself, pulling up his knees to his chest. I secure the fisherman pants around my waist and sling over the cold, unbending jacket before mirroring his position.

We sit across from each other, dazed.

"I can't believe we actually did it. It's like, unreal," I say, trying to separate myself from the dizziness, blinking at the reflections on the water to make sure they're there.

"No, it's something special, something better than smoking weed. We just had the best joint ever, Ailen, and it's called *making love*." Hunter reels with this smug satisfaction that only a horny teenager can have after waiting months for a special moment. He pronounces it *makiing loooove*, in his typical theatrical manner, and grins.

"Did we just have sex, like, right here, on the boat?" I say, still unable to believe it.

"Thee misses the correct expression, my dearest. It is but called *making love*. In the darkness of the night, under the bridge, to the gleeful eye of the moon itself, spying on us like a barren bitch who never saw two people shagging," he says in the low baritone of a stage performer, pointing at the moon.

"Stop it! Stop talking like this. Or I'll slap you." I scowl, but I know Hunter recognizes it as fake. In fact, I loved the whole experience but am scared to openly admit it.

"Go ahead, that'll make me horny again." I can see his grin

## Chapter 8

in the darkness, wide and crooked, his teeth shining white and reflecting the faint moonlight.

“Though I admit, you felt kinda cold, you know, as compared to the other times. Must be a siren thing and all, dead body. So I get it. Man, does that make me a necrophiliac?” he says.

“What? Fuck you!” I push him in the chest.

“Gladly. Here, let me get myself worked up again, okay? Just a second.” He rubs his hands for warmth, then his belly and sides, stomps his feet and shakes the boat, with a genuine concentration and the small sounds of an athlete warming up for a marathon.

“Uh-uh-uh. Almost there, thank you for your patience.” He looks so comical that I laugh.

“Stop it! You’re making my stomach hurt,” I say, forgetting to be quiet. My voice rolls under the bridge, echoing in a series of bells, reverberating through the night around us. Hunter’s burned soul melody envelops me with a familiar warmth, off-key but desirable. For a few minutes, I stop caring about what will happen. Sitting here together, on the boat, makes me happy. I feel at home. Hunter’s voice, his very presence, tunes out other noises—the whizzing of late cars, the discord of human unrest as it presses from the land, unoriginal, fragmented, stale, turning and twisting in its insomnia.

I tilt my head and look at the moon. Its light falls on the water in a silvery film, a path with broken dancing edges. A few rain droplets hit its surface and make it quiver. It’s beautiful.

I think back to looking down at this very spot from the Aurora Bridge, aching inside, feeling the desire to end my life. Feeling overwhelmed by it, to the point of not being able to stand living another minute, wanting to go underwater and never surface. To be rid of this mind and body that I hate so much; to be rid of myself.

## Fremont Bridge

"Hunter?"

"Huh? Hang on, I'm not ready yet..." he starts. When he sees my face, his expression turns somber.

"What is it? What's wrong?" He takes my hand. I let him hold it, clutching his fingers.

"Do you ever feel like you're faking it?" I say, looking at the point where the silver road of the moon reflection ends on the horizon, vanishing into the narrow corridor of the canal.

"Faking what?"

"You know, life. Like you're pretending to live just to get by. To show everyone that you can, but really you don't give a damn. Really, you don't care."

"Is that how you felt? When, you know..." He takes my other hand into his, cradling both of them, and the contrast in our body temperature makes me want to cry all over again.

"What's one reason not to die?" I say quietly. "I remember skipping stones with you into this lake. I was so happy then. What happened to me, Hunter? When did I change? When I was ten, twelve, fifteen? When?" A wave of tears burns behind my eyes, I blink to chase them away.

"You mean, when you decided to turn it off, 'cause it hurt so bad it was easier to survive this way?" he asks.

A light breeze sways our boat. The night is peaceful and quiet, broken up only by an occasional car passing over our heads and the masts of moored boats clinging together in a metallic sounding jingle.

"I wish I knew how it came to this. Look at me," I say and nod toward my body. "I'm a dirty plastic bag of a person who got stuck in a puddle, torn. A plastic bag without a bottom because it fell out, and without handles because they both broke. Remember that dancing plastic bag in *American Beauty*? The movie?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

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"It's like that, only afterward, it's filled with too much water and stomped on in the dirt." I look at my hands held in his.

"That's not true." Hunter reaches for my face, but I turn away.

"Yes, it is. I couldn't hold that weight anymore, that's why. I turned empty, dry. Like an abandoned well. You lean over and look inside, and you know there must be water there, deep down. You throw a rock, but you never hear a splash. Because it's all gone. It's barren."

I take one of my hands out of Hunter's hold and dip it into the lake, to feel it, to connect.

"I can fill you in. I just did, didn't I?" Hunter says and falls silent, perhaps realizing that this is the wrong moment to be funny.

I pretend I don't hear.

"Sorry, I'm sorry. Bad joke. Stupid." He passes a hand through his hair. "What do you want me to do? How can I help?"

"I wish we could just drop it all and swim away. Into the open ocean, you know? I wish I could swim away from myself, but I can't," I say, twirling my hand.

The boat careens left and right in the tiniest waves, soothing. Street lights flicker on and off on the surface of the lake. Stars sprinkle the sky.

"Promise me something?" Hunter says.

"What?"

He palms my face, darkness reflecting around his pupils.

"Promise me that, right after what I will tell you, after you hear what I have to say, you won't argue with me, okay?" He lets out a big exhale and waits.

"I promise," I say, holding my breath.

It takes another second for Hunter to start talking again, and he says it quietly, but firmly. "When you go, I go."

## Fremont Bridge

“What? So you did mean it for real. Hunter, you can’t! What about your mom?” I ask.

“Please. I asked you not to argue.” He makes an impatient face.

“But—” I begin.

He pulls me closer. Our noses touch—mine cold, his warm. Then our lips. Then our tongues. Moonlight splatters our faces joined in a bizarre moment of dare, a dare to those who don’t believe in love anymore. I lose myself in it.

A moment later, a fraction of a thought passes through my mind, wondering how come the moon is shining on top of us, we’re supposed to be in the shadow of the bridge. It feels like *déjà vu*, like the kiss that we exchanged in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, just before the trawler got on top of us, before Canosa tipped over our boat. I ignored it back then too, I...wait, Canosa! Where is she now? A sinking feeling freezes me. The strap of orange material I tore from the fisherman’s jacket must have failed, got torn, or maybe...

The boat revolves around, first slowly, then picking up speed, tracing a full circle. That nagging feeling of being watched returns full force, and I break the kiss.

“Hunter!” I grab his hand, warning him.

“Wh—” he begins and stops talking.

With a quiet hum and glistening eyes, three sirens circle the boat, the remaining ones we’re supposed to hunt down and kill. Naturally, no need for that now, since they found us themselves—Teles, Ligeia, and, of course, Canosa, my big sister. She smiles broadly and gives me an encouraging nod.

“Continue. Please, continue, we didn’t mean to interrupt,” her voice jingles merrily. “It’s rather entertaining. Wet and sloppy,

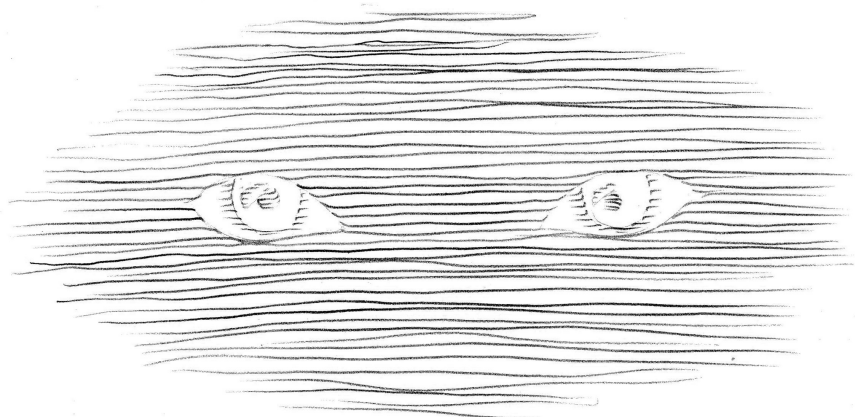


## Chapter 8

but in the absence of any other variety, I'll take it. *We'll* take it. Right, girls?" she says.

Ligeia and Teles giggle their approval.

## Chapter 9



### Fremont Canal

It must be a beautiful sight if observed from the bridge. Dark water, strips of zigzagging light reflections, a trio of white-maned girls performing a synchronized swimming routine, stretching out their arms in elaborate moves, accompanied by their mesmerizing humming and advanced water skills, turning the boat in a perfect circle; two startled teenagers gawking at them, gripping the edges of the boat like mad. Luckily, I don't hear a single soul, not on the bridge, and not on either shore. I flick my eyes to Hunter in panic, as if asking, *What do we do now? We haven't even discussed how we're going to catch them, or with what—nothing!* He winks at me, drops his head into a nod, as if saying, *It's okay, I got it, just follow my lead.*

"Hey girls. Long time no see," he says, squeezing my hand three times. "A bit too cold to go skinny dipping at night in September, don't you think? I like your hair, though, as always. Your hair looks awesome."

They giggle, Canosa falling silent first as she studies me from under her long, curly eyelashes, her face stern. Ligeia and

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Teles continue snickering, pointing at Hunter and mouthing something to each other.

Our party of five breaks into two staring contests.

There is me and Canosa; we size each other up quietly, without words. And then there is Hunter with Teles and Ligeia, both devouring him openly with their hungry gawks, lustily smiling and shaking their hair in that attention-demanding manner.

“Hunter Crosby, where have you been? We missed you. Oh, we missed you so much!” Ligeia says, tilting her head to the side causing her wet locks to roll off her bare shoulders. No doubt, a practiced movement.

“Shhh! Shut up, remember what Canosa said,” Teles hisses into her ear, clasp the edge of the boat.

“So? What I say is none of your business, so get off me. Get your fingers off me! You’re annoying me,” Ligeia says. They remind me of two typical high school girls from the mean girl clique. It’s like I’m reliving my high school nightmare, again.

“What’s up, Teles?” Hunter says.

“Oh, nothing, nothing in particular,” she says, and lowers her head as if she’s blushing.

They engage in meaningless banter, Hunter clearly trying to stave them off while thinking about what to do next.

Meanwhile, Canosa is quiet. Her stare is so demanding I can feel it on my skin. Her hair glistens in the moon light, wet and braided with lust. I guess I expected something, anything, an acknowledgement about what she did; a nod that said she’s sorry. There is none of that, only a self-indulgent gaze and egoistic demeanor. Like I owe her something, like it’s my fault, like somehow I have wronged her and not the other way around.

“I’m waiting,” she finally says.

I stare back. “Waiting for what?”

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“For an apology,” she balks, like it was the most obvious thing in the world and I have the misfortune to miss it.

All caution evaporates from my mind in one instant.

“Really? An apology. You’re asking for an apology? You stinking traitor,” I say, my heart rate rapidly rising.

Hunter steps on my bare foot, but it’s too late. The words escape me at an alarming rate.

“How can you. All this talk about siren family, what we do for each other, all this bullshit you’ve been feeding me. For what? To serve your own purposes. You even turned me into a siren for your sick little game with my father. I’m no more than a pawn to you, and as soon as you’re done with me, you’ll dispose of me.” I catch a breath.

“Well, fuck you! You’re a traitor and a liar. You made a deal with my father and sold me out. Sold both of us out. Me and Hunter. And you weren’t *ever* going to show me where my mom is, were you? In fact, I’m not even sure you were here when she jumped. It was just another lie, to get me going, to make me do stuff for you, wasn’t it?” Hunter stomps on my foot again, and I fall quiet for a moment, waiting.

Canosa twirls a lock of hair around her finger, an amused expression on her face.

“Answer me!” I demand.

She ignores me, using the trick my father pulls all the time. She swims around the boat to the back of it, switching places with Teles and Ligeia, who have fallen quiet after they exhausted their limited vocabulary.

“Hunter Crosby, still holding on to your catch, I see.” She nods in my direction. “Nice one, I must say.”

Hunter faces her.

“I don’t know about that. She’s a slippery little thing. Kind of hard to hold on to,” he says with a significant glance. I don’t

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know if he means it as a compliment or another joke, not sure how to react.

“Splendid, ain’t she? How long has it been now, three days? Not bad, not bad at all. Thank you for the show, it was mesmerizing to watch. Heartbreaking, in fact. My girls here almost gagged with desire,” Canosa finishes, and licks her lips.

Ligeia and Teles nod energetically.

“I’m glad you liked it,” Hunter says.

“Wait...” I begin, and fall quiet, afraid of putting Hunter into jeopardy somehow.

They all turn and look at me, Hunter included. There is an awkward pause when we all size each other up again, against the background of the full night and a couple of cars making their way across the bridge at this hour.

“What is it?” Canosa asks.

“I’m hungry.” Ligeia suddenly sticks out her lower lip in a gesture of an upset toddler who’s about to throw a fit. “Are you?” she asks Teles, grabbing her hand and drifting to the back of the boat, where Hunter sits and my big sister siren floats.

“Canosa, can we please eat him now?” Teles says, the perfect side-kick, so gullible I want to throw up; her cute chubby face has adopted a grimace of childish pleading. “We’ve been good like you asked, and it’s been a while now, and he sounds so yummy!” She looks back at Hunter with carnal lust, grinding her teeth, transforming from a cute maiden into a fierce fiend at the onset of her hideous, hungry smile.

“His soul is burned down.” Canosa promptly fists Teles forehead. “Don’t you remember what I told you? To keep your mouth shut at all times?”

Teles mumbles something in response, and I see a faint smile play on Ligeia’s lips. It must have been the desired effect she was looking for, moving up a rung in her boss’s favor.

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I shake my head. I keep getting distracted from the reality of our predicament. We have no chance of escape, no weapons to fight the sirens with. They caught us at a vulnerable moment. We were idiotic enough to forget to even ask Papa for sonic guns, I mean, how stupid is that?

The story repeats itself, it's like when I found Hunter at the siren meadow all over again, only worse, because I feel Canosa does not intend to let us go this time, and Papa won't suddenly show up to interrupt her. They must have been planning this all along, that's why he left in such a hurry. They can't stand being close to each other, hating their torture. I'm sure I will feel the same way very soon; in fact, I should be feeling it now, since me and Hunter have been together for a while—for the whole previous day and an entire night.

I freeze for a moment, searching my body's sensations, waiting for this murderous urge to sweep me away. A feeling of wrongness creeps into the air, a feeling of being very close to death, close like never before, as if being watched by death itself.

"Enough diddle daddle," Canosa proclaims, and all three sirens clasp the edges of the boat, Canosa behind me and Ligeia and Teles to either side of Hunter. "Do it." There is metallic ferocity to her voice, a command.

Whatever she means by *it*, is not good. If she wants to revive Hunter's soul so that she or another siren could kill him, it's not an easy task. And as far as I understand, a siren hunter can't simply die at the hands of a siren, if she were, for example, to try to strangle him. Still, whatever it is she's planned, it feels like the end, for both of us. My spine turns to ice. In a split second, I weigh my options. I could scream and rouse the entire lake, but that would send Hunter into the water where the sirens would get him. I could scream very loudly without engaging the water, hoping somebody would call the cops. And then what? By the

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time they come, it will be too late. I could attack the sirens. Three against one? I don't stand a chance. Or, I could simply do what I've always wanted to do...let go of the fear. Let go of this miserable life, stay together with Hunter in the face of death, until the very end. The chase will never cease; I'll never have peace, no matter where I go.

I search myself, my mind, my heart. Hunter's words ring clearly in my head, *If you knew you'd die, in like, ten minutes, what would be the last thing you'd wanna do, right before your death?*

I look Hunter in the eyes.

"I'd want to be together with you," I say.

He passes a shiver and says, "Me too." Looking me in the eyes, he takes both of my hands and squeezes them three times.

"See, I told you it would happen. I'm glad we had the time of our lives. This is the perfect moment, I think. Are you ready?"

The sirens begin to hum, in a barely audible baritone at first.

My heart, already down to my knees, drops further to where I can't feel it at all.

"You sure you wanna to do this?" I ask.

"Yeah. The first part is done, isn't it? Like I said, perfect timing." He smiles with the finality of someone who knows death is near but refuses to give in to its terror. His hair moves in the light breeze.

The sirens' humming unnerves me, because they closed their eyes, in concentration, but nothing is happening.

"We don't really have a choice, do we?" I ask.

"Yes, we do. We're making it right now," he says.

"You made up your mind a while ago, didn't you?"

"Yeah, you got that right, turkey." He grins, but underneath his bravado he's trembling like a leaf in the wind.

I study him, his arching eye brows, the cocky grin that

splits his face in two, in the manner that I love so much, and his hair bunched up over his forehead, barely visible in the darkness. I realize I didn't know he wanted to kill himself too, all this time, but it makes sense, that's why we're such close friends. That's why he was the only one who got me, understood my playing with death, my daring, my willingness to risk life and not caring much for it.

I smile. It's been a while since he's called me "turkey" or "brat," and I take it that all of our past quarrels are forgotten.

I'm ready to die.

I expect terror, or resistance, or something, but there is nothing. I'm empty, and the decision comes easily, like relief after a long, bumpy ride. I must be at the point of complete exhaustion, from myself, my own mood swings, and my constant decision doubting—the perpetual up and down of balancing on the precipice between life and death.

It's too much, and I want out.

"Okay, then. Let's do it." I squeeze his hands back three times and relive the moment before I jumped, the few seconds of utter despair that pushed me over the edge; only now, we're doing it together. From the corner of my eye, I watch the sirens drifting, holding on to the boat and twirling it around slowly.

"Go ahead, girls," I say calmly. "Whatever it is you're going to do, we're ready."

For a moment, Canosa opens her eyes and breaks her humming.

"Ailen Bright, I'm amazed. What's wrong with you, silly girl? You're giving in just like that? Without putting up a fight? What a pity," she mocks, and I think perhaps she expected resistance and it was part of the plan.

"All right, let's see what you do when your boyfriend here calls for help. Ligeia, he's all yours. Teles, get her," she cackles,



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dropping her poison into the silence.

I notice now that we're covered by a thick bowl of fog, our rowboat sitting underneath it. That's what they were weaving with their humming, creating an invisible pocket to outside eyes.

Ligeia breaks her humming, tilts her head to the sky, and begins to sing. The air rings with her high pitch, amplified by the emptiness over the lake, reaching high, all the way to the top layer of the fog, then twists in a reverse vortex and heads directly toward the boat, dropping its force onto Hunter; his eyes hazy with her song, a thin trickle of smoke streaming from his mouth in ribbons.

Mesmerized, I focus on his eyes, arrested by the beauty of the pause before the storm, when everything's standing still, about to erupt.

"She's reigniting your soul! Without looking you in the eyes! How the h—" I begin to yell, noticing with my peripheral vision that Teles is swimming closer to me, throwing jealous glances at Ligeia; then her fingers wrap around my neck, cutting off my hysterical speech and my attempt to lunge at Hunter and rouse him from Ligeia's spell—my promise to die together forgotten. I want to save him; I don't want to see him perish. No! I gag and rain my fists behind me, on Teles' head. She doesn't flinch and only laughs, rolling out a mad cackle. I thrash around, rocking the boat, but she squeezes my fingers tighter and I go slack.

Ligeia's song intensifies, droning in my ears. Hunter's soul-smoke strings out of him, a rainbow gone wrong and stripped of all color except a dull white. It smolders, it's coming alive again.

"How do you like it, sister? I say it's a *fair* price to pay for calling me a fat slab over the years, what do *you* say? Is my hold too weak? I can make it tighter, would you like me to?" she whispers into my ear, so unlike her previous childish self. She clamps her fingers to the point where I think my head will explode from the blood held in it.

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This is the true nature of a siren—this lunatic duality—toddler-like and capricious on one side, sinister and unforgiving on another. How patient they must have been, waiting to deliver their revenge on me. How many years it must've taken to make sure they torture me first, before administering their fatal blow.

*You forgot something, girls. You forgot that I'm a siren, too. I'm of your own making, and I haven't even gotten close to showing off my malevolent side—haven't dared to let it take hold of me fully. Would you like me to? I can, you know.*

I attempt to claw at Teles with my nails, lift my legs to kick her, but without oxygen, my muscles don't want to move.

At last, I cease resisting, storing my remaining energy, feeling that I'll need it to feed a growing unrest deep inside my gut, a tiny bud of fury that badly wants to bloom.

"Good job. Take it like a martyr. Now *this* is what I call fair," Teles whispers into my ear.

All I can do is stare at Hunter, unable to discern if it's the echo of his soul that's pouring out of his mouth, or the surrounding fog pouring in. Or has his actual soul been revived and is now being devoured by Ligeia? In either case, whatever is happening to him, it's making him deathly pale.

I glance up, but there is nothing there except a thick, milky whiteness. The night is gone. Maybe there are places for death, places that attract people to them like a magnet. Maybe this is one of them. It was my mother's place of death, and hundreds before her. This is our place of death, and we're a speck of life about to be swallowed.

Ligeia's song makes waves. The boat tilts precariously, then flops back upright and tips to the other side. Hunter's face drains color rapidly as more of the thick, coiling substance oozes from between his lips, lilac and bloodless.

My body goes numb. I feel the last of my resistance leave

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me. Even my attempts at breathing stop, my diaphragm relaxes. Perhaps responding to this, something passes between us all, me, Hunter, and the sirens—a question so dark that it has only one answer.

Down, down, down.

*Mom, if you hear me, if you're over there somewhere, I'm coming,* I say inside my head, before Teles cuts so deeply into my neck that I feel like my head will break off and fall off my shoulders. My hands feel cold and clammy, so do my feet, so does my heart. I'm giving in to this willingly.

Drowning in the bathtub water wasn't enough. I want to drown in the dead waters of the Styx, the river that Greeks believed connected Earth and Underworld, the great marsh of human misery on the way to extinction. I want to be dragged into the labyrinth of muddy streams, accompanied by the ever-present Siren of Canosa, carrying a zither, her right arm over her head in a moaning sign, her left on my shoulder, guiding me on my after-life journey.

The boat tilts further and begins sliding down a whirlpool like a coin circling down a spiral wishing well. I wished for something blue on my birthday and I got it, didn't I? This must be something else though, because this water is not even blue; it's black, the color of burned weed, a bad trip from a drug that's worse than teenage love. A trip with only one possible destination: death.

It doesn't come to claim me, however.

A car honks somewhere above in the fog.

Someone gasps on the shore, a human soul.

Teles lets go of me, the imprint of her fingers still etched into my skin.

Mad splashing trails around the boat, and then Ligeia's song abruptly sputters out, ending on a high-pitched cry.

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Canosa yells, “Teles, no! Stop it! Get back to her! I said, *stop it! Now!*”

I nearly fall out of the boat from dizziness, gasping for air, gulping it in huge swigs, stretching my lungs, holding on to the edges of the boat for balance, digging into its gullets with my fingers.

The whirlpool stops. The boat spins one more time from inertia and eases out. The fog breaks up into dirty rags, letting in the night, until it gets completely blown away by a light breeze. The velvet darkness of the sky consumes us. Still blinded by the whiteness of the fog, I can't see what's happening, but from the shouts and struggling noises, I guess that Teles decided to have Hunter for herself and attacked Ligeia. It's the only plausible thing that could've occurred. It means that she successfully revived his soul and proceeded to try to eat it.

The air pierces with girl-fight calls. I was right.

“You stupid cow!” Ligeia whines. “I almost had him. Look what you did! You're such an idiot; I would've left you half! Get off me, Canosa told you, did you hear her? Get off me!”

I tense, a bud of fury poking at my ribs, gingerly, eager to get out. Canosa is yelling and fighting with both sirens. Teles hisses at her, and then lashes into a long string of swear words. Light penetrates the darkness and I see Hunter's soul slam back into him from Ligeia's lips as Teles puts her in a headlock and pulls her underwater. Hunter slides to the bottom of the boat, eyes closed, clothes sodden, and clinging to his exhausted frame with his legs bent and twisted at an unnatural angle.

A strong feeling paralyzes me for a second. Forget about deadly whirlpools, they're nothing compared to shame. Shame floods me with a staggering force. Shame for thinking only about myself and pretending I care. Shame for being so selfish, for pulling Hunter into this and agreeing to double-suicide, without

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asking him for a valid reason, without trying to convince him otherwise, simply going along with it.

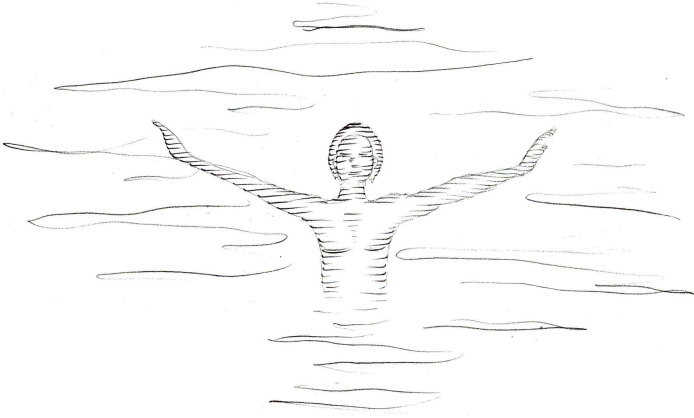
*Is this what you call love?* I mock myself, wanting to slap myself in the face. *What kind of love is this? Amazing job, Ailen, simply amazing.*

But it's not too late. No, I can fix it.

No matter what it costs me, even if I have to die in the process, I will pull him out of this, alive. The sinister tickle itches in my chest, and I prepare to let it out.

It's show time.

## Chapter 10



### Burke-Gilman Trail

A curtain of ludicrous compulsion obscures my vision. I linger, brewing it, channeling it from a simple, uncontrollable teenage outburst to a focused rage. If I strike, I'll strike with precision this time, no more splayed efforts with overwhelmed emotions, uprooted lakes, or capsized boats. Not this time. I'll be the siren I was meant to be: ruthless, marauding, and fatal. I roll over onto all fours, dig my toes into the protruding ridges on the boat's floor, and slowly rise, stretching out both arms for balance.

I steady myself and observe the scene. Canosa, her back to me, shoos the sirens toward the boat. They're a few feet away, eyes cast down, possibly reconciled with their roles and ready to finish us as planned. Teles throws murderous side glances at Ligeia, and Ligeia sucks on her thumb, hurt in her eyes. Canosa slaps them both on the cheeks, again and again. They bear it in silence, only sniffing occasionally. The entire act looks ridiculous, like an unstable babysitter is trying to school two little girls thrust into her care by equally clueless parents. The only way to discipline she knows is how to hit and yell, like *that's* going to work. What it

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does is keeps them busy, and none of them notice me standing up.

We seem to have drifted away from the Fremont Bridge and are now closer to the Aurora Bridge. The Burke-Gilman Trail is about a hundred feet to our left, its street lights puncturing the dark. Above us, a car honks. A person shouts. Somebody has stopped and is looking down at the entire commotion, shining a flashlight that causes me to squint when it hits my eyes. To that person, we must look like glowing ghosts, one standing in the boat and three floating next to it, our fluorescent halos shining in the night.

Quarrel resolved, all three sirens turn around and gape, seeing me standing.

I spread my legs wide, careful not to step on Hunter, and squat into my best warrior stance, signifying victory.

"I'm ready to fight, bitches, come and get me," I say, sensing a gleeful authority in my voice and growing bolder.

"There she is," Canosa says, slowly swimming closer. "I was wondering how long it would take you to make a move. It's hard to resist, isn't it? Hard to resist protecting the ones we love when they're in pain. You're hurting for him, I can see it. How does it feel? Where does it hurt exactly, show me. Right here?" She places her hand on her chest.

I ignore her. Whatever her personal ache she has for my father, I don't care. She's not able to penetrate my thick determination with her bitterness like she usually does. I'm immune, protected by my focused rage, feeling it grow into a hot blanket around my head.

A brilliant idea visits me. I look at Ligeia and Teles, and before they can say anything, lunge into a plot that I hope will help me scatter their thoughts into disarray.

"Hey, girls, by the way," I say, addressing both of them, "I forgot to mention something. Do you know *why* we were here?"

Me and Hunter? Why we came here in the first place?"

The shake their heads in unison.

"We were sent to kill you."

Now they raise their eyebrows. I continue talking, afraid to lose my bravery.

"Of course you were! What else—" Canosa interjects, but I override her.

"Nice turn of events, right? Do you know who sent us? My beloved father, *the* siren hunter. He made a deal with your big sister over there—" I point at Canosa.

"What? Me? What deal? I don't kn—" she says, but I interrupt her again, pressing on.

"—so she can live a long and happy life, after you two are gone. Just wanted to pass on a word of advice. You know what they say? Never get between two quarreling lovers, they'll gang up on you and turn against you. So there you have it. And I'm truly sorry about that, I really am," I finish with triumph.

I hope they're both bright enough to detect the mockery in my voice, it gives me chills myself, and I stick out my chest a little, gloriously defiant. It's dark, but I can still see their eyes widen in shock. Simple shock, nothing else. My subtle sarcasm fell flat.

All three of them are digesting what I said.

"What, you don't believe me? Go ahead, ask her," I nod toward Canosa.

She's appalled, flitting her hands to her face. I don't think she thought I'd see through her game, which wasn't all that hard to figure out, really. My only regret is not seeing it sooner.

"Kill her!" Canosa suddenly explodes, pointing at me. Pitching into a shrilly command, she hisses, "Don't listen to what she said! She's talking nonsense. She's a fool! Kill her and that idiot boyfriend of hers, kill them both! Now!"

Her chest heaves hysterically and she shrinks away from



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the approaching sirens, her figure growing smaller somehow under their outraged stares.

“Is that right, Canosa? What Ailen said, is that true?” Teles says, her plump hands curled into fists, shaking.

“She did the same with Raidne. Used her as bait. She pulled you guys down, remember? But she let Raidne stand and get shot,” I add, hoping my assumption is true. By Canosa’s quick glance at me, I see it is.

“Not true. They were fighting, and I don’t have three arms!” she yells, her eyes wild.

I decide to throw in one more jab.

“And Pisinoe, too. She tricked her into feeding in broad daylight, right over there.” I point at the Burke-Gilman Trail. “I tried reasoning with her, but she wanted a pet, so she got this poodle, Lamb-chop. We struggled, and then I grabbed her and we dove and...It was too late. My father’s boat was faster.” I pause, for dramatic effect.

“He shot her. I saw her explode. I tried saving her, but I failed. I’m sorry.” I realize I really mean it this time, I’m truly sad for her, remembering her childlike wish, such a simple yearning for a friend, for someone who loves you, always. It seems like there is no need to say anything else, they got the idea.

Ligeia jumps out of the water, her lithe body sparkling in the moonlight. She hisses, “I knew it. I knew it ever since you laid eyes on him. I was so stupid to let you. I should’ve pulled you away right there and then.”

She lands square on top of Canosa’s head, tackling her and pulling her underwater, mumbling a string of things that Canosa shouldn’t have done. They surface and cough. Canosa desperately tries to reason with them, convincing them that what I’m saying is an absolute lie. She would never do something like this to her own sisters, she would *never*. Their talking quickly escalates to shouting

obscenities at each other, to tearing at each other's hair, and then to outright fighting.

For a moment, I'm enthralled, witnessing a true girl fight, the bizarre combination of hair pulling, slapping, biting, and shrieking, amidst the froth of churning water. They blend into a moving mass of shimmering limbs, flying hair, and loud sobs.

I feel a deep ache of pity that tears at my gut, for watching them be reduced to a pack of animals, all from fear of my father, the siren hunter, *the man*. It stems from Canosa's inability to be with him, from her weakness, her lack of will to face him. At the same time, she has to impress him, to get his approval. He's stronger, more important in her eyes, the alpha male. Little does she know that he's as afraid of her as she's afraid of him, maybe even more so. He's afraid of women, period, covering up the frightened boy inside.

The boat shakes dangerously in their wake, and I sway back and forth, struggling to keep my balance. I have perhaps seconds, while they wrangle, so I shift my attention to Hunter.

"I hope we'll never be like that—you and me. I swear to you, I'd rather die than to live like this. Do you hear me?" I whisper.

He's still unconscious, still in the same unnaturally twisted position, but alive. I can hear his soul. It's beating faintly beneath the white noise of the sirens' cacophony. His impossibly delicious sweetness of homey noises and endless comfort; the fragrance of summer wrapped around the beautiful scores of Vivaldi violins. Ligeia revived him somehow, and my nightmare starts all over again. My heart rate speeds up to incredible highs, pounding in my ears and calling my hunger upward.

Horried, I lick my lips, shaking off the desire to fall on him and suck his essence out, to make it mine.

*Stop! This is exactly what they want, for you to lose control.*

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*It's what you always wanted, Papa, to provoke me into a wild anger, didn't you? You wanted your madness to reflect on my face, to seek relief from your own inner turmoil. You thought it would be easy, gullible and naïve as I was. Guess what? The only thing you achieved—with years of applying your violent techniques to beat some sense into me—is discipline. You're the one who always told me that discipline is everything, remember? Well, I thank you for that. It's an amazing skill, to be able to suppress your pain, to hold it in check, for years. To grow it, groom it, and then unleash it in its fully bloomed power.*

I shake, wishing with all my heart to remember this tirade and deliver it to my father, throwing it in his face next time I see him.

*Why did you send me on this job? Why? Was it a trap? To do what exactly, to test me again? You didn't think I'd have enough brains to figure out your play? Too bad. I did, and I'll show you what women were really made for. I'll show you what I was made for, because I'm stronger than you. You're nothing more than a coward, scurrying away with your tail between your legs, barking like a hysterical dog at everything and everyone, but afraid of the real fight.*

Time slows down, so does my heart. The world around me acquires a liquid viscosity that I can grab at will. I inhale and hum, moving the rowboat silently to the shore, away from the sirens whom now resemble a bunch of snarling sharks in a feeding frenzy.

I hum some more.

Their shrieks escalate to wails of such grief and rage that not only my spine, but my whole body seems to turn to ice. My pulsing, escalating fury dampens out all thought, all fear, and propels me forward. This is how seasoned warriors must feel when going into battle, high on war cries and adrenaline. This is how I feel right now, sailing on my excitement.

The water swells and falls in a series of heavy breaths, lassoing around the boat, pushing it to the shore. The waves crest, frosting with foam, and rise higher, until we're bobbing on top of gigantic surf that's bubbling, in tune with my inner boiling rhythm.

At once, it recedes and we're thrown onto the bank, the boat's hull hitting the grass with a dull thud, its wooden planks groaning under impact. Although I braved rolling in the lake with the grace of a captain, this time, I collapse on the floor of the boat and hit my head on Hunter's knees.

Hunter hits his head on the gullet, moans, opens his eyes and stares at me, looking as if he's seeing me for the first time in his life. I'm terrified about what will happen next, staring back at him, sensing the boat slowly sliding underneath me and back into the lake.

Our first encounter on the boat, almost in the same place where we are now, flashes through my mind. My turning into a siren, jumping out of the water on my first hunt, trying to sing out the first soul I detected, only to open my eyes and realize it was Hunter, Hunter all along. Grinning his crooked smile, with that familiar dimple in his right cheek, his hair bunched up, raindrops on his eyelashes, his eyes blue. And me, gaping at him, thunderstruck by the magnificent melody of his soul. Like then, I lunge at him out of fear.

"Say something! I need to know you're okay. Say something, please!" Tears spring up in the corners of my eyes. A memory of his warm breath nags at me with the premonition of both his and my torture starting all over again. He fell in love with me then, at that moment, his soul ignited, smoldered. Will it do so now?

He swallows, his pupils growing large, to the size of two black pools, glistening in the night.

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“Ailen?” he croaks. “Is that you? What’s that? A new fashion or something? Orange overalls?” He talks on autopilot until his eyes clear up. “What the hell happened?” His chest heaves as he glances about.

I listen, with all of my being. And there it is, the faint crush of a delicate summer flower broken off its stem, and a faint whiff of smoke emanating from between his lips, with every breath. I didn’t hear it happen the first time, didn’t smell the burn, because I didn’t know what to look for. Now I do, and it happened again. It will never stop.

“Do you love me?” I dare to ask.

“Of course, I do, why are you asking? Where the *fuck* are we?” He props himself up on his elbows, turns his head, his eyeballs rolling to their whites, and he promptly faints. Seems like talking and lifting himself was enough strain on his body.

Moonlight paints the night with her white glow, fading, yielding to early dawn. The boat drifts a few yards and I hum to guide it back to the shore. The echo from the siren fight blares all over the lake and it feels like it’s about to explode. Add to that, cars continue honking from the Aurora Bridge; not one car now, but several. People are shouting and a clear whine of a cop car announces its soon-to-be presence. Noises blend into one another, until something shifts. The sirens’ hysterical battle chorus—their boom of otherworldly rage—ceases, giving way to one frustrated cry, perhaps at the realization that we’re both gone. I look back. About a hundred feet away, Canosa, Ligeia, and Teles join hands and turn our way, ready to kill. It’s written in their faces, in their long and powerful strides.

“Shit!” I say.

Hunter doesn’t hear me, his head lolling about.

Waves lick the shore, splashing over the Burke-Gilman Trail and surprising the first morning biker. He curses and, instead

of stopping quickly, pedals away. I imagine I scared him with my beautiful morning appearance.

The marina, a couple hundred feet to my right, groans and moves about in a torn blanket, its wooden posts dangerously close to being uprooted, yacht masts dinging like bells. I hum and bump us into the dirt, the bow's hull scraping against the rocks. Great. I quickly glance back and see the sirens a few paces behind me, their dismay sounding rotten and desperate, like a week-old stew reeking of spoiled meat. They must have banded together, after all, and are about to gang up on me. I pay them no heed, trusting that, in the right moment, my siren instinct will kick in and my harbored fury will spill over and drown them.

I hop out of the boat into the shallow water and pull it up so that it gets stuck in the ground, since I have nothing to moor it with. I only need a few minutes to take Hunter out and get away on foot.

I lean over him, sticking my hands under his back when I hear something else. Somebody came to check on their trap, this time without the sound of a fancy Pershing yacht engine, or the low growling of a trawler. It's simply oars splashing, urgently. Its rhythm tells me who it is, paddling away, struggling against the current.

It's my father, the siren hunter, and he's manning a rowboat, no less.

I look up. There, passing under the Fremont Bridge, about five hundred feet away, on the hazy line between water and sky, his dark, lithe shape bends and straightens, bends and straightens, oars flying up and then dipping down.

*You can explode all you want, I tell my rising terror. I don't care. You won't sway me from my goal. Not here, not now, not ever. It's my time to act, and I will.*

## Chapter 10

“Good morning, how did you sleep?” I say into the distance. “Nice ride. What, you’ve got no money left for another yacht? Bummer.”

I smile, allowing myself to feel exactly what I need in this moment, what I want. I was never able to do this in the past, always focusing on other people’s needs; always trying to read my mother, my father, anyone I met on the street, even Hunter. Their wishes and wants ruled my world. I went as far as to invent siren wishes, when I was sitting in the bathroom, counting the hours away, serving them in the hopes of receiving positive attention. The only person who didn’t take advantage of this is Hunter. My father used it and played on it every time he got the chance. My mom rarely did, but still, she did nonetheless, maybe without fully realizing it. And the sirens...Well, I made them do it in my imagination, this being the only existence I know. Not anymore.

“How about you serve me this time?” I say, watching the bulging water near me at an alarming speed, the sirens’ arms and legs moving about directly under the lake’s surface.

I don’t make an effort to move, my fear completely gone. Now that I’m being attacked by all four of them, I’m beyond fear. It’s laughable. At this point, it’s all or nothing. My death is imminent, so I might as well take my chance and see if I can fool it once more, at least ensuring I get Hunter out of trouble first.

Something is missing, something important to make me feel fully confident. I rack my brain, searching deep inside. What is it that I need right now? What is it that I want? And I know. Silence. I want absolute silence to be able to think clearly and gather my mind. There is too much conundrum in the air, and annoyance wells up in me in waves, fueling my already blooming fury.

“Father, if only you knew. I happen to understand you right now,” I say again, noticing that I didn’t instinctively call him

Papa, like I always have.

All it takes for a full cup of water to spill is a drop. The wail of the cop car does it. I turn into the empty and calculating creature that used to scare my mom into blabbing nonsense, from the time I can remember. She'd try to coax me into listening to her, at the same time being afraid, very afraid to see part of my father on my face, that unyielding stubbornness to win or else. I'm one of those annoying types who won't give up, stupidly moving forward when normal people use their brains and logic and retreat to safety. I suppose that part of my brain is missing. You could describe me with three words right now: unmoving, impenetrable, deadly. I'm my father's daughter, after all.

For the first time in my sixteen years of life, I'm glad we're related. I intend to use this willfulness to my advantage.

My hands are still under Hunter's back; I tense and pull him into a sitting position, just as Ligeia and Teles surface behind the boat's stern and reach for him, snaking their dripping arms out of the water. I lean Hunter to the side, jerk my hands from under his armpits, and take two giant steps through the waist-high water, stopping one inch from their faces.

I utter a yowl so loudly that it blows their hair back in a gust of wind, splattering their faces with my saliva.

"Don't touch him! Don't you ever touch him again! Get your filthy hands off him, you hear me? Both of you!" My voice echoes, "you-you-you" from the bottom of the bridge and startles a few souls into stupor, causing a couple of car alarms to go off in the distance.

They're visibly taken aback. Canosa seems to be hiding underwater, having sent Ligeia and Teles out first, as always, to see how much damage they can bear from my wrath.

"Thief! You're a thief and a liar! Canosa gave him to me, he's mine! Mine!" Ligeia shrieks back at me.



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“You wish!” Teles claws at Ligeia’s face. “That’s not what she said!”

“What is going on?” Canosa finally surfaces between them. There is a quick pause.

For a second, I savor the moment, that quiet pocket of still air before imminent destruction. I know what I will do, I know how I will do it, and I know what effect it will have. All three facts give me immense satisfaction. I open my mouth and utter an ear-splitting roar, happy that Hunter is out, wondering what kind of damage I’m inflicting to his hearing. But I’d rather have him deaf and alive than dead.

“SHUT UUUUUUUUUUP!”

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### Troll Avenue

I think the best way to describe my cry is to liken it to a sonic boom. Not quite, but almost. Maybe, if I tried really hard, I could produce shock waves powerful enough to break the speed of sound. Which would turn me into a weapon against sirens. That is, if I don't manage to blow myself up in the process. Hmmm... could I kill myself with it? I feel like I almost do, because every single muscle in my body turns brittle and is ready to snap, vibrating madly to the enormous energy pouring out of my throat and flying into the world with the explosion of a supersonic bullet. My ears ring, my eyes water. My arms and legs go numb. I grab the boat's gullet to arrest my fall. The atmospheric pressure changes and sucks on my eardrums to a bursting point. Needles march across my skin, burrowing deeply into my spine and sending a rod of ice from the base of my skull to the tips of my toes.

This happens on the inside.

On the outside, a sharp near-whistle issues from my mouth on the long vowel "aaa" at the highest register of the

shrillest soprano you've ever heard. In a matter of seconds, the whole thing grows from a high-pitched yelp to a spiking squall, ululating multiple echoes across the perimeter of about a thousand feet around the spot where I stand.

Car alarms go off like a shocked flock of seagulls, things rattle, jangle over, and tinkle, sounding as if a million fragile glass orbs have been dropped from the sky. It's virulent. It causes people to shout in distress, stop their cars, and jump out to see what the hell is going on. Thankfully, there are not many people on the streets at this hour. It must be close to four in the morning.

The sirens' faces are inches from my open mouth, so they get the full blast. They cover their ears and drift a few feet away, pushed back into the water by my screaming like by a powerful gale, followed by swaths of water. I guess, if I inhale enough air, I can move objects with the sheer force of my airstream.

"And don't you dare get close to him, ever again, do you hear me? Don't you *fucking* dare!" I add, wincing at the burning in my throat and feeling like I'm on the verge of losing my voice.

My words slap their faces and they dive, all three, retreating. I grimace.

"Father?" I stifle the usual Papa. "Do you hear me now? This is your daughter screaming her head off! How does it sound? Am I loud enough? Does my voice irritate you? Answer me! I can't hear you!" I shriek into the horizon, where a rowboat slides slowly on inertia, because my father has dropped the oars and is now watching me.

"Wake up, people! It's a glorious morning!" I spread my arms wide and shout into the sky, ignoring the wailing cop cars, knowing that they can't drive in here. They'll have to hike along the waterside trail on foot, a hundred feet from the nearby parking lot, the famous suicide jumpers' landing spot. By that time, I'll be long gone. For now, I'm savoring my moment.

“What’s wrong? What are you waiting for? Come here. Let’s say good morning to each other!” My voice booms about a hundred feet, toward the boat that is floating in the middle of the ship canal, in between two bridges and directly across from me. I watch my father cover his ears and I know he heard me. But a new feeling rises to grin at me with its ugly smirk. A terrible fear.

I’m scared. Scared of the power I have. It’s as if each time I let myself fully submerge in it, only a few seconds go by unaware, letting me bask in the sun of its goodness. And then, *bam*, someone slaps me on the head. It used to be my father; now, it’s me, imitating his control, inflicting it upon myself, telling myself, *You can’t do it, you just can’t. You’re not good enough. Who do you think you are to be happy despite all of this shit you’re in? You will be miserable, because I say so.*

Then an invisible gigantic hand of shame drives me into the ground, covering me with guilt and forbidding me to come out. So I sit there, peeking out in fear, flooded with broken possibilities and crying silently, breathlessly, reminiscing about this power in my voice; thinking how I used it, carelessly, not knowing what I can do. Now that I know, suddenly, I’m afraid it won’t work on command. I won’t be able to summon it unless I’m emotionally disturbed and stressed to a breaking point.

My fury blossoms in a rush of self-hate. How many times will it take me to stop shrinking from my siren abilities and accept them for what they are? To be able to say, *Yes, I can!*

It’s maddening, and I dive into the task at hand. I pull Hunter out of the boat and onto the ground, away from the water. I cinch him under his armpits, taking several steps backward up the grassy part of the bank, digging my heels into the slimy dirt and sliding in it. Finally, I make it to the asphalt of the trail. Its rough surface gives me enough traction to move faster and provides a sense of stability, after having been on the water for

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almost a day and a half. I gently lay Hunter down on his side, arms folded and knees bent. His eyes are closed and his wet hair is plastered to his forehead; his lips have a bluish tint to them.

“Hunter!” I shake his shoulder. “Hunter, are you okay? Can you hear me? Say something. Please?”

He moves his lips.

“Hunter?” I lean over and move my ear to his face. “Talk to me. Talk to me, please?” I sigh. He can’t hear me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see lake waves licking the hull of the boat, hitting the shore and smoothing out my footprints in the ground. The rowboat moves hesitantly, its hull hissing though the grass and then it bobs on the water.

Dawn pencils the air in the lavender of an early morning, rainless, perhaps even with a chance of autumn warmth. It smells of fallen leaves and an upcoming sunrise, that freshness that hits your nose when you open the door of your house and step out.

I shake Hunter again, but he remains silent and motionless as if in a coma. The only way I know he’s alive is his shallow breathing and the faint sound of his soul that gnaws on my growing hunger.

“Hey, I’ll carry you, okay? I’ll carry you to your house.” I decide this impulsively, wanting to step into a place that can remotely remind me of being home. I want to feel its rugs under my feet, inhale its usual burned coffee smell, touch its walls, and call out to Hunter’s mom. Not by her name, but playfully say, *Hey, Hunter’s mom, Hunter is home. I brought him home for you!* Just to be able to say *mom* out loud, just to—

Cop cars stop blaring their mechanical sirens. That means they’ve arrived at the parking lot. I hear doors slamming and people shouting. It’s time to move. I survey the water and see no sign of my father. He and his rowboat have vanished.

I squat next to Hunter, facing him, and slip my arms

under his, grunting as I lift him up, to fold him over my back the way he carried me deep into the bowels of my father's trawler. He's unexpectedly heavy when lifted off the ground, and he slides out of my grip. I hear his soul, feel his heart. He's alive. One clear goal pulses in my mind.

*I have to get him out of here, alive.*

Then what's the matter? What's happened to me? I picked up a whole Ducati motorcycle at the Pike Place Fish Market and threw it into the street. It must have weighed close to four hundred pounds. And Hunter is what, one hundred eighty, ninety? The only logical explanation to my exertion is my recent yelling and growing hunger. A stab of panic pinpricks my gut. I have no choice, no time to start freaking out. There is only one thing left to do—keep moving forward, with blind determination.

I take a deep breath and try again, hoisting him up all the way this time and taking a few tentative steps. My legs shake. Having blown my energy on shouting that stupid good morning greeting, I need a fresh soul, to gain back my strength.

I stand on the tip of a curve in the Burke-Gilman Trail and I can't see those approaching from behind the bend, nor can they see me. But I can hear them. And I can be observed perfectly well from either bridge. I can see red and blue lights flashing on both of them.

The parking lot is situated about a hundred feet away from the spot I'm in, hidden by the bend and the office building in front of me, which are aplenty along the trail. I have maybe another half a minute before a couple of cops emerge, judging by the sound of their souls. There are two. No, three. One more person. Wheels whispering along the trail. A biker. An early morning biker on his way to work.

It's a he, dressed in a reflective neon yellow jacket and tight lycra shorts, braving the cold and the elements, pedaling in a

steady pumping rhythm as he turns and emerges to my right, biking past two heavy bridge-bearing columns that fork over the trail. He pedals some more before his lights pool us in a yellow circle and he immediately pushes in the brakes, coming to a screeching halt about ten feet away.

“Whoa. I almost hit you guys. Holy...Is he okay? Are you guys all right?” he asks, his large eyes round from the obvious shock at seeing a fragile girl holding a teenage boy over her shoulder. Or maybe he doesn’t like my clothing style. Either way, his face looks comical with his freckles, the big and soft parted lips, and his cleanly shaved round chin.

That’s all I can see. The bright lights on top of his helmet, and in between his handlebars, blind me and I shield my face.

“Yeah, we’re just on our way to a picnic,” I say. *We’re obviously not all right*, I want to add, because it’s a stupid question to ask. I don’t know why people always state the obvious before getting down to the nitty-gritty that really needs to be discussed in an emergency situation.

“Freeze.” I don’t even raise my voice, directing this as a command. It flows out of me, perfect in its focused intent, and it works. The biker opens his mouth to say something else and stays like that, with his right hand on the brake and his left one resting on top of his left knee. His roundish belly heaves with heavy breaths. He must be close to forty, trying to bike himself back to how he looked in his twenties, I’d imagine.

The bicycle is fancy, bright blue and shining with color as only new bikes do; so is his gear. I can smell its synthetic newness, mixed with the sour odor of sweat.

His soul is a mix of girly giggling—his daughters?—and keyboard typing. I can hear the clicking. It promises to taste rich, even creamy. I lick my lips and contemplate sucking it out right then and there, but then decide against it. Wrong place, wrong

time.

“Stay like this for another five minutes, no, make it ten. Then go to work. And don’t tell anyone about what you saw,” I say into his face.

“Hello, miss? Please stay where you are.” Two police officers run toward us, and I gather whatever energy I have left to shout.

“Freeze!” They do. “Don’t move for one hour!”

I know it’s cruel to say that, but I don’t care. I need to get out of here, fast, because my strength is fading and Hunter doesn’t seem to be in any rush to lose weight or wake up. I walk past the cops. One is tall and skinny, his legs open wide in mid-stride, his hand in a pocket pulling out something; his soul is chirping and spicy. The other cop is stout, sporting rectangular glasses on the bridge of his nose, a very serious and concentrated look on his face, dark in the hazy morning. His soul is fibrous, chewy.

My chest growls dangerously, and I quickly stride forward, intending to hike on the trail before it turns east toward the lake. I will get off the trail then and continue on foot toward one of Seattle’s most popular tourist spots, the Fremont Troll. The road is appropriately named Troll Avenue, and the colossal statue at its end is a hideous looking sculpture of the upper torso of a troll, digging his way out of the ground; his head eighteen feet tall, long hair covering one eye, his left hand clutching an actual Volkswagen Beetle—the old kind—and his right hand’s fingers splayed and groping at the ground, mid-pull.

The area is occasionally occupied by homeless people; they like to roll away from the public eye and sleep behind the troll’s broad back. It’s there that I intend to hide for a while, to lay Hunter down, rest, and snag a soul or two, to get my energy up, before hitting Linden Street, where Hunter lives. Maybe by then he’ll come around and will be able to walk with me. A change of



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clothes would be good, too. I'm sure a pair of his jeans and an old sweatshirt would look better on me than this clownish orange suit I'm in.

I walk with the pace of a snail, my knees weak and my hold jittery. I pause, letting Hunter slide down so that I can heave him on my other shoulder. I have to freeze a couple of early dog walkers on my way to Troll Avenue, where I dart across the road as fast as my load allows me.

Several cars whiz by, but not a single one stops. By the time their drivers figure out what they saw, they'll probably think it was their imagination.

It takes me a good twenty minutes to reach the troll, the hardest part of my trek being the very end of it—a steep incline of what must be thirty degrees. Early morning is my friend and I end up not meeting another soul on my way. Finally, I make it to the concrete circle right in front of the troll and proceed on my shaky legs across the street to gain rest in his shadow, under his one glistening, watchful eye.

Sand hugs my bare feet like a soft blanket. The ground by the troll is covered with it, or maybe it's cement dust. In any case, it's a welcome reprieve from the rough asphalt. I circle the troll's right arm and collapse on the ground behind him, only managing to shield Hunter's head from banging on the concrete with my hand, scratching my skin in the process. Propping him into a sitting position, I sit next to him, both of our backs against the cool cement of the statue.

"We made it," I say. "I didn't think we would."

I close my eyes and hear two things: the blare of a police siren and a new soul.

The police siren either means that the biker called the cops after coming to his senses or that other cops showed up and found their fellow colleagues entranced and immobile. Whatever the

case, they seem to be closing in. But the soul that enters my perimeter is different. Many others have before this one—in cars and on foot, all scurrying to their destinations in the early morning chill. But none alerted me to all of my senses like this one. Something is oddly different about it, but I can't place exactly what.

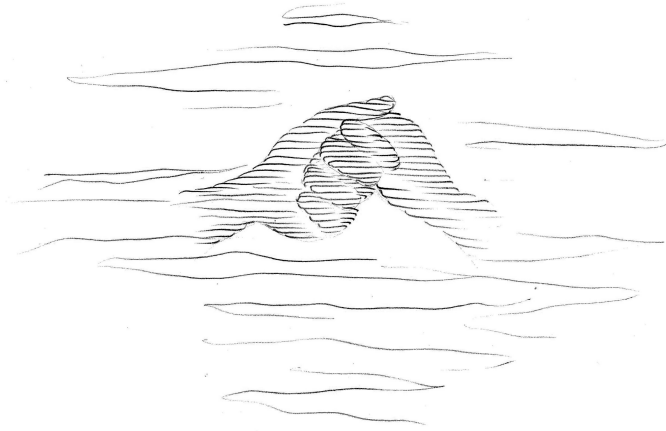
Its sound comes from above. Its owner quickly trots down the steps to the left of the troll. There are two stretches of stairs on either side, and this someone is coming down one of them, feet shuffling on concrete in a hurry, the sound of muttering bubbling through some kind of cloth that prevents me from clearly hearing what this person is saying. I tense, listening, thinking that I heard it before, not too long ago. It sounds greedy, yet surprisingly serene, like the calm of an overgrown garden, complete with the cracking of their stems, the unfolding of their leaves, and at the same time digging in what must be plastic bags—no, trash! Overall, the whole thing promises to taste grassy and earthy.

*There will be more people coming on either side, as the morning grows later. You're too weak to attack. Rest a bit, ignore it, it's nothing.*

But it's not nothing. The soul, a he, stops, as if looking around. Suddenly, he hops, which must be over the railing, and snakes in between the troll and the very bottom of the bridge, folding into a ball and rolling toward me.

I sit up, propping my hands against the sand on the ground. At the same time, I see a shape crawl to my feet as I smell the stink of foul breath, a face peering at me from the darkness.

## Chapter 12



### Fremont Troll

A homeless, mushroomy looking man gapes at me, his face emerging from the folds of his clammy hair like the folds of a sea turtle's skin. His bundle of clothes, one unidentifiable item on top of another, reeks of old urine. His breath is cheap beer and other unpleasant odors. His entire physique is shrunken yet agile for his age. What startles me more is the speed with which he reached me and my own slow reaction. I blame my newly acquired self-confidence, well, the smidge of it that I had, the very thing I desired and the thing that just rendered me blunt and oblivious to danger—though I still believe that this little man can't possibly do me any harm. I study him for a second out of pure curiosity, abashed by his boldness. Of course, on his end, I look like a disheveled teenage girl with a dirty face, clad in an oversized orange fisherman's suit, with her dirty bare feet sticking out like two lifeless appendages.

"What are you doing here? Get out, out!" he squeaks. "It's my spot, my spot! It's m—" His vision clears and his cheeks pull up into a toothless smile, no doubt in a moment of recognition,

because I recognize him, too. It's the homeless guy who grabbed me by the arm when I escaped from the Pike Place Fish Market and was on my way to dive into the Puget Sound.

"I don't believe my eyes. Here we meet again, little birdie, so we do. And where are you going this time, pray? Not going anywhere? I see. Came here to spare some change for the old man? Did ya? And who do we have here?" he says, sounding like a frog, croaking in his elderly voice.

I listen, fascinated by his ugliness, repulsed by remembering how he lied, how he blamed me for stealing his money when a cop asked him what happened. For a second, I feel sorry for him, for having rolled down to the very bottom of existence, where anything goes.

Hunter moans to my left, deciding to wake up at the wrong moment. This is not how I imagined our reconciliation, certainly not in front of some homeless guy.

The mushroom man reaches out and grabs my arm.

"Don't touch me!" I say angrily, but he only curls his fingers tighter.

"And why not?" he says, inching closer.

"Because!" I yank my arm from his hold, leaving the sleeve in his grip and causing the jacket to open up. The zipper slider glides down with a quiet whizz. I want to yank more, but don't dare, because then the whole jacket might open up and I'm naked underneath. For a moment, I glare back at him, stupefied as to how to get out of this.

"Oh, those pretty blue eyes didn't let me sleep," he says and crawls toward me even more, shuffling forward on his butt and raising a cloud of cement dust. With his other hand, he clamps on my ankle.

"I bet you got those from your mama, did you? What else did you get from your mama, pretty girl? Let the old man see." His

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face is within a foot of mine, and I can't utter a sound, paralyzed by his stink and brashness. My inability to believe that I'm attractive kicks in at the wrong moment.

He lifts himself up and reaches into the opening of my jacket. I reel with such revulsion and hatred that—my fear of waking Hunter forgotten—I shriek directly into mushroom man's face, rip the jacket out of his grip, and throw him off me in one movement.

The zipper groans and slides all the way to the bottom, exposing my torso. I don't care. I stand up and stare the mushroom man down.

"You sick fuck!" I yell. "Get away from me! I will kill you, you stinking asshole!" My rage, conveniently tucked away for the purpose of carrying Hunter, blooms anew and I let it out. I found a convenient target for it, for my hunger, and I forget everything else. I *have* to get this maddening compulsion out of me, it's boiling, it's making me sore.

The world around me wraps into one dark tunnel. Nothing exists except me and my target splayed on the sandy ground ten feet in front of me, in the shadow of the troll.

The mushroom man gingerly lifts himself up and staggers back, walking on his hands and feet in the manner of an overturned turtle, falling again, picking himself up again. A look of utter horror crosses his face, his pig-like eyes unblinking under huge, matted brows. He mutters something that vaguely sounds like please-please-please.

I lock my gaze with his and ignite his soul. There is a satisfying click that only I can hear, and a familiar glazed-over look spreads over his shaggy face, causing his toothless mouth to open, as if in wonder.

I begin to sing.

## Fremont Troll

*"We live in the meadow,  
But you don't know it."*

The man shakes his head. His arms and legs give out and he collapses onto the ground. A thin ribbon of smoke oozes through his cracked lips, his pitiful soul punctured with poverty and despair. It forms a torn veil spanning fifteen feet between us, arching and twisting. As a snake lashes out at its prey, the end of the veil jerks toward my face. I suck on it greedily, no matter how revolting the taste. It's earthy and crunchy, like I scooped up dirt and shoved it into my mouth. I don't care. I like it. It's all but sweetness to my senses to extinguish this vile human being and to feed my hunger.

*"Give me your pain,  
Dip in my song."*

I sing, my aches forgotten, outside noises hushed into a beautiful silence. Thick fog rolls off my skin in a cascading flow. The temperature drops a few degrees. A look of a happy child washes over the old man's face, smoothing out his wrinkles. He radiates innocent delight not unlike he probably experienced decades and decades ago from his mother's kisses, from her singing him a lullaby, if she ever did.

His soul is strung in a delicate arc, half of it gone, another half to go. I slurp it in and swallow, mesmerized by the transformation. The shape on the ground in front of me is that of a man peacefully asleep, dreaming a rosy fantasy with his eyes open. His smile is a sweet gentle thing, childish and endearing.

*"Give me your life,  
End in my song."*

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*Because you,  
Listen and love."*

I finish the song and suck on the last morsel of his essence, licking my lips and hearing him take his last breath. Then it's over. His chest stops heaving, his eyes turn to glass, his smile permafreeses on his face. He appears to have died in peace, and I smile in return.

"One minute of fantasy is better than nothing," I whisper, reeling from the rush of blood to my brain and the tingling, heated sensation that always kicks my body temperature up after feeding, making me warm for once. It feels good. It feels so good that, at first, I don't register what's happening around me. Sirens are most vulnerable while they feed.

There is an annoying noise, and it's disturbing my glow. Irritated, I come out of my tunnel vision to a police wail blaring in the distance, two short bursts on repeat.

"Cops," I say, confirming the fact, yet not moving—daring myself to stay where I am and overpower them with my voice. To not being afraid anymore; feel the flow of energy perk up my senses. My next thought is about Hunter.

"Hunter! Hey, can you hear me?" I call over the noise and squat down. He is in the exact same position I left him when I propped him up. His eyes are closed and his head rests on one of his shoulders, one hand on his folded knees, another on the ground. The faint sound of his soul reaches my ears and I sigh in relief, cradling his face and giving him a light peck on the lips. It's too late to run, however, because the mechanical whining is upon me now, sending ululating echoes and then promptly dying. Someone finally shuts it off.

"Thank God," I mutter, looking up. The fog began receding, but patches of it hang in the air in low floating pockets,

obscuring the ground. The underbelly of the bridge blinks with revolving red and blue lights, magnified by the mist. The pavement crunches under the tires. The brake comes up, the door slams, and two shoes make it out and walk up to peek behind the troll.

I stand, my jacket open.

“Hello?” The cop says upon laying his eyes on me, waves his hand in front of his face to see better, probably thinking it’s smoke and not fog. He quickly glances around, either out of shame or trained to behave like this in case of displayed nudity or perhaps truly investigating what is going on here. He composes himself, acting all professional.

“Hey, are you okay? I’m Manuel. What’s your name?” His dark eyes dart to me and away, and up and down, sizing up the scene. His black hair glistens with gel, accenting his olive skin and accent.

Still dazed, I grin and do nothing, staring him down. He tries really hard to keep his eyes on my face.

“Miss? It’s miss, right?” He waits a beat.

*Dude, I know I have short hair, but do you still doubt my gender?* I want to say, but I keep quiet, wondering what he’ll do.

“Are you hurt?” he says, taking another cautious step.

I stand my ground.

“I’m Officer Manuel Rodriguez. I’m here with Officer Scott Miller, my partner. We received a 911 call. Where you the one who called?” he says and steps closer. I don’t move, don’t talk.

“Scott?” he calls back and then directs his attention back to me. “Can you tell me your name?”

Another cop comes out of the car, slams the door, and approaches. Before I can compose myself, he emerges into the dark, takes out his flashlight and shines it into my face, so that I can’t quite make out his features.



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“Whoa, it’s smoky. It doesn’t smell like smoke, though, does it?” he intones in a low baritone, waving his hand. “What have we here?”

“She’s not responding,” Miguel says.

“Got you.” He nods. “Miss, aren’t you supposed to be in bed at this hour, waking up and getting ready for school? Can you tell us your name and what happened?”

“Want me to call for backup?” Miguel says under his breath.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Miguel runs off back to the car.

I lick my lips. They’re so polite, Seattle police officers, and promising to taste delicious. I blink, blinded by the light, my hazy mind reeling from my recent feeding and wanting more, deciding on whom I want to strike first. Or, maybe, I could have both at once. I can do that, can’t I? I ate dozens at once on Lake Union.

My eyes adjust to the light. About eight feet in front of me I see food. A cop, a middle-aged man with a beer belly clad in his uniform that’s a tad too tight, a sea lion type of a mustache gracing his face, an air of assured responsibility around him, a perfect candidate for a straight police record on his way into honored retirement. His soul is composed of twinkling wine glasses and piano music. The sound is so intense and rich that I’m instantly ravenous.

I cast my eyes down to escape the brightness, contemplating playing coy for a little bit, to see what they will do. Then I’ll strike and surprise them. Where exactly did this yearning come from? It’s so unlike my typical thinking that, for a split-second, I shudder. But then it passes and I’m back to grinning, like a real predator, knowing that the food can’t escape. I decide to play around a bit, out of plain prowess.

“Are you cold? Would you like a blanket?” he says. “Do

you have an ID on you?”

The static crackling of a radio tells me that the other cop has successfully called for backup. Two more souls? That will make it four, to add to the one I just ate, five. Just the breakfast I like.

He shines the light into my face again and I wince, the afterglow burned into my retina. I decide it's time to speak up.

“Do I look like I have an ID, sir?” I say playfully.

I suppose my voice instills instant panic, because the flashlight drops on the ground and the cop's right hand falls to his gun. Visibly embarrassed, he leans over to pick it up. Terror fills me, not for me, but for Hunter. In the gloom of receding fog the cop hasn't seen him yet, and I take a step to the right, to shield his body from sight.

“You can talk, that's good. I'm afraid we'll have to take you in, to establish your identity,” he says, and carefully steps around me, into the shadow, to check out the space. Morning arrives and the dimness escapes from under the bridge leaving a general muted grayness.

His eyes never leave me as he walks around me, keeping a safe five-foot distance until he stops in front of Hunter.

“What do have we here...” He whistles and flashes a light at his face. “Hey. Hello?” He waits a few seconds.

“Do you know this person?” This is directed at me. I remain quiet, too much in love with causing someone else to be confused for once. I know it's devilish in nature, but I can't help it, perhaps directing my general hate of authority and control toward this poor man who, I'm sure, only means good and wants to help in any way he can.

“Is he your friend? Has he suffered any kind of injury?” Scott asks me and then moves the light behind himself until it falls over the face of the homeless man fifteen feet away. The cop gasps at his staring, unflinching eyes.

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“What the hell...Rodriguez! Did you call backup yet?” He takes out his walkie-talkie, walks up to him and leans over to check the pulse, speaking into the radio. “Calling backup. At Fremont Troll, North 36th. We have a possible dead body. I repeat, backup needed.”

He stands. “Miss—”

“Don’t touch him. Don’t you dare touch him!” I say.

“It’s all right. I wasn’t going to. But I need to make sure your friend doesn’t need medical help. Can I—” He walks up to me and reaches out. To do what, I don’t know, but I spread my arms and act as a shield.

“I need you to step aside, please,” the cop says.

“Yeah, right. Like you can command me,” I bark, changing my plan on the fly, taken aback by how nice the cop is to me and afraid that this might escalate into another uncalled for massacre. I think about grabbing Hunter and making a run for it now that I have more strength. Too late. A few onlookers gather, two dog walkers and a biker, peering at us from the sidelines with interest. Free entertainment to start their day.

I glare, wondering if I want to kill all of them or do I simply stun them and kill only the cops. Whatever devilish nature has been sleeping under the covers of my innocence has been, for sure, brought forward by the siren in me.

“They’re on their way,” Miguel delivers, emerging from behind the troll.

“Good. One more time, can you please tell me your full and legal name?” Scott says, his flashlight lowered, a tired expression on his face. I give in.

“Ailen Bright,” I say automatically.

“I need you to tell me what happened, Ailen. Can you tell me what happened?”

Here, Hunter coughs and speaks up. I wonder if he was

awake this whole time and was simply faking, clever bastard.

“Officer, it’s all right, we’re okay. I can explain.”

His voice makes me beam for a second, and then I drop into momentary despair. Now that he’s fully awake, how will we get out of this? Would I be able to kill with him looking on? The thought chills me.

“Son, are you in any pain right now?” Scott squats next to Hunter, while Miguel throws a few concise phrases into his radio like “copy” and “over” and “go ahead.”

“I’m fine, really,” Hunter says.

Two distinct engine chopping noises join a mechanical siren wail in the distance.

“Do you have an ID I can see?” This is directed at Hunter.

“No, sir.”

“Name?”

“Hunter. Hunter Crosby. We were just returning home from a party, officer. We pr—”

I’m so sick of pretense, I interrupt.

“You really want to know who I am? I’ll tell you. My name is Ailen Bright, and I’m a siren.”

The cop looks up at me, badly startled by my voice. It must push their worst fear buttons, because his pupils widen.

By now, the unmistakable rolling grins of motorcycle engines reaches us.

“Officer, please, don’t listen to her, she’s just high. You know, we took some drugs. We’re really sorry we did,” Hunter says to him, and then hisses to me, “What the hell are you doing?”

I ignore him.

“Listen,” I command both cops. They gape at me, silent. “Listen to me!” This echoes off the walls and roots the onlookers to the spot, winning over the whine of oncoming police motorcycles.

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I turn. In several kicks, running on both legs and arms, I scale the back of the troll and stand on top of his head, the back of my head nearly touching the bridge's concrete trusses.

"Good morning, people," I yell over the racket. "My name is Ailen Bright. I'm a siren. I live underwater, because that's where seductive girls belong. I'm a killer. I kill people by singing out their souls. I especially like those whose souls sound exquisite, like a delicacy. Yours, for example, stinks." I point at the guy with the dog. They are both mesmerized, quiet.

"But I'll eat it, anyway." I clack my tongue on the roof of my mouth for an added effect and take a step, intending to jump down and feed.

Two cops veer in from the side street, on two white Harley-Davidsons. They kill their engines. The braying of the noise dies, but the lights in front of each keep flashing red and blue. This must be the Seattle motorcycle drill team, the typical backup squad to be called to a crime scene. They respond first because of their mobility.

I fight the urge to give in to my power, to kill these new cops and everyone else who gathered here, driven by their insatiable curiosity, ready to run off and gossip the latest neighborhood news where the robbing of an unlocked car makes it into a newspaper.

"Oh, God. It's the same girl, that suicide jumper, remember?" Escapes from the mouth of a newly arrived officer, young. He looks at me through his sunglasses, framed by an open-face helmet. A mock of reddish hair is plastered against his forehead, underneath the visor. I recognize him. It's the same officer who ran up to me on the Aurora Bridge and saw me jump down three days ago. Or was it four? I lost track. I don't even remember what day of the week it is anymore. Thursday? Friday? My father argued with him and called him a moron.

“What girl? That kid over there?” the other officer says into his mouthpiece, getting off the bike. I watch them both move as if in slow motion.

There must be something good in me left, because instead of lunging into a feeding frenzy, I shout, “Move!”

My voice pierces the air. I feel like a conductor, helping an orchestra find its tune. Faces look at me, expectantly, paralyzed and captivated at the same time, as if witnessing an animal talking.

“I said, move, *now!*” They don’t need to be told twice. They turn and walk, both civilians and police, then run, overtaken by instinct. Even the older cop and his partner, Rodriguez, make it out from behind the troll and join in.

Another minute, and they’re all gone. The sudden silence is overpowering. I wait some more and zip up my jacket, suddenly not wanting Hunter to see me like this, and scale the back of the troll all the way down. I find Hunter sitting in the same place, only fully awake now.

“Hey, you okay? Are you feeling all right?” I reach out for his face. He lets me feel it, but there is a certain apprehension, and I suppress the urge to hug him and kiss him, wondering what’s wrong. I’m glad his soul is burning again. My commanding voice has no effect on him, at least that’s good news.

“Well, aside from failing your dad’s job and being nearly killed by your siren friends, I’m fine. Thanks for asking,” he says, but his eyes don’t radiate the life they used to. He pulls himself up and stands.

“I’m sorry about that. Do you think you can walk? What’s wrong?” I mean to ask what is wrong with his body, but immediately it sounds stupid, because everything is wrong, and we both know it. I bite my tongue.

“Nothing is wrong. I’m awesome. Just freaking awesome,” he says, as closed off as I knew he would be. “I see you had

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breakfast already,” he throws in, nodding to the mushroom man. I have completely forgotten about him and shrink at the mention.

“Oh, that homeless guy? He just appeared out of nowhere and was claiming this is his spot. Anyway, I was hungry and...” I decide to try and save face. “You didn’t hear me yelling at him? How long ago did you come to? I mean, you heard me talking to the cops, didn’t you?”

“Um. Yeah. Yeah, about that time I did,” he says, looking through me.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, hoping to steer the conversation away from the topic of dead bodies.

“Would *you*? I didn’t want to screw up your plan.”

“Oh,” I say, taken aback. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” A trickle of familiar theatrical undertone creeps into his voice, and it makes me happy.

“Let’s get the heck out of here,” I say, and before I can add the fact that his house is only ten minutes away, he gives me this piercing look.

“Isn’t that what we planned all along?” His eyes reach deep inside of me, his face full of sadness; I sense a hidden idea behind his words. “He’ll never leave us alone, your dad, you know that, right?”

I nod, crestfallen. “Yeah, I know.”

We leave the rest unspoken, perhaps afraid to say it and realizing the futility of escaping. I choke on my helplessness, that perpendicular stubborn bone of a feeling stuck in my throat by stupid accident. We don’t have a chance to choose our parents, we are given them the way they are, whether we can bear them or not.

I can’t take a single breath, can’t close my mouth. My eyes fill with tears, heart pounding. I gag, wanting to take in some air, but I can’t. I try to rip myself open, to let this feeling out. I want to turn back the time, to reverse everything that’s been done.

“Come on, Ailen. Let’s do it, before somebody else helps us. I’d rather die on my own terms,” Hunter says, with a terrible finality.

“What do you mean, your own terms?” I ask quietly, pretending I didn’t understand him and making an innocent face, hoping against all hope that I’m wrong.

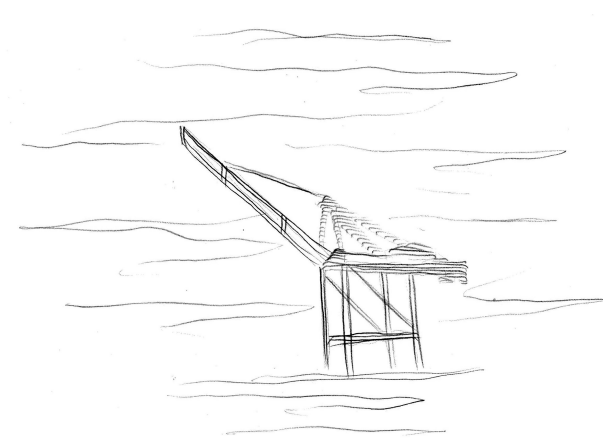
“You know what I mean,” he says.

“No, I don’t.” I wouldn’t let go.

“Yes, you do, you’re just afraid to say it. Want me to say it?” He takes my hands into his. “Double suicide.”



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## Interstate 5

We stand, motionless, peering at each other for what seems like an eternity. A gallery of images passes through my head, remembering the day we met at the lake, spinning through all of those hours spent together over the years, trying to find the place where he first decided to die, because you don't just decide something like that overnight. The pain adds up, day in and day out, little by little, until you can't hold it in anymore. It eats away at you, turning your daily existence into a magnificent torture, and dying promises to be the easy way out. The only way.

Memories refuse to appear. There is nothing there. It's like I've been gutted of my past and there is only now. Only Hunter's eyes, blue and scary in their determination. And my own fear; fear of letting him go, fear of not succeeding at killing myself, of being left alone, to suffer for who knows how long. That would be a pathetic existence.

"You did not just say that," I mutter, at a loss of words.

"Yeah, I did," he says.

"Why?" Now that we're away from danger, or at least there

is an illusion of being away from danger, suddenly, I don't want him to die, maybe don't even want to die myself, hoping to preserve some kind of normalcy between us, even while knowing it won't happen.

"We talked about this already, on the boat. Don't you remember?" His voice is tired. "What changed? You promised me. If you go, I go. Unless we decide *how* we do it, somebody will decide for us. Like those siren girlfriends of yours. You see what I mean?" he says.

"Yeah. You're right," I admit.

"When you jumped off the bridge—I hope you take this the right way—I was jealous. Jealous of your...how do I call it? Well, it was a brave thing to, it took serious guts."

"What? Are you out of your mind? Suicide is not about bravery." I glare.

"I know, I know. Hang on, just let me finish. What I'm saying is, it gave me the boost I needed. A kick in the ass, in a way. I thought about...taking my life for a couple of years now, since mom got cancer, and again when dad left. Anyway, I came close, but chickened out at the last minute." He falls silent.

"You never told me," I say, shocked.

"Of course I didn't. I didn't want to freak you out."

"What exactly did you do?" I ask.

"I stole a bike and rode it really fast." He grins.

"Jesus. You did? For real?"

"Yeah. It was awesome, at first. Then I was turning and I lost control. Out of the blue, the stupid back tire decided to lock up," he waves his arms showing me how far he was leaning and how fast the tires were spinning, "and I skidded for a few feet and rode into a ditch. Thank God it was simply dirt and not rocks or something. I left the bike and hiked home. It took me three hours, lots of time to think about lots of things. After this, I was too

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afraid to try it again.” He plays with my fingers, strumming them like piano keys.

“And you were never found out? Whose bike was it?” I ask.

“I dunno. Just some bike off the street. I hotwired it.”

“Figures. So you lied to me. When I asked you if you ever thought about killing yourself, you lied to me.”

“Sorry.” He hangs his head for a while, and then looks back up. “Does this mean, you’re up for it, then?”

“I was up for it in the boat, wasn’t I?” I motion with my head toward the lake. “That was suicide attempt number two for me. No, wait—three. Four? I don’t even know what number it was, to be honest. I lost count. I guess I’m game. What else can we do?” I shrug my shoulders.

“Awesome,” Hunter says and kisses me, as if I just agreed to go on an amusement park ride with him and not on a ride to extinction.

A wild surge of feelings spins my head and I have no room for a single breath, gulping his warm presence like a starving, caged animal that was thrown a bone for the first time in days. The echo of Hunter’s burning soul envelops me, melts me, smoldering.

We part, panting, electrified.

Hunter’s face is contorted in a menacing rage. He quickly swallows it and smiles. I mirror him back.

There will be no happy times, after all. There is no way for us to be together. There is no other way out. So be it.

This dare to death itself fills me with a strange excitement. It’s something I finally have control over. I hope I can shriek so loudly that my voice will pass the speed of sound and I’ll simply explode. Wouldn’t that be something?

Hunter grins the smile of a boy who doesn’t care if his newest mischief will cost him his life, because it’s too exciting not

to try. To exit this world as spectacularly as we can, to be seen and heard and talked about for a long time after we're gone. *Now* they will notice. *Now* they will cry. *Now* they will regret. *Now* they will hurt. But we won't care—it won't be our hurt anymore, it will be theirs to live with. We will be free of it by then, free and happy.

The air around us fills with purpose and a feeling of relief. The decision has been made and suffering leaves our conversation. We're back to planning it, like it's a vacation.

"So, how exactly do you propose we do it?" I ask, keeping my doubts about my own ability to perish to myself, afraid to kill the mood.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Because I think we got ourselves a new toy." Hunter pulls me by the hand around the troll statue. We step out onto the road.

Two police motorcycles are parked on it with their lights still flashing, both keys left in the ignition. The bikes stand close to the curb and there is enough space for the traffic to avoid them. It's not a busy street. A few cars cautiously drive by slowing down but not stopping, perhaps thinking that an investigation is underway and it's none of their business.

"Too bad you can't ride. I wish I had the time to teach you. Would you mind adjusting this one for two people?" Hunter asks.

"Yeah, I suppose," I say, studying the bike in question.

It's a Harley Davidson Road King, white, with a nice big windscreen that makes it look like George Jetson's sky mobile about to take off into the future. I pat it lightly. The gas tank is still warm and the bike is perfectly fine to ride, except it has only one leather seat that curves and butts up against a shiny black rectangular trunk the size of a small suitcase. There is nowhere for me to sit, and upon closer inspection, I see that it's bolted to the metal frame underneath.

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"I suppose I could sit on top?" I say, kneeling next to it to see better how it's fastened.

"Nah, you'd keep sliding and it won't be as comfortable," Hunter says from above. A car slows down and the driver, a middle-aged woman, peeks at us with interest.

I stand, looking ridiculous in this huge orange jacket that I grew to hate. "What are you looking at? Keep going," I say, and she hurriedly does, pushing on the gas and making her tires squeal.

I step behind the back to the rear tire and fix it between my legs. I roll up my sleeves and wedge my hands underneath both sides of the trunk, grabbing the pipes that hold it and pulling them apart, hard, and grunting with the effort. The metal groans and bends, but doesn't break. I blow on my hands, clasp harder and try again, applying as much force as I can. Pipes screech and heat up in my fists, then the first one yanks its bolts out of the hard-shell saddlebag on the left side, and I nearly fall together with the bike.

"Whoa!" Hunter grabs both handles.

I finish the job by tearing the remaining bolts out. Screaming, they leave large holes in the pristine white surface of its top wraparound part. Particles of dust settle on the ground. I toss the trunk aside. It rattles loudly. "Done."

"Perfect. Are you ready?" Hunter mounts the bike, beckoning me to sit behind him. I hesitate. "What's the matter?"

"Hold on," I say and run around the troll to the body of the mushroom man, hoping that I can find what I'm looking for. On his back he has a backpack. I unzip it, hold my breath so that I don't feel the stink, and reach in, pulling out various items of clothing, just like I suspected, hoping that some of it might not be soiled in any way. What I find instead is treasure, it's like I knew it might be in there.

"Oh, my God!" I shriek, unable to believe my eyes.

"Baby, we need to get out of here. What is it?"

"My hoodie!" I unfurl the clammy roll of cotton, instantly recognizing the large white letter S in the multitude of blue folds. "It's the one I lost when I jumped! It must have floated to the shore and he must have found it."

Beside myself with joy, I unzip the fisherman jacket, toss it to the ground, and pull my beloved hoodie over my head, feeling its dampness next to my skin. I rummage some more, but it's stupid to hope to find a girl's jeans or leggings in an old man's bundle of clothes. The rest of his stuff is mostly rags that might have been suitable to wear at some point in their life. So I plop on the ground, lift one leg to my mouth, then another, and tear two thick strips off the bottom of the pants I'm wearing, using my teeth. When I'm done, both cuffs hit about a foot above my ankles, making the fisherman overalls look more like wide capris.

"That's better," I say and run out.

"Looking good. Did that guy have it in his backpack?" Hunter says, feeling the sleeve.

"I know. Can you imagine?"

"Hey! Hey! Whatcha doing there? That's a police bike, get off it!" a man shouts at us from the street, walking briskly in our direction.

We exchange a look. Neither of us responds or moves.

"This is how I wanted to go, remember?" Hunter beams, but there is no laughter in his eyes. Just an empty calm. I'm drawn into his darkness, wishing for vacuum. I want him to suck me in, keep me blind, and never let me go.

"Care for a ride?" His hand doesn't shake this time. Long slender fingers. An upturned palm. And this look.

"Yes," I say and give him mine. I hop behind him and hold his waist, my bare feet hovering above the spot where passenger pegs would have been. Then I gently place them on top of the

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pipes that run around the perimeter of the saddlebags.

“Hey! Hey!” The man is running toward us.

“Don’t move!” I shout. He stops mid-step.

There is a momentary pocket of silence underneath the morning racket of traffic, souls, and human chatter. I take a breath, two, thinking, *this is it*, glancing up at the watchful eye of the stone troll. I grip Hunter tighter, my fingers entwined, and notice the glowing sunrays tear at the clouds.

Hunter turns the key in the ignition, pushes the start button, and guns the throttle. The roar of the bike’s engine bounces off the bridge’s underbelly. An elderly woman shouts at us from the porch of her house a few yards away, either to be quiet or fashioning some other scolding, I can’t tell.

I flip her the finger.

And we fly.

The ride is choppy, each speed change a jolt. I don’t think Hunter ever rode a Harley before. But he quickly adjusts and, gradually, the movement becomes smooth. Heart-quickenings. We’re a white drop of speed, first on empty neighborhood streets, then against slow moving highway traffic, a sea of gray prone to commuting boredom. If there is a way to go in style, it’s by cutting into this fabric of mundane and ripping it apart. Those who follow the rules stay inside preconceived road lanes. We cut on top of them, oblivious to honking, mean stares, and flared up indignation.

*Live every minute as if it was your last. Experience a million lives in a moment against half a life in a hundred tedious years. This is my one minute of fantasy that’s better than nothing.*

We dart along Highway 99, across the Aurora Bridge and into downtown Seattle that busts with life while the rest of the town is still just waking. The city is swarmed with morning souls, carrying their bodies into cars, sipping their first cups of coffee,

and puffing the air with delight after each gulp.

My ears hum with the constant drone of speed. I hug Hunter tighter and press my cheek against his back, expecting to crash any second. Together. Because he weaves in and out of gaps between cars like a madman, begging for it to happen.

We ride along the same route we took escaping from the sirens' meadow in Seward Park, except backward.

A cop car is leisurely patrolling early commuters. We whiz by it. I hear the cop spill his coffee, curse in surprise, and flip on the lights. Red and blue flashes in my peripheral vision. I consider flipping him the finger then decide against it because I'm too comfortable and I don't want to break my embrace. Hunter's body trembles with what must be adrenaline, he shifts into fifth gear. The bike jerks and lurches forward.

The police siren goes off from behind us.

Bweep! Bweep! Bweep!

"We've got to lose him!" I yell over the wind howl.

"I hear him!" Hunter yells back.

A few seconds later my left knee nearly scrapes the ground as we veer onto the dark swallow of the off-ramp and come off Highway 99 right by Seattle's two stadiums. By now, both of my feet burn from the scorching exhaust and the general heat coming off the bike. I grind my teeth to ignore it.

Hunter speeds up to fifty miles per hour, sixty, eighty. He runs the red light, turns left onto the road that leads to another onramp, rides up the hill, swerves along the loop, and gets onto a relatively empty Interstate 5 to the surprised looks from north-crawling traffic and honking from the cars heading south. Another cop comes ablaze from behind us. Great.

Hunter shivers violently. My hair ripples in the stink of traffic exhaust. I lean forward and yell. "What's wrong?"

"I'm freezing!" he shouts back against the tide of air. "I



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can't feel my fingers!" His teeth chatter, his muscles vibrate to the rhythm of his fear.

"Can't we stop and get some gloves somewhere?"

He doesn't answer, probably hyper-focused, intent on going as long as he can. That's typical Hunter; once he sets his mind to something, there is no swaying him.

"Shit," I say into his back, thinking hard. I parted rain before to stay dry, moving water particles in the air. My spine is ramrod straight, my mind focused. *Think, Ailen, think!* But there is nothing, no great ideas. Blankness overrides any attempt at producing an intelligent solution.

I feel Hunter's temperature drop as we fly in between road lanes, oblivious to the angry shouts and beeping, and the blaring sirens behind us.

I breathe into Hunter's sweatshirt, inhaling the lightly moist scent that reminds me of wet laundry. Its fabric balloons and ripples in the wind. Suddenly I know. One moment there is emptiness, the next is filled with certain knowledge, as if it was always there. Humidity. Water vapor in the air. Perhaps I can move little droplets of water faster and make the air warmer by speeding them up?

It's worth a try.

"Don't freak out! I'm about to scream! I want to try something!" I shout. There's no indication that he heard me.

I tilt my head at the sky and open into a guttural animal wail, a wild a cappella. It starts out soft, and then gradually grows in volume. I hike it up a pitch, higher, *higher*, overpowering the cacophony of traffic punctured by the blaring police sirens behind us.

Hunter's body goes tense, I rub my hands up and down his stomach to tell him it's okay, to hopefully relax him.

Reaching its highest register, my yowl explodes into a solo

opening for a reckless opera, its dotted rhythm designed to match the rhythm of water atoms—three of them, one oxygen and two hydrogen—their lot connected by a chemical embrace.

*Listen to me, I command it. I want you to dance for me, okay? I want you to do a hydrological dance, to turn from solid to liquid to gas. Become tasteless, odorless, colorless, and transparent. I want you to move faster, move as fast as you can and create hot steam.*

They hear. The atoms. A great many of them in about a twenty feet diameter around me. They shift and scat and jitter in tune to my yelling, resonating in my ears.

Never mind the tunnel of dry air that parts the rain into pouring, rattling sheets. I can do better. I can produce a bubble of warmth. I can bind tiny basic units of water to my voice.

The air in my lungs is running out and I badly need another breath but am afraid to break the flow. I continue bellowing, losing myself in the sound.

I feel Hunter's core warm up, stop trembling, and relax. At the same time, the gush of wind against my face rises in temperature. My fingertips tingle with the buzzing heat.

"Whatever it is you're doing, it's awesome! Keep doing it!" he shouts at me.

I pause, nod into his back, take another deep breath, and launch into more wailing, turning a little sphere of climate around us almost tropical.

The traffic thins out. We keep riding fast with the cops still on our tail, but now I think I also detect a distant whoop-whoop of a helicopter. I know I need to stop my yowling and yell a command for the police officers to turn, but I'm worried about Hunter being hit by the cold air and losing his grip on the ride. It's so smooth, so thrilling, he's obviously in a zone.

Time stretches, or maybe it shrinks, I can't tell. City buildings give way to low-strung malls and houses skittered along

## Chapter 13

the highway. I hear the mechanical wail of the sirens moving in closer, same with the helicopter. Hunter must hear it too because he guns the throttle, suddenly alight with panic. I keep howling to keep him warm.

Two patrol cars catch up with us, flanking our stolen police motorcycle on both sides. I can see an officer gesticulating, ordering us to slow down and pull over.

“Eat this!” Hunter shouts and guns the bike. He whizzes ahead and skids across two lanes to the right, veering onto the closest exit, a cloud of smoke dissipating behind us. The engine emits some coughing noises, stretched to its limits. The off-ramp slope is so steep that the front wheel of the bike lifts off the ground for a second and then we thump down as Hunter brakes and nearly lays the bike down in the turn. I watch in horror as my left knee scrapes the asphalt, happy that I’m wearing tough fisherman overalls and not flimsy jeans.

“Woo-hoo! We popped a wheelie!” he yells in delirious excitement. We recover from the left turn and speed across the little bridge over the highway. Both cops whiz by underneath, too late to react, but sure to turn around at the first opportunity. We make it to a suburban road, roll off its asphalt, and slip into the bushes, dirt, and torn grass splattering upward and over the bike. Both of its wheels grind into the mud and stop turning. Hunter kills the engine.

At the same time, I break my wail. The warm pocket of air slowly disintegrates. We both hop off at the same time and Hunter drops the bike on its side. We’re in the pocket of green that hugs one of the intersection corners, cookie-cutter houses spread evenly along both roads.

“Are you okay?” I immediately ask, pulling leaves out of my hair.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” Hunter answers, not looking at me,

thinking.

"Wait, where exactly are we?" I ask.

"I think somewhere in the glorious suburbia of Puyallup."

"And why did we stop here?"

"We're almost out of gas." Hunter dog-shakes his head.

"Oh. That's just great," I say, surveying our surroundings through the branches of the tall bushes we're in.

"Don't worry, we'll figure something out." He's enthralled by something else at the moment, I can tell.

"What do you mean, we'll figure something out? How!"

He puts a finger across my lips to shush me. "That thing you did, with the warm air? That was awesome." His dirty face splits into a wide grin, his appearance muddy and shaken but happy, like a toddler after a bout of some particularly good mischief. He wipes his palms on his jeans and takes my hand into his left.

"It wasn't air, it was water in the air. I can move water. I can make it move so fast that it warms up. You know, make the atoms bump against each other faster?"

"Whatever, it was awesome is all I'm saying." He wipes his nose with his other hand and then wipes it on his jeans in turn, spitting on the ground.

I watch this with a typical girly revulsion and, at the same time, with a certain air of pride for his raw manliness.

"So, how are we gonna get gas? The cops will be here any minute," I say.

His face smiles but I sense that underneath the mask he's empty, as if all the life has been sucked out of him.

"Just drop the whole gas thing. Listen. I have an idea, and I fully respect your decision in this matter, okay? But, I say, drowning is overrated."

"Not like I can drown *now*," I mutter.

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“Exactly. It’s meh, too quiet,” Hunter continues without missing a beat. “How about, I teach you how to fly?”

“And you would know how? Then we better do it, in like, the next minute.” I glance back, listening for police. They’re still on their way south, haven’t turned around yet.

I look back and find Hunter staring at me intently. I hold his gaze, a bridge of understanding strung in the air, for both of us to cross only once and then disappear as if it never existed.

“You’re thinking somewhere high?” I ask.

“I’m thinking, a mountain,” he says triumphantly.

“Which one?”

“Rainier.”

“Oh,” I exhale, nodding, faintly aware of time passing and wondering how much longer we can stand here and talk before being caught. Hunter seems unfazed, studying my reaction with obvious satisfaction. He always falls into this calmness at the onset of danger, knowing exactly when to rest and when to run. I decide to trust his intuition.

The air grows thin. Sleepy suburban houses stir with life, souls tinkling on from slumber.

“And we will ride to the top of the mountain on...” I begin.

“That,” Hunter finishes for me and points at the first house to the left of the intersection. “A Streetfighter. Baby, we’re in luck.” That explains his stopping point.

I follow his gaze to a big craftsman-style house, squatting low over a rising manicured lawn, the walls painted an unidentifiable shade of not really beige, and not really gray, but something in the middle. Its size suggests a huge family. In front of its two garage doors are parked a dark blue van and a sporty looking motorcycle. Black. How appropriate.

“What’s a Streetfighter?” His excitement is lost on me.

"It's a cross between a Monster and a Superbike."

"Hunter." I throw him a stern look, pretending to understand.

"What?" He pulls on my hand. "Come on, we don't have much time."

I sigh. We trot across the street. It's quiet. I sense only a handful of souls behind closed doors, and none in the big house. We stop by the bike. It looks naked, with all kinds of pipes exposed and two long mirrors sticking out.

"Can you do your freezing thing again?" Hunter pleads.

I purse my lips.

"Please?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulls his piece of wire from his pocket, drops on his knees next to the bike, and sticks his hand inside its guts. "This is too easy."

"Fine," I say and scan the neighborhood. "We're just lucky nobody is on the street, and this is stealing," I add, but he doesn't hear me.

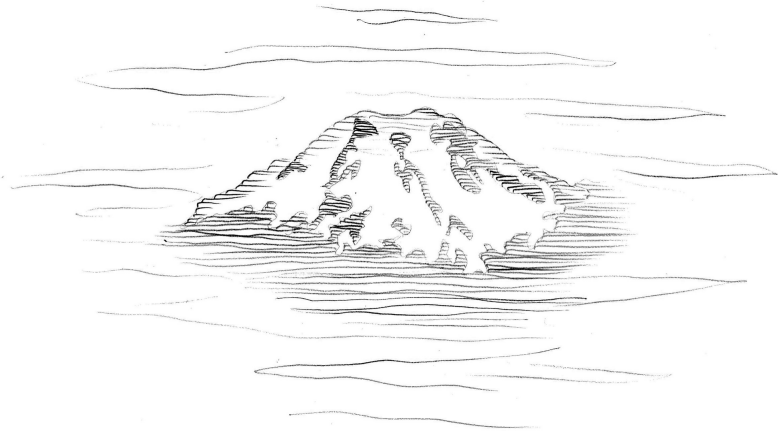
"Man, I always wanted to ride one," comes from below, and then something clicks and the engine roars to life.

"Quick!" Hunter mounts and I hop behind him on the miniscule passenger peg of a seat, but it's better than the flat surface of the Harley's saddlebags.

"It has passenger pegs!" I exclaim, opening them to their horizontal position.

Nobody runs out of the house, nobody stops us. Hunter backs out of the driveway and guns it, leaving a trail of blue smoke behind us, riding up the road and cresting the hill. It seems fortune is on your side when your end goal is death.

## Chapter 14



### Mount Rainier

It's a beautiful sight and it takes my breath away. Over the jagged line of uniform rooftops, a valley of trees, and a strip of houses miles away, a magnificent expanse of sky towers its heavy brow. The morning sun breaks through the clouds and, in that pocket of pink, an enormous mountain glistens with snow, pristinely white in its splendor. Multiple ridges give it a rough yet peaceful appearance, its sheer vastness making me feel small and unimportant. I wonder how many people made it to the top and decided they rule the very nature, when their hands slipped off the rock and they fell into the abyss, collapsing back into organic matter, the mountain unperturbed, looking down from its height, sending a blizzard as a way of goodbye.

"Mount Rainier," we say at the same time.

"You know how to get there?" I say into his ear, standing up on the pegs.

"Yep. Ought to go out in style, right? Ever flew off a stratovolcano?" He falls into his comical speak, shouting over the racket of the motor.

## Mount Rainier

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our performance, the one and only show. Against a backdrop of glacial ice, with Rainier Valley for the stage! Today! Don’t miss it! There will be no reruns! We will make sure to donate all proceeds to future suicide victims, of which, let me assure you, there will be many!”

“That’s not funny!” I interrupt him.

“Says who?”

I pinch him lightly.

“Oww!” he cries.

The topic dies and we continue speeding along mostly empty streets. A minute or two later I pick up the distant wail of the police siren again.

“Cops!” I yell. “A few miles behind!”

“Can you shroud us in fog or something?” Hunter yells back, gunning the bike and running a red light to the honk of a lonely car standing at the intersection.

“Ahead of you, punk, already planned!” I lie. Well, just a little bit, to appear superior, because I still feel wounded by his stupid joke.

A blue shimmer of atmosphere rushes past us as rolling blankets of fog creep up the sides of the road. Hunter turns and we fly onto a narrow back road hidden in the woods, full of twists and turns to enjoy one last time.

Yellowing trees frame our flight with their canopies of burnt foliage on top of tufts of green as if their gigantic, hairy heads have been dipped in fire. The damp smell of fallen leaves mixes with the crispness of fall, fresh and chilly on the touch. An obnoxious mechanical blaring is on our tail, together with helicopter blades whooping above us. Another minute and they’ll see us.

I tilt my head up and open into a song, the one I sang to Hunter, one of my Siren Suicides favorites.



## Chapter 14

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

Thick mist rolls off my skin and licks us under a cotton candy blanket of fog. Its edges touch the ground on all sides except in front, leaving a wide enough gap between the sky and the road for Hunter to see where we’re going. I find it easy to manipulate the moisture to my design while keeping it warm at the same time, wondering if one day I can master a cloud castle—then realizing that there won’t be a one day. Today is all I have.

*“I adore you,  
See me or I fly.”*

All other noises hush. I listen for the police. Their annoying ululating has diminished. Hunter gives me a thumbs up with his left hand before gripping the clutch handle again.

*“Can you hold my heart?  
Can you hold my soul?  
I can’t be apart.”*

The words ring so true that I’m ready for our fall, watching this spectacular ride through a cloud of my own creation, singing for what feels like hours, until my throat turns hoarse and I can’t sing anymore. I close my mouth and press my cheek against Hunter’s back, letting myself get lost in the scenery. Ghosts of trees appear out of nowhere and are swallowed behind us into oblivion, their branches grinning toothless smiles along

## Mount Rainier

this ribbon of road. Slowly, the fog recedes to greenery on our left and a huge flat lake on our right. The road comes up to the base of the mountain after which it disappears around the bend into nothing. The mountain itself is not visible behind the thick layer of forest.

My left ear picks up Hunter's rapid heartbeat and breathing; with my right, I concentrate on listening into the distance behind us. Apart from a few souls and a few passing cars, there is nothing. I perk up and stand on the pegs again. At the same time, Hunter slows down and stops on the side of the road.

In front of us towers a wooden park entrance, a twenty feet high structure of two cut off tree trunks on each side and six more on top of them forming a roof. The actual gate is fastened to each front pole and is currently open. Two metal chains hug the middle top beam and hold up a wooden board that reads, MT. RAINIER NATIONAL PARK. Up ahead are wooden cabins with windows and a flag in the middle of the road. In fact, the road parts in two around the middle cabin. It's an entrance station building where you're supposed to stop and buy a park pass.

"We've lost them. The cops," I say, as I get off the bike and stretch out my legs.

"No, *you* lost them. Thank you." He turns and takes my face into his hands, the bike idling softly and radiating heat between us.

"Ah, it's nothing. How are we going to get past that?" I point ahead. "I have no cash on me. Do you?"

"No cash needed, baby. We will gun it, as always."

"Right," I say, avoiding his intense gaze and looking up. Beyond the entrance station, the base of the mountain is covered in dense vegetation, the road zigzagging up and out of sight, vertical rock on its right side, a void on its left.

"I've never been here before," I say. "What's it called? I

## Chapter 14

mean, what part of Mount Rainier are we going up?”

“Paradise,” Hunter says.

“Seriously? It’s called, *Paradise*?”

“Absolutely and irresistibly correct. Paradise Ridge. I’ve been here before, err...contemplating. There is this nice drop-off about—” He shifts closer to me so that he can intercept my gaze. “What’s wrong?”

I sigh. “Nothing.”

Hunter gives me a quick peck on the nose. “I don’t believe you. Talk to me.”

I try to make out the mountain’s peak in the clouds, golden in the sun. “Do you really want to know?”

We lock eyes, transfixed by what we’re about to do, pressed by its weight and lifted to the highs of existence at the same time.

“I do. I really do,” Hunter urges me on.

My familiar inability to speak my mind at important moments, especially when emotionally overwhelmed, kicks in. Unable to explain the turmoil of my suddenly emotional state, all I can say is, “Can’t you guess?”

“I think I know. This is my bridge, in a way, and to you it must feel like—”

“No. No, that’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean then?” His eyebrows fly up.

“You never told me why you want to kill yourself. I told you, but you never told me. And I...I want to know.” I fall quiet, biting my lower lip.

Hunter looks away. He appears to study a nearby bush sprinkled with bursts of yellow salmonberries.

“That week, when my father left, I thought I could fix it.” His eyes brim with tears and he flaps his hand at them, pressing his lips together so that the next words come out suppressed as if they were never meant to be heard by anyone.

## Mount Rainier

"I was stupid and arrogant, thought I could fix anything, but then I couldn't. There is no magic glue for family, you know, no magic pill for cancer. I felt so useless, just wanted to lie down and die..."

"And you decided you couldn't hold the weight anymore, is that right? It was too painful to bear," I quietly chime in.

"Yeah. You're stealing my words." He stretches his lips into a hint of a smile, still studying the bush.

I simply hold his hand.

"Then I got angry. I picked myself up and decided to fight no matter what. We had no money for medical insurance, so I went out and got a job, a real paying job." He steals a glance at me. "Your dad, you know, helping him with the whole siren hunting thing. It seemed very far-fetched when he explained it to me, but I didn't care. I'd do anything for cash. Suddenly, I could afford to buy meds for my mom." There are tears in his voice.

"It was fake though, a false hope. It only pushed back what I knew would happen all along. She doesn't even recognize me anymore, has to ask my name every day. So what's the point? What is the fucking point of living?"

He grabs my shoulders and shakes me. I let him.

"At least you have a mom," I whisper.

He falls silent, as if I slapped him on the face.

"At least you have a dad."

Touché. A surge of hate fills my throat.

"You call *that* a dad?" I yank my hand out of his to curl it into a fist. "That control freak, that sicko woman-hating asshole creep?" I stop to catch my breath, tears spilling down my cheeks in two angry lines.

He cradles my face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. How can I make you feel better? What can I do?" His eyes widen and all I see is the

## Chapter 14

sky reflected in the two blue pools of his irises, pulsing with care. It fills me with a brilliant pain that's borderline pleasure and hunger, rearing its ugly head to hear Hunter's burning soul—an off-key shuffling of slippers on the floor, clanking dishes as the dinner table is set, and birds chirping, all against the background of Vivaldi's *Summer* season.

It takes an enormous amount of will power not to lunge and tear him apart. My chest lights on fire and threatens to burn me alive from the inside. I hug myself fiercely, hoping it will help.

"Let's just do it," I whisper through tight lips, hoping against all hope that, by the sheer force of my yelling, I will explode and finally stop existing; images of Hunter smashing on the rocks into a million pieces pollutes my head.

"You okay?" Hunter asks.

I take a deep breath and exhale the pain, numb. "Have you ever given someone a ride of a lifetime?"

We exchange a smile.

"What's a ride of a lifetime?" he asks innocently.

"You know, the killer kind," I say, mirroring his tone.

"Oh, how curious. Nope, I never have."

"Well, can I be the first? Pretty please?" I play coy.

"You? Of course. Always. And forever."

I lean in and he's kissing me. Desperate to feel all of it, I press hard. Lips, tongue, my whole face. We gobble each other up. There is no room for breath, no room for thought, only this.

His hands grip my hair, I ball up the collar of his clammy shirt into fists, watching clouds drift by, revealing blue sky. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes only one minute to fall down ten thousand feet. I close my eyes, trying to imagine what our bodies will sound like, flying down the mountainside, crashing through pines and onto the rocks. I decide that I will see Hunter through his fall, to make sure he dies

## Mount Rainier

peacefully, and then I will wail over his dead body and burst into nothing.

Pulling against desire, as if against a strong magnetic force, we break apart and reach for a breath at the same time.

"It's time," Hunter says.

"How long to the top?"

"Well, it's not exactly *the top*. It's a drop-off from one of the ridges. One of the observation points. Twenty minutes at the most."

"Oh, right," I say, remembering now that Hunter mentioned the word *ridge* before and understanding that it was stupid to think that an asphalt road would go all the way to the snowy top of Mount Rainier. I grab his hand to cover up my shame and mutter, "I love you. To death."

"I love you more." He grins and gives me another peck on the lips. "You're so beautiful, you know that?"

And I don't know how to parry that, dropping my eyes. A surge of excitement runs through me, pins and needles. My hands shake.

Hunter turns and revs up the bike.

"Shit, we're almost out of fuel. Get on!"

"I'm on!" I shout, clutching him from behind. We whiz up the path and past the entrance, ignoring the shouts of the ranger who sticks his head out the window, surprised.

Up we go, high, higher, taking tight turns at incredible speed, waiting for that perfect drop-off to come.

How ironic is it to experience the last twenty minutes of your life as the most vibrant and happy. The sky's aglow with September morning, and I gobble it up with my eyes. I suck the cool wind, full of autumn smells, through my nose. The thick brush is dotted with the distant tinkle of deer souls. I taste the mountain air on my tongue, a nectar of vastness and freedom akin

## Chapter 14

to standing on the peak's top, hugging rough rock, yelling to the world, *Look at me, I made it!* Above all, Hunter's burning soul, although smoldering, is still the sweet penultimate note to finish it all off.

I begin to count the minutes. Seven pass by, thirteen left until we reach our spot.

Each turn makes my heart stop. We ride higher still, twisting together with the road.

"Right there!" Hunter yells and points across the valley. I dare to glance to my right, and then down—and I wish I didn't. We're riding on the top edge of a narrow valley with a river at its very bottom. He points to a cliff across the valley. So our drop won't be a spectacular 14,000 feet high like I thought; more like 500 feet. Still, it's breath-catching. A layer of fog palms the tree tops ever so gently, torn into patches of needlework by the sun. I dare not breathe, not wanting to blow off whatever is left of it.

Six minutes left.

We take a sharp right turn together with the road. Douglas firs, red cedars, and hemlocks recede, giving way to occasional pine clumps against open clearings tickled with berries and dew. I hug Hunter even tighter. He covers my hands with his left palm, hot and sweaty despite the rapidly dropping temperature.

I press my knees into his thighs and squeeze hard. I feel his stomach muscles roll under my arms. I imprint my face in his back wanting to melt into him and become a permanent impression—one solid being instead of two.

I listen to the low thumping of his heart and imagine riding inside his blood vessels at full speed, bathing hot and red like boiling tea after a walk in a winter afternoon. Straight to his heart that's still beating.

Four minutes left.

Pieces of crumbled rock fly from under the bike's wheels

## Mount Rainier

and skitter down into nearly eight thousand feet of obscurity. I turn my head back a little to see the mountain. It's on my right and a little behind us now. Sunrays hit its top with their golden glory. It must be close to three o'clock in the afternoon. The sky has cleared of clouds. The sun shines down the valley, rendering it gray, covering it with a layer of milky thick mist, just like I've seen on postcards.

One minute.

I nuzzle my face all over Hunter's back, trying to absorb as much of him as I can; reveling in the shape of his ribs that curve out from a delicate spine to the smooth sides of his torso, tense with apprehension. As if in answer, Hunter guns the throttle. The bike sputters and coughs up a phlegm of purple exhaust.

"We're out of fucking fuel!" he yells. "Right on time!"

"I love you!" I yell back, wondering if these would be the last words I tell him, rubbing my hands all over him in a mad urgent caress, feeling his face, touching his lips, sliding my fingers down his neck, panic rolling over me and pulling me under.

"I love you more!" he shouts with delirious glee. His voice is sharp with shrillness. We are near. I can see the drop-off ahead of us.

Thirty seconds.

This is our final stretch. I clench my arms around his waist, not worried anymore if I cut off his breath or not. I'd mash him to pieces and stuff him into my pocket if I could, to dip my fingers inside his homespun goodness, forever warm and soothing. Hunter grunts and grabs my hands briefly, crushing my fingers.

Ten seconds.

We go in a straight line, right into the sun, into the split that divides the horizon, light blue and dark blue. Blue is my favorite color.

Three. Two. One.



## Chapter 14

Ahead of us is an observation point with a two-foot high stone fence running along its edge. I momentarily freak out thinking we will smash into it and that will be the end of our glory. But before I can shout anything, I see a gap straight ahead, about six feet wide, and that's where Hunter's headed.

A wooden make-shift fence is propped in front of it, sporting a sign that says DANGER and something else that I have no time to read.

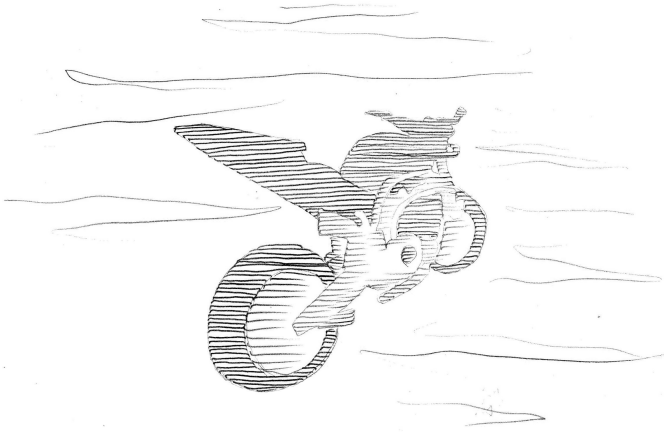
"We're on!" Hunter yells.

As if anticipating our descent, the road in this spot curves slightly down, and we hit the wooden make-shift fence head on, making it fly up spectacularly and then over us, dropping with a creaking thud as we roll forward.

Our hearts beat in unison and threaten to overpower the motorcycle's buzz. Its tires hug the asphalt one last time, revolve another ninety degrees in a fraction of a second, and burst free of gravity like a rookie diver propelled by sheer force, off the cliff, into the air.

We fly.

## Chapter 15



### Paradise

“YEAH!” Hunter’s voice echoes into space as he takes his hands off the bike handles and intertwines his fingers with mine. At the same time, I reach out to him. Joined, we spread our arms like wings before the wind tears off our madness feathers. The bike roars, sputters, and falls out from under us, crashing over treetops along the steep incline and smashing everything in its wake, rolling out of sight, leaving a trail of smoke. On inertia, we arch away from the slope just enough to avoid the trees and propel down into the rocky valley. Wind flaps our shirts and Hunter is falling face first, I hover over him. One second passes, and then another. I’m hit with a full-blown panic attack. What the hell are we doing? The air is thin and freezes my guts. The wind, rumbling loudly, tears at me with its fingers and the rush deafens me. My mind reels with big red pulsing letters forming one word: **WRONG!**

As if to tell me—wrong way, wrong decision, wrong direction. But it’s too late to turn back. Too late for anything at this point. Another five seconds or so and we’ll be mush at best,

## Chapter 15

slime at worst, to be scraped off the rocks as our final act of togetherness.

I hyperventilate, my voice caught in my throat by the wind. This is a hundred times worse than jumping off the Aurora Bridge. This is so scary that I think my heart will stop beating and I'll slide into a coma before we hit.

Hunter's fingers clench mine with the force of a corpse in its final death grip, bone-crunching and icy. We tear through the milky fog, our clothes instantly damp, faces teary, eyeballs chilled past the point of hurting. A rather spotty clump of pines is lined up as spikes, ready to puncture our fall. I briefly think about creating a pocket of air to cushion our landing, when the direction of the wind shifts. We hit a dense air mass at the wrong angle and spiral out of control. My thoughts ruthlessly tossed aside, my body takes over and my siren survival instinct kicks in.

I scream.

Desperation passes through my vocal cords and exits at way over one hundred decibels—a battle cry, a death growl, a rebel yell, all combined into one. We're two seconds from hitting the ground when the mist shifts. Droplets appear out of thin air and multiply at an alarming rate. Water condenses around us and wafts down in a river of rain. We're soaked. I forget my promise about seeing Hunter all the way to his death, to make sure he dies peacefully, to wail over his dead body, to explode into nothing. All I want right now is to save him. I don't want him to die. I clench my arms into a tight hold, curl my knees and lift my legs up, twisting in the air, surrounding Hunter with my body like a blanket, my back to the ground, acting as a protective shield.

*Crack!*

We crash through pines at the very bottom of the incline. Branches snap across my back, their furious hands slapping my face and covering me in a shower of needles. We tumble over and

spiral. I lose all sense of direction, closing my eyes and keeping only one goal in mind. *Protect Hunter. Protect Hunter. At any cost, protect Hunter.*

*Thud!*

My back lands on the wet ground, softened by all the water. It's like I managed to create a floating sphere of liquid and landed in the middle of it, bursting it apart like a gigantic soap bubble. The ground is covered with minced rock. It bites its sharp teeth into my skin. The spot where I land yields to my moving force, indents, and sends shockwaves around me in circles. A shockwave travels through my spine from the collision; its force seems to break every one of my bones, stretching every muscle to its snapping point. Still, I don't release my arms, pressing them tighter. It's my death grip. It doesn't matter what happens, I won't let Hunter go.

My body bounces up and down like a rubber ball. It feels bruised and shattered but intact, only my skin gets torn due to moisture. Does this mean it's impossible to break a siren apart? Does it mean that because my body is around Hunter's, he won't die? Because, technically, I'm sort of trying to kill him and, if I remember correctly, Canosa told me that sirens can't kill siren hunters by conventional means. Only with a song. I'm confused and stumped, as we continue to roll down the slope toward what must be the river we saw from above.

My favorite hoodie has been nearly torn off me and the skin on my back has peeled to reveal flesh. Like my father said, sirens are easier to cut underwater so, inadvertently, by softening my fall with water, I also made myself vulnerable. I just wish there was a manual to read so that I could understand what my abilities are and how to use them.

My head hits a rock and, for a second, complete darkness surrounds me. I refuse to let go and continue tumbling through

the underbrush and into a tangle of wet dirt, pine needles, and twigs. Small stones and soil mash into my mouth. My left hand is over Hunter's face to protect it from damage, my right hugs his bent legs. My entire body is flattened by the fall and surrounds him on all sides, or so I imagine in my head, because my eyes are still closed. My ears ring. Everything in my body is on fire and I no longer know where we are and when we'll stop moving.

I realize I'm still screaming, that explains my open mouth. I close it, falling silent. We stop rolling. Silence falls down in a hushed hammer, and I'm afraid to move. I'm cradling Hunter's body in an embrace, his back pressed into my stomach, his head on the ground.

Deafened, I can't quite pick up the echo of his burning soul, or his breathing, or the beating of his heart. My fingers are sticky and wet.

Nature itself seems to be unperturbed by our fall, hurrying on its way. A cold whiff of rapidly moving mountain river fills my nostrils. Despite my pain, I smile and take a deep inhale, noting the aroma of moss, passing fish, and evergreen trees.

Unable to wait any longer, I open my eyes.

A huge Douglas fir towers over us in a protective gesture. It's solitary, standing all alone, a long way from the cluster of firs yards away on either side. A silver line of river glistens about twenty yards behind it. It's as much as I can see, peeking above Hunter's head. I can't turn my head to look back, nor can I glance up. In fact, I can't seem to move at all.

Guilt crushes me. I'm alive. Before I descend into the dark tunnel of self-loathing, I hear something through the diminishing ringing in my ears. I stop breathing and tense. There it is again. A flood of elation pulls into instant happiness unlike anything I've felt before.

I can hear the echo of Hunter's soul! He convulses and

coughs up blood. Warm liquid trickles down my fingers.

“Oh, my God! Hunter! You’re alive, you’re alive!” I croak, happy my voice is working. And I laugh, though it comes out in hysterical bursts.

“We didn’t die,” I say. “We’re alive, Hunter. Did you hear me? We’re alive.”

He breathes in short wheezing gasps and doesn’t answer me.

“Are you all right?” I ask again.

Silence is my answer.

I can’t move my arms or wiggle my fingers. I’m frozen in the position we landed. My left hand is splayed close to Hunter’s face, my right hand on his knees. Nothing works. I can’t pinpoint the exact moment when my body stopped melting from an internal fire of pain and succumbed to the freezing numbness. I try to wiggle my toes or move my legs. No luck, I don’t feel them at all. Thinking back to Hunter’s attempt to cut out my vocal cords on my father’s trawler, I realize that it will take my body a while to repair itself, hoping that it actually will. That my skin and muscles will knit together.

Are my bones broken too? It feels like they are—all of them. How long would *that* take to stitch together? A couple hours, days, weeks? How exactly can I help Hunter if I can’t move? I realize I didn’t think about this scenario, it wasn’t in the plan. The plan was to see him through death and cry my sorrow over his body until I burst. Amazingly, before that, the plan was to make him stop loving me so that he could stop turning into a fully fledged siren hunter; so that his soul would stop burning and he would return to being a normal teenager. So that he could forget me and find himself a normal girl. I would convince Canosa and the other sirens to leave him alone. Him and my father. Because I was planning to fully revive my father’s soul, but not to kill him.

Splendid. I think I just screwed up on all of these accounts.

A loud thunder cracks in the near distance, sounding precisely like an explosion. It takes me a moment to put it together.

“There goes the bike,” I say.

Silence. Hunter doesn’t react.

“Hunter? Can you hear me? Can you talk? I can hear you breathing. Can you say something, anything, please? Or just nod to let me know that you heard me?” My voice catches, throat sore from screaming. His hair tickles my nose but I can’t tilt my head away. More blood seeps from Hunter and onto my left sleeve. He shakes in a violent fit and is still.

I give up trying to make him talk. “Hey, it’s okay. We’re alive, and that’s all that matters. It was an idiotic thing to do. I’m here, I’m with you. It’ll be okay,” I whisper.

No response, only shallow wheezing. Hunter takes a deep breath and produces a barely audible, “Fuck.”

“What did you say? Oh, God. Oh, God, you can talk. You’re alive you’re alive you’re alive. We didn’t die. That was the stupidest thing we’ve ever done, you hear me? It was fucking retarded. I don’t care what you say, but I’m not going to do this, not ever again. It’s not our turn to die, okay? Fuck this, fuck suicide. Do you hear me?”

Rapid breathing.

“As long as you don’t die on me, you don’t have to answer. Just keep breathing, okay? Keep breathing and keep living,” I whisper.

A tickling sensation runs through my torso down to my legs. My muscles begin knitting together on their own accord. I feel them mend, limbs tingling. My skin is itchy as if a million red ants bit me all over. *Stand aside, creeps, I’ll be reborn here any second*, pops into my head. It sounds like something Hunter would

say.

I rest, happy to feel his warmth in my embrace, and feel my eyelids slowly droop and close completely from weakness. Whatever energy I had left, I expended it on conversing.

How much time goes by, I don't know. Maybe ten minutes, maybe ten hours. The only thing I know is that I'm still broken but repairing myself fast. I dare to flex my fingers. They work, but my hands still can't move. I notice that Hunter's breathing slows down.

*No. No-no-no. Don't panic, don't panic. It's okay, it'll be okay.* All I can do is breathe into his hair and wait, listening to the faint violin moans of his burning soul, knowing that as long as I can hear it, he's living.

I keep dipping in and out of reality, sensing with some built-in acuity that I can now move my arms. Carefully, afraid to hurt Hunter, and in what seems to take an eternity—inch by inch—I pull my left arm from under him, letting him lie on the rocks. After that's done, I prop myself up on my elbow and promptly collapse back onto the ground, hitting my head on the same stone I hit as before and seeing stars.

I close my eyes. Too soon, need to rest more.

I completely lose sense of time and fluctuate between the agony of everything itching inside of me, suppressing the mad urge to scratch it.

I hear souls and snap my eyes open. A hundred feet away or so, a couple of deer step out from behind the trees, no doubt on their way to the river to get a drink of water. They flick their ears, approaching cautiously, sniffing at the air and keeping their distance. Their slender legs click against the stones. Their souls sound like rustling leaves and animal trilling. I clear my throat, thinking whether or not I can lure one in to feast on it. It would



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do me good. I suppose I could sustain myself on animals alone, come to think of it. Why not? It would take more of them, in terms of quantity, to match one human soul. As if reading my thoughts, they sprint and are gone.

The sun is as bright as it was during our fall, and appears to be in the same position. I'm guessing it's around three in the afternoon. Well, maybe closer to four. I wonder if the ranger decided to pursue us or didn't bother. Did anyone see us sail off the cliff? Has anyone heard the bike explode and called to send a rescue squad our way? I glance about.

The valley is an open, elongated canyon about five hundred feet deep, and we're both in plain view. Although, the gigantic Douglas fir might be a convenient cover, shielding us if people look down. We're in the shade and I wish the sun would move already, because I could use some warming up. From what I can hear, no human souls are within a mile radius.

I try lifting myself again. My arm shakes like crazy as the rocks painfully dig into my elbow. Beads of cold perspiration break out on my forehead and my gills puff up, inflated. Reaching the river to get moisture into my system dominates my every wish. I lick my lips and pause for a few seconds to make sure the dizziness goes away. Slowly, I prop myself up on all shaky fours and gently roll Hunter onto his back, holding his head and laying it down carefully, having my first good look at him since we fell.

I don't want to see what I see.

His face is mush, scraped and bruised and swollen, one bloody mess caked into a mask of pain. His eyes are two slits that are glued shut. His hair appears to have become an old wig from a prop shop that needs to be thrown away; it's matted and greasy and dirty. His clothes are a shredded heap of cotton from another life, the color of mud. I can't see if he suffered any wounds, because he's caked in mud, and I briefly glance down at myself, I

am, too. It's dry now and is peeling off me in large chunks as I move about.

I shift my focus to his lower body. His legs are bent; his feet are still in socks, but his sneakers are gone, torn off by our crash. His right arm is limp and his left sticks out at an awkward angle. I touch his cheek and tear my hand away.

It feels like his scream will never end.

"Fuck that hurts don't touch me talking hurts! Owv..." he wails, gradually falling into quiet moaning, occasionally coughing.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry," I mutter, cursing myself for my own stupidity.

Hunter sobs. Tears trace two clear lines on the sides of his filthy face. For a moment, he opens his eyes wide, perhaps from another wave of pain. His bright blue irises are the only two things of clean color, as lovely as the sky. He closes them, whimpering. I decide if I look at his face any longer, I will start sobbing, so I get busy. I squat, ball up the bottom of his sweatshirt, and rip it open in one yank.

"Your ribs look like they're intact, so that's a good thing." I gently hover my hand over his shoulders and stomach, afraid to touch him, eyeing his bright red bruises on either side of his chest, two long oval-shaped areas that must have resulted from me not having enough of a complete enclosure to protect his sides. There are no cuts, however, and I sigh in relief.

"Looks like your arm might be broken. It's twisted at a strange angle. Can you move it?"

I dare to touch it and Hunter wails, then coughs up more blood and stops moving. I hear his smoldering soul dance in his ribcage like a moth at the light, wanting to flee, thrashing, breaking its delicate wings. It cries out to me, begs for mercy.

Terror envelops me.

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“No-no-no-no-no. Don’t you die on me now!”

I pry open his eyelids, to reveal the whites. His eyes are rolled all the way up. His mouth falls open and the first tendrils of mist curl out. Mist and smoke. There is no time to think. My tears transform into a soft, velvety humming. It drips into a song, creating a stream of calming water, drop by drop, puddle by puddle.

*“Look up,  
The sky is gray.  
Can you see me?  
Tell me.”*

I take his cold hands into mine, lowering my face over his so that our lips almost touch. I sing and I sing and I sing, pouring out my wish to take his pain away. His soul skirts around me and up into the sky, ready to flee his body.

“No!”

His bloodied face turns old, his eyelids falling into their sockets, buried in wrinkles, hollow.

“NO!” I yell at him. *“No no no no no!”*

I try again.

*“Speak to my love,  
It won’t survive.”*

My song doesn’t seem to be working as it usually does. It comes out ugly, torn and disjointed. But I don’t care. I don’t want him to die, not now, not after all of this. What else is there to do except to try to bring him back? He’s not fully gone yet. I hear his faint breathing, a slow beating of his heart like a flickering light. Now it’s on, now it’s off. I choke on tears and sing more.

*“Did you love me?  
Tell me, did you love me.”*

I call to the mountain, to the river, to the trees and grass. It seems like they sway in sorrow together with me, it seems the ground itself is wailing.

*“Memories  
Have left me now.  
I want to know.”*

My voice rises and it soon turns into a powerful shriek that bounces off the ravine cliffs, for all to hear. Something shifts in the air from far away, moves in closer with lightning speed, as if all it was waiting for was my location.

Instantly, I know who it is. Canosa. She's not alone. And she's on her way to find me.

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### Nisqually River

My wail dies, kicked out of me by Canosa's impending presence. For a few moments I'm disoriented, not fully understanding where I am and how I got here, held fast in the flow of the melody that I managed to produce with my pain. I blink, tearing myself out of my choral daze, and glance down.

Hunter.

He's injured. He died, didn't he? An otherworldly melody, piercing in its beauty, touches my every nerve and sends me into bliss. I have revived him, after all. His soul is back to its splendor of homey sounds, the comfort of shuffling slippers on a parquet floor, the banging of pots in the kitchen, a late summer wind filled with bird whistles, and laughter. Hearty laughter. I want to give in to it, to bask in it as if it was the sun, and soak up its warmth. But I can't, not after what just happened. I won't. I must make him hate me, and then I need to disappear from his life; this time, for good.

Involuntarily, I let out a cry of dismay.

"Can we do without screaming, please?" Hunter croaks, as

if he was awake for a while. "I thought paradise was supposed to be a quiet place, a place without headaches. Man, I'm thirsty."

My thoughts about Canosa vanish in an instant.

"You didn't die." I kneel over him, a surge of happiness making me tremble.

"Thanks for letting me know. I was just wondering about that." His lips part into a grimace of pain across his bloody face. The dusk of the pre-evening sky matches the lavender blue of his eyes.

I gasp, at once exhilarated and miserable, because all of this is so absurd, so unreal, and so ridiculous that, at times, I'm having a hard time believing it's actually happening. Then I promptly remember my goal of leaving him and suppress my normal questions, like how does he feel, where does it hurt, does it hurt really bad, can he move, and so on. I make myself think of the worst possible thing I could tell him right now.

*I hate you. You were supposed to die. Now look at you, you're a cripple. You're a burden to me. You're... You're...*

A myriad of pathetically immature and condescending phrases circle in my head, and I'm astounded at my own idiocy, at my primitive logic. Why do I always resort to this kind of thinking, lashing out like I'm a five-year-old little girl who is upset, so she stomps her foot like a spoiled brat?

"Hunter. I need to tell you something important. I'm sorry that I don't have a properly prepared speech for this. I didn't think we'd live. But if I don't say it now, I won't have the courage to try to say it again." I pause.

He closes his eyes and groans. I can't tell if he's listening or not, if he's ignoring me on purpose or simply because everything hurts in his body; but now that I started saying it out loud, I'm unable to stop.

I swallow hard, deciding to stop hiding behind double-

meanings and childish mood swings. "I'm leaving. And...I don't want you to love me anymore," I say quietly. I hold myself in place and keep my mouth shut, afraid I'll come unglued.

He props himself up on his right elbow and winces, but doesn't cry out. "What? Sorry, I missed it. What did you say?"

I raise my eyes at him, unable to repeat the "I'm leaving" part, and burst into, "Are you hurt? How are you feeling?" Then I promptly bite my tongue. I can't display any kind of affection toward him right now.

I hug myself, to stop the urge to reach out. Everything inside me trembles, waiting for that characteristic click, that sound that will indicate that he has fallen in love with me all over again, the crackle of his soul catching on fire. I must be looking horrible, because I fail to hear it.

He just looks at me blankly.

"Did you seriously just ask me how I'm feeling?" He's shaking, visibly annoyed. "How would you feel if you were me? Huh? Do you really have no idea? That's just great." He shakes his head. "All right, I'll tell you. I'm feeling fine, thank you very much, considering I just fell more than five hundred fucking feet off this cliff, almost smashed to pieces, and am probably crippled now. Thanks to my siren girlfriend who decided to save me. Did I ask you to? Nope. So then, why in the fuck are *you* the one crying? I'm the one who has every right to come apart." He's glaring at me, his bloodied face angry with fire.

I wipe my face. "Sorry."

He's on a roll, rattling off insult after insult. I'm taking in his resentment, abashed at its ferocity. I remember reading in some magazine that when you prevent someone from committing suicide, instead of thanking you, they shower you with indignation. Because in that scary moment—when they've had it, when they finally hoped to find relief from their pain by parting

with life—you interrupted, and they are overwhelmed with tremendous devastation. Most internalize this new pain and never show it. But a few are capable of throwing it in your face. Hunter is certainly the latter type. Here he was, hoping to end his torture once and for all, and here I am, having broken my promise to help him.

“One minute I’m flying through the air, and the next, I wake up on the bottom of the world, broken but alive. I’m supposed to be dead, all right. I’m supposed to—cut it out!” He makes an angry face of a dog that’s protecting a bone, complete with snarling and bared teeth.

I recoil, tearing my hand away and wanting to slap myself for slipping my guard. On one level, I’m glad he’s distressed. I imagine one can’t fall in love while in the state of shock and confusion like he is right now. This will make my job easier.

“We can’t stay here,” I say as calmly as I can. “Canosa heard me singing. She and, I think Ligeia and Teles, they’re coming. Sirens can move fast when they want, so we have maybe a few minutes, at best, before they get here. I’ll need to carry you. May I?” As I say it, I wonder if I’ll be able to lift him in my state, let alone carry him.

In an attempt to prop himself up on both elbows, Hunter shifts his weight to the left and collapses on the ground. He opens his mouth into an agonizing cry. “Owww! I think my arm is broken. Fuck!”

“I thought so. I’m sorry. I’m...” I reach out to him again, but he yells with such intensity that I fall back on my butt.

“I said, don’t fucking touch me!” Tears spring up in his eyes; he swats at them with his right hand, grinding his teeth.

I can’t use logic to swamp my hurt anymore and blurt it out. “Why are you so mad at me?”

“Because you let me live! Isn’t it obvious? I thought we



agreed to die together. Then why in the hell did you stop me from dying? Why? Because you were too chicken to let me go?" He opens his mouth wide and scowls in pain, covering his bruised lip with his right hand and raising his left hand to his eyes, as if to ward off an oncoming headache.

"I...I only wanted to...But, Hunter! I couldn't *not* protect you. I'm sorry I failed you. I really am." I'm hurt and confused and am trying not to cry.

He's suddenly somber.

"Hey." He reaches out with his right hand, and I take it. "Hey, I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry, baby. I'm the one who should be sorry. Will you forgive me?" He suddenly comes apart and screws up his face.

"It's just that..." He looks up at me. "In the event of my death, I thought my insurance money would go to my mom. To pay for her meds, and...Well, now that goes down the drain."

After a pause, he says, "Ailen? Tell me it's not true. Tell me we're having a bad trip. Tell me we took some strong medicine-grade shit. For fuck's sake, did we *really* just fall down that cliff?" He motions with his head. "This is not happening. It can't be happening." His eyes widen. "Wait, did you say something about leaving?"

My ears adjust to a sudden change. I put a finger across my lips, listening for any sign of life. Hunter falls silent, his eyes widening.

It's quiet. In fact, it's too quiet, and the feeling of being watched creeps into my senses again.

"I don't like this silence," I whisper.

Hunter nods. I scoot next to him, studying the valley and the road above us, listening to the forest life, to the faint gurgle of the river. I detect the distant motor of a car. A couple of cars. A mouse here, a bird there, and deer. Three of them, grazing on the

## Nisqually River

grass a couple hundred feet away. Their souls rustle softly in the wind, pine needles crunching under their hooves.

Pine needles fall.

Pine needles fall on my head. I brush them out of my hair, and then look up and meet two eyes. The two eyes of Canosa who descends head first down gigantic Douglas fir boughs, using them as ladder steps, hissing. Ligeia and Teles are behind her, their long hair hanging down in bleached hunks, making them look like inverted blooming cattails. My only thought is, how did they make it here without a sound, how did I fail to detect them?

There is a stillness in the air, and I know that as soon as I make a move, even attempt to breath, it will erupt.

The world folds into a narrow tunnel and at the opposite end of it I see Canosa, about ten feet away from me. She glows with an ageless hunger. Perhaps a thousand souls have sunk into her, perhaps a hundred thousand. I don't move, staring, immobile, glued to the ground. That white mane over her eerie face, and those large milky eyes. Their chill makes me shrink. It's impossible for me to get any colder, yet I do. I crust all over with a layer of frost and terror. I know that this is not a game anymore. I know she's fed up with me and came here to kill me.

"How the hell did you get here so fast?" I manage.

"Ailen Bright, silly girl. Nice to see you in one piece," she says. That's her opening point. I get it.

"I thought I blew you guys out of the water. I told you not to bother me again, remember?" I clench my fists to gather more courage, cursing that I'm not fully healed yet. Every movement sends spasms down my spine. I ignore them, putting on a mask of indifference.

"I told you to stay away. Do you understand the word *away*? Do you need me to spell it for you? Because I can." It hardly sounds threatening, but it's the best I can do under the

circumstances.

Without breaking our gaze, from the corners of my eyes I see droplets of water caught between fir needles. Ligeia's and Teles's hungry faces peer from above, glistening with anticipation. They both have changed, as if they grew up—that's the best way I can describe them. Cold, distant, bent on feeding their lust, savoring the idea of swallowing Hunter's soul already.

Because, of course, he's just another meal for them right now, thanks to my brilliant reviving technique. I growl, caught in sudden dolor.

One against three. One injured weakling against a pack of nacreous girls on the prowl.

"Girls, you got your reward. Have fun," Canosa says.

And I'm born. A note rises to my throat, forcing my lips open.

I scream a war cry. It's so loud that the trees seem to sway in response, the mountain itself pulses to my rhythm, and the ground shifts under my feet. I scream an animal scream, a wild call to protect my territory. It means, *Back off, or I'll claw at your eyes, I'll rip out your heart, I'll feast on your flesh, I'll grind your bones into a thousand pieces and spit you out to rot.*

Hunter squints and covers his right ear with his uninjured hand. I wish I could help him, but I'd rather have him deaf than dead.

Both sirens answer me with a guttural wail.

It booms through the expanse of the gorge and echoes off the vertical walls of rock, whining and howling and moaning. They're hungry, but they're waiting for their alpha to make her first move.

She does.

Canosa lets go of her grip on the fir's thickest bough about ten feet from the ground and propels herself forward with

inhuman speed, landing on my back. She attempts to stuff my gills full of fir needles. I anticipated the trick so I crane my neck as far back as it will go, raising my shoulders at the same time. Fir needles fall under my sweatshirt, sticky with sap and smelling sharp.

Canosa twangs with fury and tosses me to the ground. I reach back and grab handfuls of her hair. We roll away from Hunter. Mineral dust stuffs my eyes, tiny pebbles flying into my mouth. Bitter, crunchy. Canosa tightens her grip on me. She's strong, but I'm faster, even though I'm not fully healed yet. I twist in her grip and nail her in the face with the back of my head. She lets go with a cry.

"How is that for a greeting?" I say and begin crawling back toward the tree, to where Hunter stirs.

Canosa stares me down, no doubt calculating her next move.

This is a girl fight unlike you've ever seen. The immature bickering that I saw on Seward Park beach is gone. This is real. This here is an alpha siren, animalistic and primitive to the very marrow of her bones. Her nostrils flare, and her eyes search me, lips tight. She pulls herself back up, no shred of clothing on her petite yet womanly body, except thick strands of hair so long it touches her feet.

She glances up. A signal. Ligeia and Teles let go of the tree with a cry, propel over my head a good fifteen feet, and squat down next to her. They both look up at me, waiting. I know they're just along for the ride. They don't care if I die or not, only Canosa hungers for my death, or, perhaps, she's not done playing with me yet. But I realize I am. I don't want to be part of this anymore. After this morning, I've finally had enough of dying.

"Bravo," I say, sitting up, feeling for Hunter's hand and squeezing it once. Then quickly two times more. He squeezes it

back three times.

"In simple speak—which I'm sure you require—congratulations." I continue, "This will give you bragging rights. How many sirens did you bring with you to take me down? Only two? Wow, too bad. Will that be really enough against *one* injured newborn? I mean, after all, I'm what—barely a week old? If I were you, I wouldn't take any chances. Oh, look at me; I'm such a terrible, horrible monster." I growl theatrically, to see how much I can annoy her.

Canosa stiffens and produces a loud hiss.

"You forgot how to talk? I see. All right, I'll talk for both of us. I understand your plan now. This is what it was all about. To wait for me to turn sixteen, to be able to turn me into a siren according to your special rules, which I still don't fully understand. Then to torture me as much as possible, to see pain on my face, which resembles my father's face to some extent, right? Oh, and my mother's as well—so, two birds killed with one stone. I get it. Then you waited for me to fall off the cliff and break all my bones to become an easy target. Sorry it took me so long. Truly. I apologize for the inconvenience." I let go of Hunter's hand and stand, attempting to perform a curtsy, failing horribly and nearly falling off my quivering legs.

"Hush! Ungrateful girl," Canosa says with a flick of her hair. I would imagine she's missing a mirror to check how magnificent she looks. "Have you lost the rest of your manners? The world does not revolve around you or your pitiful desires. Why would I expect any more from a motherless child?"

That stings. I cringe, willing myself not to react.

"I came here to thank you," she continues. "Thank you for a job well done. Now, if you could please step aside and let us finish it, I would be delighted." She points toward Hunter and assumes the stance of a boxer, legs spread far apart for balance,

arms bent close to her sides, hands in fists.

“If you came to thank me, why did you have to bring your sorry sidekicks with you? To tag along, because they had nothing else to do? Or to stand by in case something terribly awful should happen? Are you afraid of me or something? You wanted them to take me under the bridge, so why didn’t they? Look at me, am I really that scary? Ailen Bright! The little girl who turned out to be so dangerous, so frightening! And she’s not alone! She’s with her terribly dangerous friend, only injured from a fall off the cliff over there, no big deal.” I motion at Hunter who throws me a terrified look, asking with his eyes, *What the hell are you doing?*

“Oh, my God! Everyone! Run and hide,” I finish.

Ligeia and Teles hiss at me.

“Nice speech. Hold it, girls,” Canosa pushes Ligeia and Teles back, having started forward. They shout their displeasure to her, visibly annoyed.

Hunter manages to sit up. His uninjured hand pokes around for a rock the right size, to fit into his palm. I hear his laborious breathing without looking, backing away from Canosa and toward him, spreading my arms in a protective gesture.

“You little thief. You stole my catch. Again. And I wanted to call you my sister.” Ligeia purses her lips and wipes the dirt off her face, sneers, showing rows of jagged teeth that I haven’t noticed before.

“We’ll split him in half this time, okay, *sister*? You promised,” Teles says, her voice melodic yet harsh. Her hair, curly and thin, barely covers her voluptuous body.

“Oh, so you act on command only? Canosa is your boss, right? The big sis. Lovely arrangement,” I murmur with distaste.

“Quiet. Back off, both of you,” Canosa interjects.

Cool on the surface, my mind races inside in a mad daze. What should I do next, how can I overpower three strong sirens

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while my bones are still hardening, my muscles still knitting together, my skin still closing, and Hunter so badly injured and weak?

“Nice outfits. I still prefer you with your hair up, though. Like, totally naked,” Hunter suddenly says. We exchange a look. He nods, assuring me to trust him. “I hear there is going to be a girl fight, just for me? Why, thank you, ladies. This should be spectacular.”

“More like a party in honor of our jump,” I chime in. “I think we broke the world-record, surviving a fall over five hundred feet. Drinks should be served momentarily. Care to join?”

“Nah, I don’t know. I’m not dressed for the occasion.” He motions at his torn sweatshirt.

“Hunter Crosby,” Canosa says, acknowledging his existence for the first time. “The unfortunate siren hunter who happened to forget his weapon. Pity. But it’s very nice to see you again. *Alive*. How’s the mom?” Canosa asks.

I sense Hunter tense all over, emanating hatred, and then it’s gone, washed over with self-control.

“Fine, thanks. How’s yours? I forget the name. Let’s see... Terpsichore? No. Melpomene. Nope, not that. Sterope? Chthon? There were four, right? Nice names too. Listen, I always wanted to ask you how this works. Did they all fuck the same guy?”

I break into a wide smile. I know that what Hunter said is mean and primitive, but I can’t help it.

A fizz of anger erupts from Canosa’s lips. “Make him shut up. I can’t stand this insolent nonsense.” She flicks her hand and assumes the stance of a nonchalant observer, her back to the glistening river, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

Ligeia and Teles shriek in approval and advance at me.

I widen my stance, feeling pressed into the corner of a gigantic basin framed by mountains, their ridges its rims, their

vegetation its dingy slippery coating. The only thing that's missing to complete the picture is water. Canosa watches the scene with her lips stretched into a smile, her body stiff with anticipation. For a second, I think that she's simply a bronze faucet, until she snarls at me and cackles her hideous laugh.

My heart sinks. This is not a girl fight like I thought, this is slaughter. Perhaps she'll leave me alive after it, just to play some more. Perhaps she'll kill Hunter in front of my eyes, just to see what I'll do, how I'll react. She's bound to win.

I decide that my only defense is my voice, so I concentrate on inhaling a lungful of air, my arms spread wide to shield Hunter.

Too late. One second Teles flexes her muscles a few feet in front of me, another she clasps her hands around my neck behind me, cutting off air, just like she did on the boat yesterday. I don't even have time to react, she's lightning fast and I'm painfully slow. I twist my arms to try to grab a fistful of her hair, but it's so smooth and slippery that my fingers keep sliding. She keeps turning her head left and right to avoid me. The best I can do is to grope her head, hoping to stick my fingers into her gills and rip them open.

My heart palpitates. We fall and roll on the ground, clawing at each other. I can't make a single sound. Finally, Teles stuffs my face into crumbled rock and holds me hostage, sitting on top of my back. She presses her left knee against my neck, and pins my twisted arms to my back with her right. I wiggle, forcing her to continually struggle for balance, not giving her a chance to stick her fingers into my gills, because I'm sure that's what she'll do next now that my voice is disabled by my mouth being mashed into the ground.

"Hold still!" she yells.

I can't answer and I wish myself deaf so that I can't hear what's happening, but I hear every bit of it.



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Ligeia descends on Hunter, pins him down, laughing. In my mind, she's a squirming maggot that wants to eat his soul, to tear him apart and suck on his guts, devouring him whole—bones and sinew and hair. He cries in pain and then falls silent. She must have propped open his eyes. The first tendrils of fog reach my peripheral vision, and the air temperature drops ten degrees.

Ligeia begins to sing.

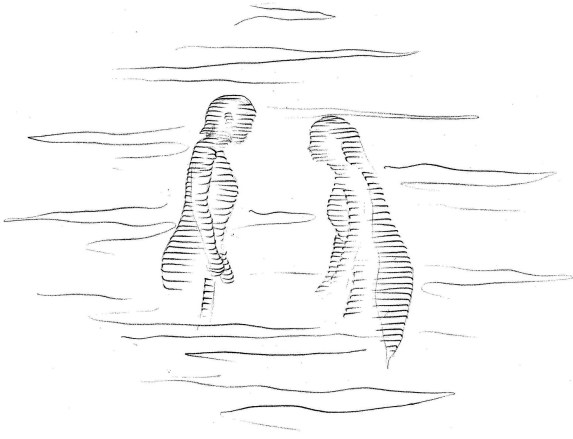
"You said we'll split him in half this time! Don't you dare eat him whole!" Teles shouts.

Canosa blares a cry to silence the arguing, hushing the rest of the noises into a thick layer of fog. Momentarily distracted, Teles relaxes her grip and it gives me the break I need. I tense, crest on my left side, roll over, and throw her off me. Taken by surprise, she falls back on her butt and hands. Free from her hold, I lurch forward and saddle her, pinning her wrists to the ground.

"I was just wondering," I say. "Would you like some gravel for dinner instead?"

She begins screaming.

## Chapter 17



### Nisqually Valley

A curtain of battle-lust blots out my mind. Somewhere, behind it, leftover morals and a sense of what's right are nagging at me, wanting me to stop. I rudely brush them aside. There is only a singular need left: to kill. I have three obstacles in my path to saving Hunter's life, and they need to be eliminated one by one. Teles happens to be the unfortunate first. Somehow, the fact that my entire life I have called her a sister and adored her chubby marble cheeks doesn't matter anymore. Her screaming only adds to my determination to shut her up for good. I scoop handfuls of crushed rock and stuff them into her mouth and gills, pushing hard with my thumbs to make it go deep. She sputters some of it back at me. I gather more and press with both hands. Her face grimaces in utmost concentration and finally her screaming subsides into quiet whimpering. She writhes in agony like a leech on hot sand.

Mist dims the valley, hiding the Douglas fir and rolling over us before it reaches the river like a giant bleached tongue. At any second, I expect Canosa to jump out of the haze at me and

tear me apart, but she's disappeared. There is no time to wonder where she went or why. I have minutes left before Hunter's soul takes a hike in Ligeia's chest. On impulse, I decide to try out my idea of blowing myself up with my voice, except on Teles. Maybe it will work on her, and she will be my training ground. In any case, there is nothing else I can do right now but to yelp, because my strength is quickly fading.

I lower my face directly over Teles's and shout into her open mouth, making her body shimmer as if aglow. My ringing holler rises an octave higher, stretching the range of my limits, approaching the upper register of the highest female voice possible, a painfully shrill soprano. If a sonic gun can cause a lethal vibration, so can my voice. It all comes down to air waves reaching a speed faster than the speed of sound, to produce a sonic boom, much like a mini-explosion.

I force my pitch higher, louder still, until it stops sounding like a cry and begins trilling like a piercing whistle, becoming diaphanous, almost translucent in the musical sense of the word. If I measure its speed in numbers, it would have to reach beyond 751 miles per hour to break the sound barrier. My every fiber palpitates in tune and I lose myself in this shimmering sensation, reaching a crescendo. At last, my air goes out, and my scream abruptly stops.

An invisible force throws me on the rocks. I hit my head hard on a boulder, thinking that either Teles has managed to kick me off, or Canosa finally decided to interject. Both guesses are wrong. In front of my eyes, the inflated body of Teles pulsates for a split second like a gigantic balloon filled with too much water and then it simply bursts into a million droplets. I get drenched. Water drips off my hair and runs down my cheeks, a poor imitation of tears, because I have none. For a moment, I see the indentation of her shape in the fog, a faint outline burned into my retina. I blink

and it's gone.

"I blew her up," I whisper, unable to believe it, letting the knowledge sink in. I relive the episode while looking at my upturned palms. I'm afraid to lick my lips; somehow, that seems as if I'd be licking off a piece of Teles. A shudder of disgust overwhelms me. I wipe my face with my sleeve until it's almost dry. It hits me that I really did it—I willed myself to do it. Delirious, I open into a victorious cry, pitching my voice to an impossible height.

"I DID IT!"

I wait for the usual horror of guilt to cover me with its wings and to painfully peck at my equilibrium, but it doesn't. It leaves me alone this time. It lets me get away with a siren murder and experience zero remorse. I'm in my element, and I feel divine. I lean over and roll onto all fours, ignoring the jagged rock edges cutting into my palms and knees. I lift my head and focus on my next target, like a predator sizing up the distance to its prey. Knowing that victory is on my side.

The best part of believing in yourself is having others see it. I'm superior to Ligeia right now. I know it, and I know that she knows it. Her every pore speaks to me clearly, her stunted body tells me a million words of submission. She heard me, and she saw Teles explode. In fact, she's doused in her remains, silver drops falling off her chin and onto Hunter. Their shapes appear in two gray clumps amidst the receding fog. Ligeia stops singing. She hovers above him as if in a dream gone wrong, her face distorted with hatred and anguish at the same time. Her hands fly up to cover her ears.

"I'm sorry, Ligeia, but that won't help you," I say, lunging for her. I cover the fifteen feet between us in one powerful leap, astounded that my body is functioning like new, expecting it to falter at any second due the exertion from my sonic cry.

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I spear-head into her chest and throw her off Hunter, clasping her shoulders and beating my head repeatedly into her ribcage. We land on the rocks, her limp body in my hold and me pressing my knees into her hollow stomach. She coughs up Hunter's soul. Curlicue after curlicue, it makes its way to its rightful owner. He gulps it up, convulsing.

Satisfied, I scream into Ligeia's open mouth. She doesn't resist, knowing her fate. I drive my voice into a familiar crescendo. The nightmare repeats and she pops. I'm thrown off her by the force of the explosion, shivering from exhaustion. Yet, in a way, it fuels me, driving me to keep going. My actions and responses become automatic as if, instead of slaying another siren, I merely squashed an annoying bug and am on an extermination spree. *One more, Ailen, one more. Canosa, wherever you are, your squalid presence is my next target for elimination.*

The fog produced by my vocalization becomes so thick, it starts to feel like light rain, although it makes no difference. I might as well have been dipped into a bathtub full of water and made to stand up. Clear fluid cascades down my face, my chest, and my stomach. My soggy, sticky sweatshirt is glued to my skin, and my legs chafe against the plastic lining of the cut-off fisherman capris. I wipe my brow as best as I can and search for Hunter. A mere hop away, his body is curled up in sediment mud, his hands over his ears and his eyes squinted shut. I take a hasty step, when a voice from behind me makes me stop and turn around.

"Spectacular. Who would've thought you possess such talent," Canosa warbles softly, striving to instigate my usual self-doubt.

I refuse to waver. Nothing has the desired effect—not her white mane nor her devilish sneer. None of those things changes the fact that, for once, I'm not afraid. And we both feel it.

## Nisqually Valley

"I'm glad you approve," I say, eyeing her uncertain movement. She carefully skips from stone to stone, balancing casually on a boulder about seven feet away. I detect Hunter's pain with the skin on my back, with the invisible eye of my temple, but I can't turn to look.

"Come on, Ailen Bright. Only two? I thought you could do better than that. Look at me, I'm still standing." Her face glows subtly in the mist.

There is a line of tension strung between us, and its pressure is about equal. For a split second, my newly found roots take a sharp tug. I'm suddenly unsure of the outcome, thinking that there is a chance that I might lose to her. She seems eager to confirm.

In the flight of a bird, her hair acts as the white, feathery wings of an albatross; she sails over me in an incredibly beautiful jump and lands next to Hunter, rolling him onto his back and smacking her foot into his chest. He groans. His breath rises in a mushroom cloud of steam and into the cold air before she chokes him into silence.

I arrest the urge to lurch at her and, instead, take a breath to speak. My throat is ablaze from so much screaming. Tired from the pretense, I decide to be simple and ask the question that's been bothering me from the start.

"What do you want?" My voice catches at the end. Where did my confidence go? I blame my worry for Hunter's life, it's distracting.

Canosa senses my uncertainty and giggles like a little girl, to make it even more apparent, to grind into my face that she's stronger, older, and viler.

"*You*, silly girl. I want *you*. Haven't you figured it out with that smart brain of yours? You disappoint me." She purses her lips. "Well, *now* you know. I'm very pleased. There's only two of us left,

thanks to you. Isn't it splendid? You made my job easier and, for that, I'm eternally grateful. Come." She stretches out her hand.

I freeze, my eyes on Hunter.

"Oh, leave this mortal to his suffering." She presses her foot harder on his chest. He only moans, his eyes still closed. "He's boring. The whole world is ours for the taking, Ailen Bright, you and me alone. Let's go fry some big fish, together. Sound like fun?"

"Wait, what?" I'm taken aback. "You wanted to dispose of your sisters all along?" The idea is so incredulous that, for a second, I lower my guard and start to think that maybe this is her intention, to shift my focus and make me vulnerable so that she can attack me. I begin to hyperventilate, frantically digging for the source of my calm, willing it to come back.

"Well, no, it wasn't like that. I wasn't sure of you, at first. When you were born, all I wanted to do was to, um, get rid of you, to hurt your father. But you've proven to grow up into something else, forever stubborn, not giving in to his growing violence. Nerves of steel. I liked watching your spirit grow from the confines of my bronze self, forever hugging the faucet, waiting for the perfect moment."

"Why did you wait until I turned sixteen?" I ask.

"Because. A girl has to mature into a woman—both by primitive hormonal means and by the growth of her soul—to be able to turn into a fully fledged, ferocious siren. You sing to one too young, and she simply dies. You sing to one too old, and she withers on the spot, becomes a walking corpse, a ghost of her previous vitality. Ever seen those women, dry like fallen maple leaves, bitter, odious, distorted shadows of themselves? Those are the ones who didn't *quite* turn out. Pity. I made a lot of those mistakes when I was younger. Way too many. " She pauses dramatically, pointing her finger at me. "And then I found you."

She smiles and it looks like she means it. Her face alights with pride.

“Your soul grew ripe that night, ripe and juicy.” She licks her lips. “When you contemplated taking your life, remember? You turned the whole bathroom into a smoky hell. I thought I would cough and blow my cover! I knew it was time. Time to reap you. Oh, the sweet sound of your soul—your dreams, the flutter of you leafing through book pages, the tinkling of your favorite music. I admit, you were the tastiest girl I ever turned.”

I recoil. “Who gave you the right? It was not up to you decide. I didn’t ask you,” I say, trembling all over.

“Oh, but you did, the girl who doesn’t remember. You asked for my help. I merely obliged. Your mother truly missed the opportunity to polish your behavior, to teach you when it’s appropriate to say hi and goodbye, please and thank you. Shame-shame-shame. How very disappointing.” She falls silent and studies me, shaking her head slightly in disapproval.

I boil. The effort to conceal the powerful cocktail of my emotions goes out the window and I grunt something unintelligible, awash with blinding fury.

“Is that a *yes* I hear?” Canosa asks, and it blows the lid on my tumultuous pot. Terror surges through me first, and then confusion, anger, dismay, childish helplessness, and, finally, elation. I have power and I know it.

Above all, I have my voice.

I can sing.

“You haven’t heard anything yet,” I say quietly.

Her eyebrows fly up in surprise, a hint of fear flashing across her features. It’s obviously not the answer she expected.

Time stops its flow. My body shakes violently, ready to explode. My mind melts from fiery tribulations. I put my feet together and stand tall, strung into a line about to leap skyward.



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Armed with my song alone, I dive into a solo. I sing my way through the drizzle searching for the frequency of the rhythm, for the very tempo that causes Canosa's particles to move, her little water cells that make up her essence. It's different from screaming into the mouths of Teles and Ligeia, where I could sense their vibrations and mimic them. We're separated by about seven feet, and I have to match her pulse to lead her to an exploding crescendo. I want to unravel her, octave by octave, note by note, until she is no more. With each musical stroll into this lethal madness, I grow bolder, wilder, until my confidence is back and I'm on a roll.

I become a hollow, resonating column full of earsplitting soprano. Loud, merciless, torrid.

Canosa takes a gulp of wet air to sing back at me, bidding to duel. She doesn't realize that she makes a big mistake. Her singing gives me her pitch, the key to her melody, straight to the core of her tempo. Her siren DNA.

*This is the ultimate girl fight, the one that will set your teeth on edge and send you running.* From the side, we must look like two angry girls screaming their heads off at each other. One of them is about to lose, and one is about to win. That would be me, *me*, looking like a homeless runaway dipped in rain and mud and madness.

My earth shattering cry continues to grow in volume and ferocity. It travels outward, splattering needles from the Douglas fir above us, from the firs in the foggy yonder. It proceeds to uproot young trees from the ground. Another beat, and it lifts Canosa off of her feet and throws her into the air. Her limbs flit and twist, her hair resembles the flapping sail of a disoriented boat. Another octave higher and the leaden sky itself is out of place, a foreboding glaucous mass, quivering to my command. I'm the conductor. I unify all moisture around me, set its tempo, and tell

it when to beat and how fast.

First, raindrops tap on my temple. Then, all at once, a rush of rains slaps me in the face as if someone overturned a bucket of water on my head.

A deafening tearing noise erupts, mixed with a creaky groan. The gigantic Douglas fir, in the shadow of which we ended our fall, leans dangerously and then falls a few feet in front of me with a detonating crash, showering me with needles and twigs. I blink and stop screaming, flailing my arms for balance and nearly falling over from the inertia.

My eyes are drawn to the spot a few feet behind the fallen fir. Canosa is gone, swept away by my voice. Or dare I hope she exploded the same way Teles and Ligeia did? Wouldn't I have heard it? The rest I don't have the will to think about, because a single, most important thought blots out everything else.

"Hunter?" I say, but nothing comes out, my vocal cords merely produce a hiss.

Beneath the heavy rain patter, silence is absolute. I'm afraid of it, it's somehow wrong. I have created a wasteland in roughly a one mile radius. There is nothing around me except dirt. I'm the peg in the center, proud and still, soaked with rain, terrified about what I might find where, not too long ago, Hunter's body lay on the ground.

The trunk of the tree lies in front of me, thick with age, covered in a mound of earth at its base, fragrant and fresh, smelling of worms. Its sap sticks to my bare feet as I climb over to the other side, to inspect.

"Hunter?" I repeat, more audibly this time.

There is no sign of him. He's gone. Did I blow him away as well? My knees buckle and I fall into the mud. I come unglued, weeping into my hands.

A feeling of loss first unbuttons my neck and then cuts

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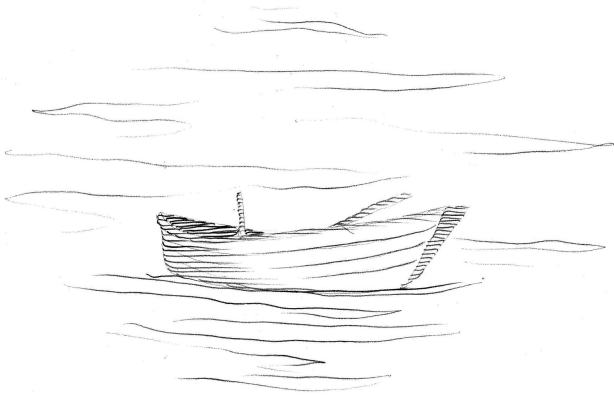
open my torso in one swift movement. If I had a soul, it'd fall out—warm, writhing, pulsing—into this barren landscape, unaware that its housing is being severed by the stupidity its owner. I come apart. My hands, they don't belong to my fingers. Feet don't belong to my legs. My head drops, ready to roll off my shoulders. Then I realize that this is not the worst of it. What finishes me is the knowledge that I did this myself.

I killed him.

In my murderous glee of siren slaughter, I killed my love.

“No!” I scream and clutch my face.

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### Mud Lake

How I long I sit like this, I don't know. I'm unable to move, in fear of finding his body and confirming his passing. Evening begins trickling lilac gloom into the fog. I sob into my hands, blind, numb, and bitter. I want to be deaf too, to avoid missing the one, and the only one, I want to hear. My auditory perception detects a shift in the pattern of the river's constant gurgling. I hear my answer. My heart skips a beat. A feeble violin moans in the gloomy yonder and falls silent. I spring up and dash in its direction, my feet slipping in mud puddles, my breath ripping my chest. As quickly as it surfaced, the sound disappears. I stop to listen. There it is again, coming from the pile of rocks and dirt a good fifty feet from the fallen fir tree. I stumble, fall, pick myself up, and sprint to the source of the melody. I'm almost too afraid that it's my imagination playing tricks and when I find the spot, there won't be anything there except rock, rock, and more rock.

I stop in front of a hillock and start digging like mad, fingers and nails, one frantic little mole. I throw stones off the pile in all directions, muttering gibberish, hoping against all hope that

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I'm right. Stones give way to gravel, gravel gives way to dirt. When the dirt shifts, a hand emerges and grabs on to me for dear life.

"Hunter!" I shriek.

I clear his face from the debris, cupping brown sludge and smearing handfuls of it onto my pants until his pale skin is relatively clean. He coughs and opens his eyes, bright blue in contrast to all this dirt. He gulps for air, licking his lips, saying something. I lean my ear closer.

"Water," he mouths, without an actual sound.

"Just a second!" I say and dash to the river. Up close it turns out to be no more than a brook about thirty feet across. It gurgles its merry stream, and I dip into it, wade deeper, and exhale in relief as I dunk my head and drink the melted glacier water. Savoring its sweetness, I inhale it through my cracked gills, and wash my face, the icy water chilling me properly. I stumble out, sliding on mossy pebbles with the precious liquid caught in my palms. Carrying it carefully over to Hunter, I trickle drop by drop between his cracked lips.

"More," he croaks, so quietly that I barely hear it.

I repeat my journey, elated, feeling as if I'm flying, ready to make this thirty-foot trip to the stream and back a million times.

"You're alive," I say on repeat, digging the rest of his frame out until he's free of dirt, resting amidst broken rocks like he's just been pulled from his grave. I lean and lightly press him against my chest.

"You're alive, you're alive, you're *alive*. I'm so sorry I hurt you, I really am. I lost control, I sort of forgot about everything else. I needed to get rid of the sirens. Ligeia was sucking out your soul and..." I notice his incredulous look. "Are you badly hurt? Will you ever forgive me? Can I—"

"I can't hear you," Hunter utters in a long slur, obviously disoriented. It sounds more like *acanthearya*.

I fist the end of my wet sweatshirt sleeve and wipe his lips clean. “I said, I’m sorry. I said—”

He grabs me with his left hand, bewildered.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong?” I ask, alarmed.

“I can’t hear you. I can’t hear myself talking. I can’t hear nothing.” His voice is quiet and garbled, words hardly separated from each other, sounding like one long string.

Paralysis pins me to the ground. I feared this might happen, but I was dutifully pushing this premonition out of my mind, wanting to extend my happiness and not think about it. What a hypocrite.

“You can’t hear me?” I repeat like a parrot. “How about now?” I yell into his ear, denying what he told me, not wanting to acknowledge what it means. He doesn’t cringe at my voice, which confirms that I must have damaged his eardrums. But wouldn’t he be in terrible pain right now if I did? He doesn’t look like he is. I fill the awkward silence with rapid action, warbling along.

“Come on, let me carry you, let’s figure out a way to get out of here. We’ll go to your house and you’ll take a bath and a nap and feel better and see your mom and...” I chatter nonsense in hopes of making him feel better, but mostly I hope to make myself feel better. I scoop him by the shoulders and struggle to sit him up. I slip in the mud and fall on my knees. He grabs my arm and insistently pulls me closer to him.

“Stop...I’m deaf...STOP!”

It takes my mind a few seconds to discern separate words from his slurring, and it takes another few seconds to fully register their meaning.

Strength drains from me. The feeling of dread returns, brought on by the horrible mistake I made. I can’t reverse it no matter what I do. It’s like Hunter’s mother and her cancer; this must be how he felt. Hopeless—not wanting to believe what

happened, denying the facts.

I break into hysteria.

“What do you mean, stop? What do you mean, you can’t hear me? Listen to me! I killed them, I killed them all. The sirens, they’re gone! Well, I’m not so sure about Canosa, but...but even if she made it, I don’t think she’ll bother us anymore. She won’t dare. You should’ve seen her fly, it was epic. We didn’t die, you hear me? We can live, we can run away, we can...” I grope for the next thing we can do, thinking that in some perverted sense it’s great that he’s deaf, because maybe, just *maybe*, it will prevent him from reacting to my siren voice and we actually will have a chance of creating a future together.

Hunter shakes his head no. It makes me angry.

I shout obscenities at him, wave my arms for added effect, but all I see in response is pain flitting across his face, and I know I went a little too far.

“You can’t be deaf!” I yell at the end of my tirade, and break down crying. Hunter reaches out to for my cheek, smearing tears off my face. I grasp his hand and kiss his grimy fingers, one by one.

“I’m sorry. Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that...it’s just...I was...I’m overwhelmed with all of this shit, okay? It’s getting under my skin and it’s a little too much. I want to forget about everything that happened and run away, hide some place quiet, you know. Together...” I trail off, not sure what else to say, ignoring the futility of it, which Hunter confirms.

“I...can’t...hear...you.” He spells out each word carefully, moving his lips in an exaggerated fashion, and gradually the meaning sinks in. “I...can’t...hear...myself...talk,” he insists.

“You can’t hear me?” I repeat idiotically.

He reads off my lips and nods, wiping hair off his forehead and leaving a dirty streak. He props himself up on his healthy arm,

and I help him sit up. We stare at each other, into each other.

The rain patter turns into a gushing stream, heavy, washing our faces and our minds. Dusk prances around in rivulets of violet haze.

“Did I blow your eardrums? I did, didn’t I,” I say quietly. I cover my mouth with one hand, horrified, holding his hand in the other.

A small indentation in the ground between us fills up with muddy fluid and turns into a puddle. I watch drops splatter on its surface, and hear them make teeny plopping sounds.

I raise my eyes. Hunter looks at me without any expression. I want to cry again. The moment is ripe to feel tears rolling down my cheeks instead of raindrops, but they won’t come. My tear ducts are as dry as bone. The sky cries for me, rain dripping down my face and soaking my tattered sweatshirt.

“Oh, God. What did I do. What did I do,” I mumble into my hand, numb and unmoving.

Hunter screws his face in concentration, slides his hand out of my grip, and taps me on the shoulder. Then, stumbling over each word and stopping to make sure I understand him, he begins to talk, slowly.

“Ailen. I didn’t ask you to save me. The deal was to die together. But you’re a stubborn turkey, eh? You always do things *your* way. Well, it’s *my* life and it’s up to *me* what I do with it. I decided to call it quits a long time ago. I planned for it, carefully, in case you didn’t know. Now I’m alive and deaf. Crippled. You know how weird it feels talking and not hearing yourself? It’s not just weird, it’s scary. I don’t want to carry this pain around for the rest of my life. If you can call it life,” he sighs, visibly exhausted by his effort.

I open my mouth. He shakes his head. I close it, biting my tongue.



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Hunter continues. “We were supposed to exit life, *spectacularly*, once and for all. I thought falling down over five hundred feet would do it. I shouldn’t have dragged you with me. I should’ve done it alone.”

He holds back tears. I swallow, taking his hand and studying his palm; I bend his fingers and inspect the grime under his nails, black and sticky.

“Shoulda-woulda-coulda. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. You know who I am right now?” he asks, the tone of his voice bordering on annoyance.

I shake my head, scared to look up.

“A disabled teenager with a single parent who’s dying of cancer. Hunter Crossby, nice to meet you.” He shifts from talking to nearly yelling, which sounds even scarier because he fails to pronounce the words clearly and they sound like a broken string of vowels and consonants.

“A siren hunter who can’t hear. What a joke. I don’t know what else to do. This is all I know. It’s what your father taught me to do. To hell with sonic guns and whips, why bother. You exploded them with your voice, just like that. What’s the need for me after this? Nice job, Ailen. Go brag to your papa.” He yanks his hand out of my grip.

He never ever used to call my father Papa. Not once. His words hurt. I look up and slowly stand.

His face is livid with anger, and he glares me down.

“Remember how I asked you if you ever wanted to kill yourself?” I say. “Well, have you ever felt like death is not enough, like the mere fact of your existence poisons everything around you, ruins everyone you touch? It’s like in that legend about King Midas. He asked Dionysus, the Greek god of grape harvest, to grant him a special wish. To turn anything he touched into gold. You know what happened to him? He died of hunger. Know why?

Because the food he touched turned to gold. Even his daughter turned to gold when he wanted to hug her. I'm like that Midas guy, except everything I touch turns to dust." I suppress the oncoming tears and fall quiet.

Hunter looks at me, but from the expression on his face, I can see that he didn't hear a word I just said.

Rain splatters over the fallen tree trunk. The brook warbles and rolls and gurgles. The air turns dark and impatient.

Hunter starts to shiver. I keep forgetting that it's me who feels good under the rain, not him.

I hear his soul, clasp at its tune as if I'm drowning. Yet, somehow, it doesn't sound like home to me anymore, doesn't sound like anything at all. It's just a melody empty of meaning.

Hunter opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of water, but no words come out. He averts his eyes and looks into the darkening distance, not seeming to see anything at all with his gaze empty.

"It hurts, you know, not being able to hear you," he finally says in a small voice, as if his whole body shrunk. "I love listening to your voice. Loved it." He's in pain, I can feel it, and I automatically squat next to him, to comfort him. He shrugs away and I freeze, my arm raised. I slowly lower it and hug myself, tight.

"I want to die. Can you please leave me alone? Leave me."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I want to reach out to him, to stroke his hair, to kiss his face, to hold him. My arms stay firmly crossed over each other.

"Your father was right, you know." He slurs his words, but the undertone of bitterness is unmistakable. "Sirens poison our very spirit. They do it sweetly, quietly, with a hundred percent rate of success." He turns his head to look at me.

"Why can't I simply quit you? Why? Can you please get out of my life, *please*? Can you simply leave me alone? It's all I'm

asking.” I sense an urge to hurt me in his eyes, a childish wish to strike out just because. Just because it will make him feel better. So I take this virtual blow and nod. I wanted to prevent him from falling in love with me again after all, didn’t I? Looks like I succeeded. I know it’s time to let him go, but I can’t move.

“Fine. If you won’t go, I will,” Hunter says.

He turns his back on me, pulls up his legs, and awkwardly pushes himself up, using his only healthy arm, moaning in pain and slipping in dirt. I stretch out my arms to help, but then drop them, knowing he won’t accept it. He stumbles forward a good ten feet before looking back. I never saw his eyes that cold.

“I don’t ever want to see you again, you hear me?” His voice catches at the end. “Never.” And then, after a pause, “I can’t even tell if you heard me or not.” He turns away and stumbles forward.

“Mission accomplished,” I whisper. I want to beg him not to leave me, I want to scream and yell and thrash, but my muscles atrophy. One phrase echoes against the walls of my empty core, *He left me, he left me*. I need to stop sulking and accept it. But I can’t help myself and lose it completely.

I wail. I pour my grief into an odious animalistic howl that has no words, only pain. Its voluble garble disburses across the valley in loud echoes, and I howl harder, convinced that Hunter won’t hear me anyway. I lose myself in my anguish, screaming freely, at the top of my lungs. What I fail to take into account is the effect my voice has on the elements, water in particular. By the time I figure out what’s happening, it can’t be reversed.

Called on by my incessant misery, liquid seeps out of the ground and pools into puddles; puddles overflow, forming rills that quickly join with the flowing river about thirty feet away. It spills over its rims and rises a foot, swallows the banks, rapidly covering dirt with mangy streams. I abruptly stop wailing and

jump up, watching with horror as the surrounding mud turns into a pond filled with broken tree limbs and tawny fluid.

There is a sucking sound from the ground itself, as if it's a gigantic sponge that some ancient, monstrous hand squeezed. At once, water surrounds me, rising rapidly from my knees to my waist to my shoulders. The rumble is overpowering.

"Hunter!" I yell, thrashing about in the muddy liquid of my own creation.

Hunter is about ten yards away, clutching the Douglas fir trunk, bobbing in this watery madness. He struggles to pull himself over with one arm, to saddle on top of it.

I want to help him but his request to get out of his life holds me back. Now is the perfect time to let go and die for real. Now there is truly nothing else left to live for. Nothing at all.

This knowledge makes me calm and I know what to do.

Water comes out from all surfaces at once, covering my shoulders, gurgling, filling up the basin between the mountain ridges, turning the valley into a gigantic bathtub filled with liquid mud, with my pain, with Hunter's pain, with my father's pain, with my mother's pain. Even with Canosa's pain and the pain of the sirens. It soaks it all up, the brown mess of life that stinks, that's hard to face, that we shove into the backs of our minds hoping it will vanish.

Hunter shouts something at me, pointing into the distance and then back at me. I can't hear him; I'm floating, giving in to my exhaustion from fighting.

Clouds give way to a clear lavender sky. Mount Rainier looms its white splendor over everything. I watch as rapid fluid darts down its slope at maybe fifty miles per hour. A loud rumble fills the air, announcing melted snow mixed with soil and other forest debris. It sounds almost like a musical mudflow, with me directing its performance. Except, at this point, I'm not doing

## Chapter 18

anything anymore, I shifted something and set it in motion with my wailing, the glorious vocalist of erosion. Mount Rainier National Park is my conductor stand, and my voice acted as a maestro's baton.

I watch the catastrophe unfold with insane glee, my feet barely touching the ground underneath the murk. The noise of the rushing water is deafening, but it appears that the worst of it is over. It's gradually quieting down.

Something bumps into me and kicks me out of my delusion. It's a tree trunk. Uprooted firs fight for space, their branches overlapping each other. Several yards away, dunking in and out of the water, Hunter clutches a floating Douglas for dear life. He frantically motions at me. I can't make up my mind if it's safe to swim to him and help, when a distinct rhythmical plopping enters my range of hearing.

An elongated object bobs on the surface about a mile away. It's hollow. I concentrate on it, trying to discern the exact shape by the sound and why it attracted me in the first place.

Then I know why. It's a boat. A rowboat. It slips across the surface of the liquid mud. It's empty; at least I hope it is. I can't discern a human soul within it. It must be someone's boat from a nearby campground, because where else would an empty boat come from? Perfect. The least I can do is guide it here and let it be Hunter's ride, if he decides he still wants to live. It's better than having him hang off a tree trunk.

I hum, creating an undercurrent, thinking that once Hunter spots the boat and makes his way into it, which I'm sure he will, I can secretly hum him back to civilization and maybe he'll change his mind about dying.

Elated by this prospect, I float, closing my eyes as I concentrate on humming. I open my eyes. Night is approaching fast. The boat appears in the distance, no more than a dark dot

gliding through evening mist.

"It's for you, Hunter, just so you know that I love you," I whisper, and hum some more.

Hunter doesn't even look at me. I don't blame him. There is nothing to look at; I'm a cold, undead girl submerged to her neck in thick brown soup.

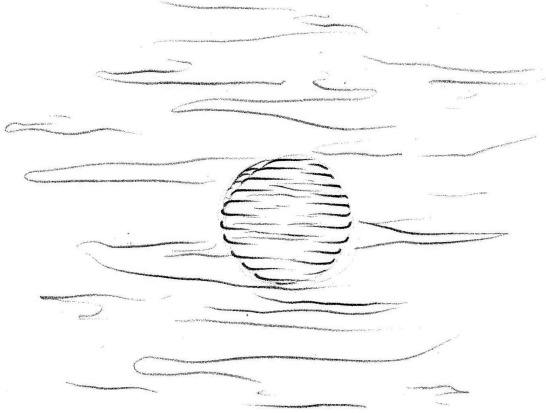
*You're a monster, remember that. Won't you ever forget your place?*

Another minute goes by. The boat is now about fifty feet away, and Hunter notices it too. It looks empty, two oars trailing on each side, their handles sticking out of the rusty oarlocks, screeching. Its hull was once painted bright blue, now it's faded into an unidentifiable shade of ultramarine. I close my eyes once more, willing it to move, tugging at it with my voice, wanting it to glide closer. It bobs on the waves, its weight disproportionate with the shape and size of its wooden body, submerged too deeply in the thick gumbo of dirt that I conjured.

I open my eyes to see what's wrong and float very still.

The boat is ten feet away from me, and about ten feet away from Hunter, dead in the middle between us. What I took for silence is not silence at all. I hear it now. The familiar flap of butterfly wings, the broken flute. My father sits up in the boat, his face pale yet smug and satisfied.

## Chapter 19



### Cascade Range

This is my nightmare.

“You never cease to surprise me with your...methods, Ailen. Nonetheless, excellent job. Two sirens gone, and Canosa damaged. I’m pleased with you, very pleased, indeed.”

I feel numb all over. More than numb, I feel like I’m chiseled from a mountain rock that miraculously doesn’t sink. Somehow, I’m still floating, taking in every detail of our encounter in a series of snapshots. My father’s open forehead, his gray hair carefully combed back. His stern eyes peeling me apart. His ever-present classy boating outfit, complete with a fancy maroon waterproof jacket and brand-new khaki pants. I sense a whiff of his signature cologne and want to gag.

“Out of all boats, I had to pick the one with you in it,” I whisper, every word slow to emerge.

“Kids,” he actually addresses both of us, “sorry to have left you hanging. I certainly didn’t think it would take you this far from the Aurora Bridge to do the job. But a job is a job is a job, right? No matter where you do it or how, the fact remains. You did

it. I will hold to my word. You both will live. Ain't that good news, Ailen? Where is that smile, show your Papa, please?" He looks at me with a new expression in his face, one I don't recognize. Half awe, half fascination, and perhaps a hint of jealousy mixed with fear. All hiding under his mask of fake parental love. Forget gagging, I want to outright vomit.

He leans out of the boat and I have the sudden urge to pull him underwater and keep him there until he is no more. I'm pissed, because I know that a siren hunter can't die from a siren's hands.

"Will you accept my apology for abandoning you two?" my father says. My jaw drops open once more. He has never apologized to me in my entire life. Never. Not once.

He stretches out his right hand, his gray hair moving in the evening breeze and his lips forming a perfect smile.

When I fail to give him my hand in return, he pats me on the head lightly with a contained grimace of disgust. My father always hated wet things, especially wet, dirty things. Promptly, he unzips both of his jacket pockets and takes out two resin gloves, the thick orange kind that fishermen use for fetching their catch out of the water. They squeak as he pulls them on.

"Looks like your boyfriend is injured?" he says to me.

"Hey, son, you all right?" This is directed at Hunter.

Hunter merely nods.

"If you don't want to talk, that's fine with me. We'll have all the time in the world to talk later." My father is obviously in a very good mood and I exhale in relief. I don't know what he'll do to Hunter if he learns of his impairment, especially here, in the middle of nowhere, with who knows what he has hidden in his pockets or under the bench.

Hunter seems indifferent, staring blankly.

"Well?" My father raises his eyebrows.



I hesitate, not knowing what to do next. He apologized to me. He praised me for a job well done. He *heard* me and spoke to me like to a normal human being. So what that it took for me to die to get this? It's what I wanted my entire life. Perhaps he loves me, really loves me, after all?

Thoughts are reeling around my head like an angry cloud of buzzing bees. Automatically, I follow the boat and help my father prop Hunter up and over the side of it.

"Did you forget how to talk? Or did she stun you with her theatrics?" my father asks Hunter.

"Hello," Hunter mutters and falls silent, slumping into a wet, shivering pile on the front bench, giving me a look full of accusation.

"I don't blame you. I'd be speechless, too. Look at this. She flooded an entire valley! My God." My father's cheery mood fueled by the aftermath of the destruction makes him blind to what's going on, and I'm eternally grateful.

"Ailen? You coming?" My father stretches out his gloved hand, speaking in a jovial tone as if we're departing for a summer picnic.

I wait for a second, still uncertain. Did I finally earn his approval? Can people change? It takes a while, but it can happen. Can't it? Is it possible that he feels remorse, or guilt, or dare I imagine, there is love for me? I wanted to revive his soul fully, is this perhaps another chance? Years of childish yearning are close to impossible to erase, as I know now.

I fasten my eyes onto his bleached gaze. His pupils widen, two dark pools into the unknown. They don't frighten me like they used to. Although the lilac of the dusk solidifies by the minute, I see his eyes clearly for what they really are—merely two orbs full of protein liquid. I could reach out and pop them with my fingers, or I could scream and make them boil. Either way, the

source of my nightmares—those two terrible spheres of menace—are gone, replaced by a pair of vulnerable globules, old and tired, sunken from years of internal conflict. My father's whole demeanor is that of a disappointed old man who's trying to make ends meet, doing the only thing he knows how to do well, hate women. What sorry existence it must be, how much pain must he carry around and suppress on a daily basis.

He blinks, unable to withhold my gaze, perhaps sensing what I'm thinking. I choose to believe the unbelievable.

"Sure," I say.

I steady the boat from bobbing and propel myself up and out of the filthy soup in one leap, landing softly between Hunter and him and onto the boat's floor. My greasy feet splatter mud in all directions and I watch with horror how the beautiful maroon fabric of my father's jacket turns brown in several spots.

I feel him burning a hole in my head with his stare and I dare to lift my eyes, automatically expecting a blow. It doesn't happen, and I sigh in relief, noticing wonder in his eyes. Wonder and uncertainty.

"Don't worry, sweetie, it's just a jacket." This is new as well, and I stare, struggling to comprehend the change.

"I have a hundred of these puppies, don't I?" He gives me another pat on the shoulder, and smiles. "Let's go home." He picks up the oars and plunges them into the dark water.

"It will take us forever," I manage.

"But you can hum us faster, can't you? We don't have to go far. I left my car by the campground, over there." He motions west. "It's high on the ridge, so it evaded your...what shall we call it...forceful flooding."

"Sure, I'll do it." I nod, overtaken by his attention. An alarm rings a thousand bells inside my mind, but my heart covers it with a blanket of hope, hushing it.

## Chapter 19

It's my trap and my curse, this elusive happiness. I'm buried alive by my desire. Despite it, I clutch to the silky rope of the promise of his love, elusive as it is. With an indescribable accuracy, I can feel it pulsing, distant and taciturn, but there.

I've got nothing left to lose at this point, do I? Then why not risk it? Why not throw myself into mad belief? And I do, dwelling on my folly and not having a care in the world; if there is even a one percent chance that I'm right, the reward will thwart my pain and polish me with its new and shiny lacquer.

So I hum and hum, passing hours as we make our way to a campground that resembles a ghostly peninsula in the night, completely devoid of campers and sitting smack in the middle of the mudslide, swollen with tree trunks, silt, and even snowmelt.

"That took, what, less than an hour? You could make good money doing this, Ailen, did it ever cross your mind?" my father exclaims. I nod. No other remarks are exchanged for the rest of the journey.

Time loses significance and staggers along in a series of boring practical moves, like getting out of the boat, pulling it ashore, slushing through wet grass to the dark parking lot, because electricity malfunctioned at some point during my effort to fill the valley with water. My über-organized father, nonplussed, turns on his super bright flashlight. I help Hunter limp along, eager to enter the comfortable confines of Papa's Maserati. Surprised that we're not asked to clean up, we both file into the back of the car and sink into the enveloping leather. I realize I forgot what it's like to ride in a car, to bask in its quiet whirring. I take Hunter's hand, and he lets me. I squeeze it and wait. He doesn't squeeze back at first, then he does, and I feel a tired smile spread over my face.

How we make it out to the highway is less about driving along a road and more about wading through a dark tunnel toward some unattainable light at the end—light and life and

normalcy.

My journey home is paved with anguish. Five days ago I was in a different place. Three hours is how long it takes for me to return to its precise location. Three minutes to surface out of sealed off wonder, taking in my house through the tinted car windows like a ghost from the past. It turns my skin into a flock of marching goose pimples. Instantly, I can't breathe, sensing that I'll die right here, in this place where I grew up, where I was born.

We arrive in the dead middle of the night.

My father parks the car by our garage door, kills the purr of the engine, turns around, and throws me a large black fleece blanket to cover myself up. Apparently, he's worried that my glowing skin will freak the neighbors out.

I take the blanket and nod, moving on autopilot. I open the door, throw the blanket over my head, shuffle around the car, and help Hunter out, ignoring my father's hushed urgency to be fast and quiet and discreet lest we be discovered by neighbors who—thank you very much—are still under the impression that I died from my suicidal jump off the Aurora Bridge. I would imagine I gave Mr. Thompson and his elderly friends enough juicy details to speculate on my passing and how it must have felt. Add to that the unexplained death of Missis Elliott and her poodle Lamb-chop, and you've got a morbid gossip party.

I make my legs move, dragging them up the steps to my house that, with its lights turned off, resembles a huge casket. *No more running for you, Ailen Bright. Where would you even go?*

Hunter breathes rapidly in front of me, taking each step with great care, moving slowly and moaning; his damp hoodie brushes my face as I nearly stumble into it. My father is behind me and I'm caught in the middle. Having endured Hunter's soul melody during the three hour ride, I don't how to find the strength to suppress my growing hunger. It's overpowering. When

was the last time I ate? Who was it? That revolting homeless mushroom guy by the Fremont Troll, and that was an eternity ago.

I glance to the side, to Mr. Thompson's dark garden. I could dash into the bushes, wrench open his door, crash into his bedroom, and suck out his soul. But I don't. A certain softness has destroyed my resolve—hope for my father's love. One more attempt to verify whether it's true. One girl's needy yearning, however crazy or hopeless it sounds. It can never be destroyed.

We emerge on the porch and wait for father to quietly fumble for keys and stick one into the keyhole. Hunter leans on the railing, his head turned away from me. Afraid to bother him, I leave him be, clutching the edges of the blanket tighter around my head, creating a hood while looking around.

Velvety black at this hour, with only two street lights dotting the night on either side, lies Raye Street. Wet from recent rain, puddles glisten with the reflected light. Expensive cars are parked along its right curb, while recycling and compost cans have been rolled out neatly in between.

*You hypocrites. You like to flash your perfect façades to everyone, but you don't dare talk about your familial secrets. You hide inside your beautiful houses, pretending like you have your shit together, when, in fact, you don't.* I spit with vigor, thinking about my father and his nightly violence toward my mother, covered up in the morning with the proper social stance of a respected businessman with a wife who's gone a little cuckoo. But whose doesn't? That was always his counterpoint. *Women were made to haul water,* his words echo in my mind as I stare at our manicured lawn, so disgustingly pristine in the moonlight. The only sign of disturbance is a pile of sheetrock, wooden beams, and other construction materials right above the garage, to patch up the hole in the ground where I happened to escape Papa's private man cave a few days ago.

## Cascade Range

“Welcome home,” my father says, slowly opening the door into darkness, with a barely audible squeak. Hunter steps in, and I follow, father shutting the door behind us.

Hunter immediately staggers into the living room and plops down on the couch, hands over his ears, all without uttering a single word, silent for more than three hours now. This unnerves me and I throw a worried look to see if father is alarmed by this in any way.

“I’m afraid we won’t be able to turn on any lights at this moment, I hope you don’t mind. Go on, take a seat.” Father motions me to the same couch, and then proceeds to carefully remove his dirty boating shoes. After he sheds his rain jacket, he flattens the collar of his shirt and smoothes his hair. He stretches his neck and checks his teeth in the mirror, like he can see his own reflection in the darkness.

I carelessly drop the blanket onto the floor and, without wiping my bare feet on the rug, I walk over to sit next to Hunter, feeling like I’ll never get out of this house again.

I can’t help but recognize the outlines of the familiar furniture in the gloom of the living room. To my left stands our dinner table of cherry wood, a thick oval top balanced on a single spindle leg, four chairs tucked under it. The lucid tulip shades of our chandelier hang over it. Swarovski crystal, twinkling like drops of water suspended in the air.

I remember climbing on top of the table and pushing the chandelier to swing, watching the shadows dance on the walls and pretending I was underwater. Papa hit me hard for that, from behind, and without warning. I flew several feet and split my chin on our polished parquet floor. There was a lot of blood, but I didn’t utter a sound. I flinch at the memory, remembering clearly how mother was bringing out the casserole and a set of candlesticks, ignoring the scene out of fear and averting her eyes as

if nothing happened. I can almost smell the bubbling hot cheese and the burnt matches after she lit the candles. I was five.

I blink and look to my right, to the big window unobscured by blinds, because father likes his light. In the blackness outside I see the street lights on the Aurora Bridge, 3,000 feet of its steel stretched from my house to Hunter's, where his mom is probably thinking him dead at the moment, if she is thinking anything at all in her state.

I turn my head and notice Hunter's gaze in the same direction. He quickly lowers his eyes. I wonder what is going through his head, but I don't dare ask. Not that he'll hear me anyway. I suppress the urge to grab his hand and press it to my chest. I shift a little to the right, just so I'm farther away from his maddeningly sweet melody.

"A perfect blend of art and science, wouldn't you say?" Father interrupts my willful stupor. He lifts a glass sphere from the coffee table and turns it this way and that, squinting at the water against the moonlight that filters through the glass, causing fish to scatter in all directions; they bump into the sphere's walls, into each other, locked in their glass casket until they die.

"Yeah..." I trail off, looking at it with a new understanding.

"Hey," I say, unable to bring myself to call him Papa and yet not feeling comfortable at this particular moment to say father either. "Hunter needs to see a doctor, like, soon. His arm might be broken, and I think I..." I want to say, I made him deaf, but arrest it mid-sentence, biting my tongue. "I think I shook him up pretty badly. We fell off a cliff about five hundred feet, so—"

"Don't you find it fascinating?" father continues, obviously deciding to ignore what I said. His usual treatment is back, so I close off and ignore him, incredulous at his ability to shut out the most horrific facts, yet understanding it fully. This is how must

have survived his own horror—whatever it was—by making horrible things sound normal. You fell off a cliff over five hundred feet tall? No big deal.

“It’s not very polite to ignore me, Ailen, you know that. Don’t you have anything to say?” He places the glass orb back on the table, comes up to me, squats, and lifts my chin toward the window. I freeze at his touch—warm, yet not comforting. He peers into my face, as if it’s my turn to be his orb. *I’m not transparent, Papa, I’m empty. I have no soul. There’s no use looking.*

“You really need to take Hunter to the ER,” I repeat, feeling the urge to kill rising in my chest in large, vehement waves.

“I’m sure he can speak up for himself, can’t he?” my father says inquisitively.

“Sorry,” I say, not knowing for what. It’s a habit.

“No need to apologize. You’re my star, after everything you’ve accomplished. Albeit, a bit messy. But I understand. We all love a little fame, don’t we?” He pats me on the shoulder.

“Hunter needs to see a doctor, now,” I press on, curling my hands into fists, hoping it will help stifle my fever. “He’s in pain.” I turn my head and see him slumped in the corner of the couch, soundly sleeping; by some unknown miracle, I don’t fall on top of him right there and then. Watching him sleep is like watching a delicious homemade pie steam its sugary aroma, fresh out of the oven, placed directly under your nose after you’ve had nothing to eat for a whole week.

“I see.” Father is back on his feet and then sits across from me on the other couch, a low glass coffee table separating the ten feet between us, the glass aquarium balancing dully in the middle like an enormous transparent egg.

“You’re that fond of him, are you?”

I swallow rapidly but don’t answer.

“He seems okay for now, don’t you think? Sleep will do



him good. Meanwhile, I want to show you something. I want you to pay close attention, please.” He sticks his thumb and forefinger into his shirt pocket, takes out a small object, and places it on his upturned palm. It glistens in the hazy moonlight.

A pearl.

While I look at it, he pulls out a sonic gun from under his feet and places on the table top with a cautious smile. I recoil. I thought he trusted me, but he’s still afraid, after all. I stare at the pearl.

“Let me explain something to you, perhaps it will help us understand each other better. Do you know what this is?”

*Do you take me for an idiot*, I want to say, but the gun makes me answer his question literally. “A pearl?”

“Not just any pearl. It’s a natural pearl. Do you know the difference between a cultured and a natural pearl?” The way he says it make me feel dumb. The way I’ll explain it, he won’t hear. So I give him an excuse to shine.

“No, I don’t,” I say.

“Of course you don’t. Most pearls in stores are cultured, grown on pearl farms. It’s a fascinating process, really. They take a tiny mother-of-pearl bead, or a piece of sand, and implant it into a mollusk—the host.” He pauses, waiting for a reaction.

I nod, unsure where he’s going.

“This one,” he puts it on his palm, “was made by nature. It’s perfectly round, which is extremely rare. Look.”

He lifts it against the faint light diffusing through the window, and pinches it between his manicured fingers. “Very pretty. The closer it is to an ideal spherical shape, the more expensive. Until the last century, they’ve been valued above all other gems. Know why?”

I shake my head, playing along.

“Not for their beauty. For their rarity.”

## Cascade Range

He gives me a long look. I shift uncomfortably. Something sinister wakes in his eyes, I can't place it. He leans over the table, his other hand on the gun.

"Tell me how natural pearls are made."

I stare.

"Do we need to talk about pearls right now? Hunter's—"

"By a *parasite*," he interrupts me.

A film of greedy fever rolls over his face like parchment. I have a sensation that I'm looking at a marionette controlled by an evil puppeteer, struggling to remember the last time he gave me an in-depth lecture like this one and coming up blank. The only lecture I remember is the one where he taught me how women were made to haul water, never going into as sophisticated of an explanation as the one now about how natural pearls are made. It doesn't make any sense, yet I feel something important lurks behind it.

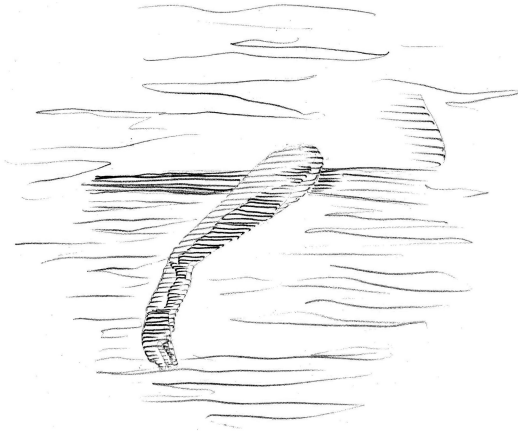
"The parasite enters a mollusk's body so that it can't be expelled. The mollusk fights back by producing calcium carbonate and protein, to cover it up, layer upon layer, until it's completely enclosed. Dead. It becomes a cyst, a cancerous growth. That's what a natural pearl is, Ailen."

He closes his lips on my name with an audible smack and pulls the corners of his mouth into what's supposed to resemble a smile, then shifts back into the groaning couch cushions, apparently satisfied with my reaction.

My mouth goes dry.

I get it.

## Chapter 20



### Brights' House

A lonely car honks once behind the window. A few late night commuter souls clink into a tired escapade from a party, trailing home. Hunter's soul hums its delicious concerto next to me. Darkness presses on the house, smelling of gasoline and nightly perspiration. My tongue tastes bitter.

*A parasite*, I repeat in my mind over and over. He means me. Enclosed in a beautiful shell. His most precious pearl. A work of art and science combined. Extracted from a broken mollusk, discarded after delivery. I shrink into the soft leather, wanting to run, battling the desire to stay and discover if my yearning can be answered. Revolting disappointment overwhelms me. A sudden temptation takes over, and I throw my next words at my father like I don't care.

"You forgot something," I say levelly.

He raises his eyebrows and taps his fingers on the sonic gun in a steady rhythm, lifting his feet on tiptoe so that his silk socks press lightly into the freshly vacuumed carpet.

"Please, enlighten me," he says.

"You forgot to check if the parasite is still alive." I savor the pause.

"Oh. Not for long, actually. Turns out, I have grown rather fond of the parasite I happened to produce." He stretches his lips, but his eyes don't smile. The air grows thick with my anticipation.

"We'll be staging your funeral tomorrow morning. To quiet the city folk and stop the rumors, let people know we found your body and just weren't ready to disclose the news. You know, the works. To give you a proper goodbye."

"What?" I almost choke. "Why?"

The rest of what he says I don't hear. I just sit there, bolted to the couch, debilitated, reaching out and grasping for the meaning of this news but finding nothing to hold on to.

"Where would you like to go?"

"What?" I force myself back. "I'm sorry, I got distracted. What did you say?"

"I said, after it's over, where would you like to settle? You didn't hear anything at all, did you?" He shakes his head. "How typical."

I gape. "Sorry. The whole parasite thing, and then the funeral thing...Why do we need to do it? I don't understand."

"I'm doing this for you, Ailen. *We* need to do this for you." He studies me, making a clear emphasis on the word *we*.

"*We* need to do this? For *me*?" I repeat.

"Yes, for *you*." He clears his throat. "I made a mistake, as a father, and I apologize. I failed to...to see you as my daughter, above all; siren or not. I want to make this right again. I want us to feel like a family and put an end to this incessant conflict."

I simply stare, dumbfounded. Something smells fishy.

"Once you're *buried*, we'll be able to leave Seattle and start a new life, you and me. I will close my store and open up a new one in another city. What do you say? Sound good? Is there a

particular place you'd like to go?" he asks again.

His knuckles grow white, his skin stretched over the hand holding the gun, yet his face lights up. There was only one other time when he was glowing like this, and it was when we returned from my mother's funeral. Another fake funeral, because there was no body to bury and her casket was empty. He excused his happiness on account of not having to look for her body anymore. He said the funeral brought him much needed closure. Back then, of course, I had no idea it was him who pushed her off the bridge.

"You're serious? You mean this? For real?" As I say this, my traitor heart burst aflutter. Hopeful, childish, full of naïve excitement. His crimes forgotten. His violent behavior evaporating from my memory like it never existed.

"Of course I mean it! How is that for a birthday present? I didn't forget, see?"

I study him, wanting to make sure there is not a hint of deception in his eyes, not a twitch in his facial muscles. I'm scared, terrified to believe. It's too good to be true, too easy, too all of a sudden. I swallow back tears.

"Can this be true?" I croak.

"Can't an old man change at the sunset of his life? Come on, Ailen, give me some credit. Look at me." He places the gun down on the coffee table and raises both arms in surrender. "I admit, I'm a little afraid of you. You turned out to be a fierce little thing. But I'm proud of you. I'm very, *very* proud of you."

I want to hug him, but I can't make myself move. I've never hugged my father, or been hugged by him in return. Not once, including when he delivered me in the bathtub. He probably had to hold me simply because I would drop to the floor if he didn't.

Confusion swirls its nasty doubts around in my head, twisting my guts. Isn't this what I wanted all along? To have him

all to myself? To sing to him, better than my mother? To have him admit that I can be of value? That I'm worthy of his love after all?

"I don't care where. Anywhere. You pick," I say and mean it.

"All right. I have an idea. How about Italy? On the outskirts of Rome, away from heavy population, say, in some small village, so that every weekend we can take a trip to the—"

"—Baths of Caracalla, to listen to the opera," I finish automatically, fetching this knowledge from the depths of my memory.

"Precisely. That's exactly what I meant. How did you know?" He looks at me quizzically, expecting an explanation.

"I just do. I'm your daughter, after all..." I trail off, blinking tears down my cheeks, mortified that he'll see me crying.

"Interesting. Perhaps it confirms that we're truly related." He grins.

I gasp. "What do you mean by that? Are you implying mom cheated on you? How can you even fathom such a thing? She would never...She loved you." My voice catches.

His face wrinkles in pain. "Let's drop the subject of your mother. We have other, rather exciting things to discuss. About the funeral—"

I can't stop. "Did you really think that m—"

"Silence!" His scream is so sudden and abrupt that my teeth click as I close my mouth. This feels comfortable in a twisted way. My father is back to normal, and thankfully, I know how to deal with him amidst his angry fits.

I feign rapt attention.

"You will pretend to be a corpse, for lack of a better word. I'm sure you can manage—your skin is perfectly white with characteristic blue undertones. Would you be able to lay still for several hours?" he asks.

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"Sure," I manage, afraid I lost his love before I even had a chance to bask in it.

"Excellent. Hunter will stay with you while you get ready. I thought you'd like that."

I steal a glance at Hunter's face; it looks peaceful and serene with his eyes closed; his hair bunches up over his fist and his chest slowly rises and falls with each breath. *I need to stay away from him.*

"And where will you be?" I ask.

"Funeral business, of course. I have to leave in a few minutes. I have to pick up the casket," his eyes drop to his Panerai watch, "see to the funeral parlor, prepare the boat—"

"The boat?" I ask.

"Ailen. How else do you think you'll be able to extract yourself from the casket—by digging yourself out of the grave in the middle of the night? I certainly don't think it's a good idea. We will be giving you a burial at sea."

I blink. "Wow. Why?"

"Because it's the only way you can safely break out of the casket. You'll tear off the lid, swim to Ocean Shores and we will meet there, okay?"

"Ocean Shores? Is it that small town on the coast where you and mom went one summer? Why Ocean Shores?" I have so many questions that my words are momentarily paralyzed, bunched up in my throat in a mass of screaming.

Father walks over to Hunter and shakes him awake, prodding his arm with his delicate fingers, announcing, "Your arm isn't broken, it's sprained. You'll live. Now, listen to me. Your job is to see to it that Ailen preps for her funeral. She needs to take a shower and put on a clean change of clothes. I don't care what, as long as it looks decent. Can you do this for me?"

Hunter's eyes open wide in a struggle to understand.

"Wha..." He winces.

I can't tell if it's because he's realizing once again that he's deaf, or because something hurts, or if he was able to make out the word *funeral* from my father's lips.

"Let me repeat." Father launches into a detailed explanation of the type of coffin he picked out and why it would be easy for me to open, the time people will come to pick me up, how long the ceremony will take, and where we will go afterward. But I only half listen. My other half imagines things that I didn't dare to imagine before, like life with my father. In another city. Staring new, from scratch.

Suddenly, I realize that a *funeral* is a very lovely word. It means a happy ending. I think that a funeral is my new favorite thing. It's where families get reunited, to witness the passage of a loved one to the other side. Like birth, only the other way around.

Hunter nods, perhaps afraid to speak up, stealing quick glances at me.

Father is done with his tirade.

"You got everything, son? Can I count on you?" he asks.

"Yes." Hunter nods.

"If he forgets, I'll remind him," I say, to get father to leave the house faster, eager to get ready and move away from Hunter so I can have a little break.

"Your job is not to remind him, but to get ready. Do you understand?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer.

"Good." My father excuses himself and disappears upstairs to change, then comes down donned in one of his finest Italian wool suits, black, with a black tie contrasting against his crisp white shirt. A waft of his signature Bulgari cologne tickles my nostrils. It takes him less than ten minutes to transform from a recreational fisherman to a gallant businessman. During this time,



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I dare not move closer to Hunter, dare not talk to him, remaining in the same position I was. I don't even steal a single glance to see what he's doing, concluding that he probably dozed off.

In the foyer, father adjusts his cufflinks and slides into his black shiny leather Italian shoes to compliment the look, addressing me without raising his eyes.

"It's close to five a.m. now. Be ready by six, please. I should be back by then with the casket." He sticks his arms into the sleeves of a trench coat, picks up his umbrella, and then jingles the keys before dropping them into his pocket. A chatter of heels against the parquet floor, a click of the door latch, and he's gone.

I remain seated for a beat or two, the rectangle of the door fried into my retina, when Hunter nudges on my sleeve.

I jump up and wheel around.

"I'll be right back!" I say and raise my index finger to indicate both my fast return and my desire to go upstairs. Then, before he has a chance to say anything or hold me back, I sprint up, literally flying up the stairs, yanking open the door to the bathroom and shutting it closed with a loud bang.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I register that this door is brand new and smells freshly painted. Out of habit, and without thinking, I lock it, slide down to the floor, and break down into sobs. Secretly, I wish Hunter would dash after me, knock on the door, beg me to let him in. But he doesn't. I know why. He's giving me space, allowing me to fume. Plus, he must be exhausted. I bang on the floor with my fists, driving the pain out of me, into the open, turning it into words, spelling it out aloud and not caring if the neighbors hear me. I simply have to purge my system of this sonorous misery.

"Hunter, I'm sorry. I want to be with you, but I can't. I love you, but I can't. I want to die, and I can't. I want to bring my mother back. I can't. I want to kill Canosa so she'd," I bang both

fists on the floor, “stop,” I hit again, “fucking,” and hit once more, “threatening you. I can’t. Can’t seem to be able to do it. I don’t want to be a siren anymore. I want to be normal, I want to turn time around. I want to go back to how it was before my birthday. But I can’t! I can’t! I can’t!”

I hit the floor until my knuckles bleed the clear liquid that is my blood. Dust flies up into the air in small puffy clouds. I manage to break the tiles into mush. I spring up and direct the rest of my fury at myself in a kind of a delirious glee, tearing at my hair, slapping my own face. There is one thing I *can* do, I realize, and it’s reunite with my father.

I yank at my Siren Suicides hoodie. It’s clammy and sticks to my skin and won’t peel off, so I rip it and throw its dirty rags around me. I strip out of the hateful orange fisherman capris, tearing them to shreds in the process. There is nothing else to destroy, so I turn my attention to our antique, carved-marble bathtub, the ridiculous Bright family relic. I consider lifting it and smashing it to pieces. Curiously, it looks naked to me, boring and bland without its sirens and their mouths open in a lethal song, their arms spread astride like wings. The faucet bends its bronze neck, vulnerable, lonely and frail without the Siren of Canosa holding it in her delicate hands. To wash off my frustrations, I want to soak in a bath so badly, that I decide to hack it into a pile of rocks afterward.

I vigorously twist the cold-water handle and nearly break it off. A frothy stream gushes from the spout. I watch it bubble, inhaling the echo of chlorine like a welcome friend. I plug in the chained resin stopper and delight in the twirling fluid. It rapidly fills the tub, making me think for a second that it’s my birthday again. Instead of drowning, I’ll simply take a bath and get out, before it all goes to hell.

I step over the rim and descent into cold water, rushing

into submersion. I tilt my head to the ceiling and slide all the way in, letting my face sink, breathing through my gills.

This is bliss. Nothing bad happened, no time has passed. It's September 7, 2009, around 5:30 a.m., and today, I'm sixteen years old. I'm simply getting ready for my big day, to celebrate, to be all nice smelling and adorable and pampered.

The ceiling doesn't share my sentiment, however. It frowns through circular waves on the surface of the water. There are no bubbles that escape my mouth, no disturbance in my chest of any kind, no pain in my lungs. I don't need to push myself down with both arms to stop from floating up. In fact, I can make my body sink or float at will, without moving a single muscle, simply by thinking about it. No, not even thinking, it's instinctual now. I tentatively reach up and touch my gills, tracing their ragged edges, torn a few days ago but now smooth and healed into two coarse openings. Jets of fluid siphon in and out of them, matching my breath.

Fate decides to completely mess up my brain. The doorknob turns once to the right. I hear a distinct click amplified by several feet of water and sit up, my heart pounding.

I watch the knob. It turns three times to the right.

Click-click-click.

"Hunter?" I call, forgetting that he won't hear me now, but knowing that if it was him, he'd knock first and not barge in like a Neanderthal.

"Papa?" This is my next guess. I instinctively call him Papa again, thanks to my wishful thinking of us reuniting.

There is no answer, but a single tentative knock on the door. I hug my knees, realizing with horror that I forgot to grab a change of clothes from my room and have nothing to throw on.

"Hang on, I'm naked! Getting out." I swiftly jump out of the tub, and, dripping water all over, grab the nearest towel, rolling

myself in it and tucking in one end at the top, ensuring it's secure. It occurs to me that, indeed, it is Hunter—who else would it be? The soft concerto of his soul seeps through the crack under the door, how did I not hear it before? He probably finally decided to come and talk, tried to enter, and then realized I'm taking a bath and knocked.

This thought erases my misery like it never existed.

"Hunter, is that you?" I repeat, not caring that it's useless. The melody of his name alone makes my heart sing.

"Ailen?" he says, as if he heard me. But it comes out muffled, strained, slurry. "Hey, uh...I got clean jeans for you." Pause. "And a T-shirt." Another pause, followed by his heavy breathing. "I can't hear what you're saying, so, can I just come in? I'll drop them on the floor and be out in a flash. I won't look, I promise. Remember your favorite number? It'll take me three seconds—" The last lines he delivers fast, in a rush, and then promptly falls quiet as if cut off. I think I hear a choking cough.

"Favorite number?" I say, thinking, *three*. Why did he ask me that? I frown, turn the lock lever into the open position, and grab the door handle. My wet palm slides against its polished bronze. Brand new and stuck, it doesn't give. I wipe my hands on the towel.

"Hang on. I can't open the darn thing," I mumble, turning it harder, afraid to break it. It won't budge, stuck, probably because it hasn't been used that much and the locking mechanism needs to be oiled and adjusted.

"What the..." I curse under my breath.

A melody penetrates me. Strong vibrations come from behind the door. I try to rotate the handle again. It's no use. The song comes through the walls, like a chorus of some ancient opera. At once, Hunter mentioning three makes sense. Him squeezing my hand three times. Three minutes is how long it takes for an

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average person to drown. For both of us, three is like a code for death.

“Canosa!” I shriek, and hear her mad cackle. Her rotten stink poisons the air, bursting through every gap and enveloping me in its ruin. It burns my nostrils, laughing at my naïveté.

“Nooo!” I yell. I rip the handle off and drop it on the floor. Raising my right leg, I kick the door with great force—one, two, three times. The hinges take pockets of plaster out of the wall and the newly painted wooden slab finally collapses with a groan, rousing a puff of dust.

My heart sinks.

## Chapter 21



### Marble Bathtub

Time has a peculiar way of turning on its head. I'm transported back to the very first time I met Canosa, on the edge of the lake. The cherry expanse of the door rolls out between us in a six-foot long welcoming carpet. She stands on its opposite end, the way she stood back then, except, she's not a gorgeous femme fatale anymore. Her face and body are distorted in the way a heart attack would wreck havoc on its victim, leaving her features lopsided. My scream that proved lethal to both Teles and Ligeia hasn't exploded her, but it seems to have damaged her beyond repair. Only half of her tissues appear dead. Her mouth is open in a grimace. Her hair is reduced to a sorry matted mess and pushed to one side; on her other side, she holds Hunter in a neck bind. The only thing that didn't change is her penetrating gaze, her big green eyes oozing some prehistoric, primeval hatred.

"You bronze bitch. Let him go!" I roar.

"Make another move and he's dead," she hisses.

I lower my leg, having almost taken a step.

She tilts up her head up and laughs, her slick, moist breasts

jiggling unpleasantly. My guts spasms in revulsion.

“Oh, I’ve been dying to see this pain on your pretty face. Marvelous,” she exhales. “Now, kiss your boyfriend goodbye, Ailen Bright.” She tightens the headlock. Hunter claws at her fingers, choking.

There is no time to think. It’s not your typical staring and sizing each other up deal. Forget it. This is a battle for life or death, and I dive into it with zeal.

To say that I leap at her is to rob your imagination. I crash at her in a combination of an acoustic and a physical wave, ear-splitting in my shrill, all-consuming in my wake, oscillating and howling. I head-spear into her slimy stomach and we tumble down the stairs in a tangle of limbs, rolling all the way into the foyer and stopping only inches from the front door. The racket we produce must have roused the entire neighborhood.

I grab at everything I can, digging my fingernails into her flesh, biting her with my teeth, even reaching up with my feet in an attempt to kick her. Hunter is half-sandwiched between us, thrashing. He can’t yell, his air is cut off by Canosa’s arm. I can’t see his face, only the back of his head.

We cartwheel around the floor, ripping coats off the hooks from the open wardrobe, spilling about shoes, and knocking down the umbrella tree stand with a clang. Canosa’s hair meshes into my mouth, her limbs bulge with veins. Her mouth opens almost to an audible cracking of her skull, and then her teeth sink into my arms, my stomach, my face.

I’m about to be eaten alive. I don’t care. There is only one goal on my mind. *To free Hunter.* If I can’t overpower her with my strength, I can try to overpower her with my voice. I inhale, but before I can burst into a song, my throat splits open. Using her nails, she rips out a chunk of flesh from my neck, tearing both gill openings open. I gurgle blood, as pain blinds me.

“You disgraceful, ignorant girl! I’m sick of you!” Her voice booms around me and through me. “I will show you how to fight me. I will show you what happens when you dare to fight the Siren of Canosa!”

Whatever is left of me gets abandoned in haste. Canosa pulls herself up with a grunt and leans against the front door, Hunter firmly in her headlock. His eyes are closed; he’s not moaning or struggling anymore. It appears he has passed out. I’m surprised he was able to stay awake at all, after everything that happened to him since yesterday. He only managed to snag a few hours here and there snoozing, and I don’t remember him eating anything. His only drink was that muddy water from the mountain river hours and hours ago.

I want to scream at Canosa to leave him alone. I try to stand up, but my feet slide on the slick floor. My leg muscles are torn by her nails, the clear liquid of my dead blood pools between wooden planks of the parquet. I try to prop myself up on my elbows and succeed for a few seconds. I stare at my naked, mutilated body, watching skin and muscles begin knitting together with a quiet hush, itching like crazy. My elbows slip apart and I drop my head on the floor with a sickening smack.

Canosa appears out of nowhere and props my head on one of shoes. “So you can see better, silly girl,” she whispers.

*See what?* I want to ask, but don’t need to.

The next minute will be forever etched into my miserable memory. All I can do is watch and listen, because my body refuses to move, I can’t even hum.

Canosa sits opposite me, about twenty feet away, by the front door. She pulls on Hunter’s limp body, putting his head into her lap.

Everything in me screams *no!* Yet I can’t look away, feeling the life drain from me with every one of her movements. I know



there is nothing I can do. I know this is the end.

She stares into his eyes and ignites his soul. She promptly launches into a Greek song that sounds like gibberish to me. She leans over his face, holding her hair up to make sure I see everything. She grimaces in a deadly yawn and sucks out his very essence, his beautiful concerto, wisp by wisp, breath by breath, until there is nothing left. Then she smacks her lips, throws me a victorious stare, and breaks into a mad laughter that sends shivers up and down my spine, shaking every single wall in the house. Just like that—without a warning, without so much as a glorious battle—Hunter is gone.

*Hunter, Hunter, Hunter.*

Seconds melt into hours. At first slowly, and then all at once, the weight of devastation rips a hole in my chest and devours me, whole. My eyes roll back and I'm about to black out.

I feel Canosa grab me under my armpits and drag me upstairs. My feet slam against the steps, one by one. I don't care. I have no strength to stop her, no strength to look around. No will to do anything anymore. She unceremoniously drops me into the empty bathtub. I slam my head on the marble and my eyes fly open. I can't even utter a cry of pain, and not because she slashed my throat, but because I don't register it anymore. It happens to some other girl, some other body, in some long distant other world that is of no concern to me.

"There you are. I have relieved you of your pain. Aren't you going to thank me? Look at me." She painfully digs her fingers into my chin. "Don't you turn your head away. Look at me!"

I automatically gurgle something in response. I want to say, *Hunter*.

"I've been thinking about you, ever since you blew me out of the water in that mountain valley." She continues, "Have you been thinking about me, Ailen Bright? Tell me." Her stinking

breath is inches away from my mouth, and I can't see beyond the halo of her hair.

She hops into the tub and pins my arms under my body with one knee; with the other, she crawls on top of my chest, sliding it onto my neck. I can't look away, drawn into her green eyes, drinking from them some sort of coldness that binds me first, then spreads through my agony, soothing it, minty.

"You *have* been thinking about me, haven't you?"

*Hunter. You killed Hunter.*

"Ailen Bright. You thought you could kill me. You silly, *silly* girl." She leans closer, her hair parting in two dirty curtains. "Well, let me tell you something, the girl who thinks she's so smart. It takes more than a song. You're not the first, you know. Many have tried before you."

I don't move. *Hunter. I love you, Hunter. I didn't get a chance to tell you this a million times more.*

"I'll let you in on a little secret," she continues quietly. "A secret only for you and me, what do you say? You can't kill me. Nobody can," Canosa whispers.

The air around us agrees with ominous silence.

"You're just dead meat that can sing, nothing more."

I croak involuntarily, because the wound she inflicted is healing quickly. She promptly reaches out and slashes my neck with her nails again. Cold slime oozes on both sides of my neck, dripping into the bathtub.

"It's who you wanted to be, who asked me to turn into A siren, Ailen Bright. This is what you are: a piece of dead meat that can sing."

I shake my head *no*, on autopilot, trained to respond to adults under any circumstance and reverting to my old way of behavior, having nothing left to grasp.

"Go on, then. Pretend to live. Pretend we never met. How

about it? How would you like to play this kind of a game?"

I blink. *Hunter*, pulses in my mind on repeat.

"You're not just silly, you're rude. Didn't your mother teach you proper manners? Answer me. I want to hear you say it one more time." She waits a beat and slaps me on the face, hard.

I keep staring, barely feeling anything.

*My mother was never there to teach me anything*, flashes through my mid. *Because of you*. I watch this thought pass, like it's a gust of wind and nothing more. Then my mind returns to torturing itself. *Hunter*. I want to chant his name.

"This mess you're in? You're the one who made it. You took it into your own little hands. Well, you're not alone. Thousands before you asked for me, called me, and I came." Her nostrils flare, the stink of rotten lilies emanates from her in waves.

I wrinkle my nose at the smell.

"You're a spoiled little brat, that's what you are. You think only about yourself. You disgust me." She stands.

Relieved of her weight, I try to prop myself up and slide back into a heap of jittering muscles.

"You can't balance on this edge between living and dying forever, you're smart enough to know this. Not after you've crossed to the other side once, not after you've tasted the bliss of death. It's only a matter of time before you try again," she says, in a voice of authority not to be questioned. She stands above me, her skin glowing softly in the hazy darkness of the pre-dawn that seeps through the bathroom window.

"Soon, we'll meet again, like old friends. Like sisters." She beams. "Until then, stay out of my way. It's my final warning. You let me do my business, I let you do yours. And don't worry about burying your boyfriend's body. I'll take care of that for you. I'll feed him to the fish, just like I fed your mother." She squats and stretches out her hand to me.

## Marble Bathtub

I stare at her, blank. I understand that she said something about my mother's body, but I can't seem to grasp the meaning of it. Annoyed, she grabs my hand and clutches it with such force that I hear my bones crack.

Then she begins to sing.

I find myself entwined in the ribbon of her voice. It binds me, lifts me up, and whisks me away, to where there is no pain, no memories, no happiness, just nothing.

I let go and fall.

I fall into the vortex of her eyes, into her pupils, deeper into darkness, into what appears to be a mass of dead souls, a colorless chaos of shadowy figures, composed of fog. I fall inside, becoming part of this mass. It breathes as one gigantic body, all-consuming, rhythmic. I can't breathe. I'm surrounded with a liquid that has no oxygen—it presses on me and sweeps me off my feet.

A current of this liquid propels me on, toward the bottom of this crazy nightmare, ten feet, twenty, a few hundred, until my chest is ready to explode. Here, the fluid turns syrupy, sticky, and absolutely black.

*Is this the River Styx? Is she showing me my final journey into afterlife, where she's supposed to be my guide?*

At the far end of this blackness appears a face. Canosa's? No, it doesn't look like it. It stands out against the darkness like an ultimate black dot, all consuming, beyond emotion, plain in its vastness. A black hole. An absolute end. I don't see its eyes, but it's looking at me, staring me up and down, and then it frowns, as if I interrupted it and will be punished, severely, for it.

"Get out of my sight." The face booms. "You're early."

Horror raises every single hair on my body, freezes me into a piece of ice, dangerously miniscule against this enormous overpowering being. I think I know who it is.

It's Death.

Death itself just told me to leave. What do I do? I do the only thing there is to do. *Get the fuck out.* I turn and kick off, wading through thick, velvety liquid, a swamp of grief and loss. This is where everything ends, but I haven't crossed the final line. No. Not yet.

The syrup that choked me, spits me out and I take one frantic breath. I'm in a black lake filled with black water, floating under the black sky. The water writhes with bodies, brushing against my legs like long lily stems, clammy and soft. I shriek and swim, not feeling anything except red pulsing panic. I bump into a shore, but it's not a shore, it's the rim of the tub. I'm in a tub full of water and I'm climbing out, heavy, as if I weigh a hundred tons and can't lift my own body. The dank smell of abandonment packs its mold around me.

I wiggle my fingers, and move my legs, my arms. Everything seems to work. My throat feels as if it's healed itself.

A muted stillness clings in shards to my face, the floor giving way under my palms and knees as I drop down and lay on the cool tiles, head turning to the side to breathe. I glance at the broken door. Yes, Canosa was here, and yes, Hunter is gone. She took him. She took him for good. For some reason she didn't kill me, she let me live. Why?

And I know.

Emptiness shrouds me in a heavy blanket.

I pull my knees up, hug myself and whimper, rocking. Back and forth. Back and forth. As if movement will soothe my pain. As if I fit in this dark and lonely place—my misery. I push past a coldness so deep, it touches my frozen bones. I want to warm up, to hear Hunter's soul. But it's gone. Gone. Gone.

This is worse than death.

"Hunter," I moan, testing my voice. It works. "Hunter.

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Hunter. Hunter.” I keep repeating his name, as if it will bring him back.

I try to imagine the sound of his soul, to bring back that feeling of home—the clatter of food cooked on the stove, the clanking of dishes, the shuffling of feet in slippers on a wooden floor, laughter, the anticipation of a meal, birds chirping behind an open window, the buzzing of insects basking in rays of the morning sun. Vivaldi’s *Summer*, its violins.

I don’t remember how it sounds.

I tighten my grip and keep rocking. Time as I know it has lost its essence. I try to soothe myself to some semblance of sleep. But sirens don’t sleep, so I brood in my self-induced slumber.

“I want to die,” I say. “Please, I want to die.”

I rock some more. Morning light turns from a lilac to the soft gray that’s typical of a Seattle dawn.

“Mom,” I say. “I wish you were here. I wish you could hold me. I wish you could take me to wherever it is you are. I want to be together. Please, I want to die.”

In front of the house, loose gravel crunches under the wheels of my father’s car. My heart jumps, aflutter.

“Papa,” I say. “Papa!”

He’ll save me, he’ll take me away. My Papa is all I have left. Immediately, I’m afraid he’ll be mad when he sees the destruction I’ve caused to the house and will change his mind. My head pounds with horror.

Keys jingle and the front door slams. Footsteps.

“What is this mess...Ailen!”

I hastily push myself up, take a few steps on shaky legs, rip another towel from the hook and cover myself with unbending fingers. The skin on my cuts has closed, and my muscles have knit back together, but they still seem weak. A weird sense of déjà vu makes me dizzy. It feels like five days have never passed, like it’s the

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morning of my birthday, all over again.

"I know you're here, sweetie. Answer me." Curses, followed by steps on the stairs. I want to disappear.

"I hope you're ready. We're leaving in fifteen minutes."

More steps.

I clutch the doorframe, to prevent myself from falling. My father slowly emerges from the shadow, first his head topped with his shiny, styled gray hair, then his black suit, then his fine Italian shoes. I dare not look him in the eyes. Both shoes stop abruptly in front of the broken door, their shiny noses glistening with contempt.

"I thought I'd find you here. What the hell happened?"

With a concentrated grunt, he lifts the door and props it up against the wall, clapping his hands to get rid of the dust.

"Will you look at this..." I hear anger in his voice.

He reaches with his hand past my shoulder, turns on the light and steps into the bathroom, whistling his dismay. The leather soles of his shoes squeak on the wet tiles. Light hits me in the face. Its electric intensity colors my hands in a bluish tint. Blue is my favorite color.

My father gapes; his mouth is open and his eyes are mad, his finger pointing. I dare to meet his gaze.

"Look what you did."

All I can do is stare.

"You know how much it costs to replace a door?"

"I didn't mean to, I swear," I say. "Well, I mean, I did do it, yes. Because Canosa was strangling Hunter. She—"

He interrupts me.

"Look at you. I spend all night preparing, organizing, arranging for caterers, scheduling flower delivery and whatnot, and picking out a casket. I haven't slept all night. I'm supposed to pick you up, clean, dressed, and ready. Your funeral starts in a couple

hours. I rush back, and what do I find? The house is a mess and you look like *shit!*" His finger pokes me in the chest, above the towel, and I wince at his warm touch.

He sniffs the air. "Do you smell it? What's that smell?"

I don't answer, confused, scared that perhaps he's referring to my wounds inflicted by Canosa, maybe I didn't fully heal after all and they stink. I remain still, not daring to glance to see if I'm oozing blood anywhere.

"Answer me. Your father is asking you a question. What does that smell like?"

"What's what smell like?" I manage.

"I thought you more intelligent than this, Ailen. Think."

"Sorry, I don't know what you mean..." I say, afraid to lose the last pillar of my family, the only one who's left.

"You. I'm talking about you." Another jab, yet an exhale in relief. "You smell like the death of me. Do you know how much a funeral costs? Do you know how much it will run me to make it happen? To abandon my business here, to close my store? To move to Italy with you? It will cost me a small fortune."

I shake, filled with terror. He lifts my face, takes a breath. I widen my eyes, expecting a blow, disbelieving what I'm hearing.

"Come on, don't be scared. Did I scare you? I didn't mean to," he says with almost tenderness.

*Was Hunter the price for me to get you back, Papa? Was that it?*

"Let's just get through this together. Tomorrow, we'll start a new life. We'll sun every day, you'll have a new school and meet new friends...Hmm? How about it?" His eyes narrow and I search them, wanting it to be true.

"She killed him," I say, swallowing tears.

"Who. What?" He feigns interest.

"Canosa. She killed Hunter," I say.



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He frowns without surprise. "That is unfortunate. I'm very sorry. But I can assure you that she won't bother us anymore."

"So you made a deal with her? Is this what you did? You paid her with Hunter?" I fall silent, processing the information I managed to spit out without realizing it was there all along, at the tip of my tongue.

"Look, sweetie, what's done is done. There's no use mulling over it. We need to get moving."

I gasp. "You seriously did it? How could you...How can you talk about it so mundane, like it's buying groceries or something." I pause. Each word takes an effort to produce through my paralyzed lips, regaining my ability to talk.

"He was my best friend. I...I loved him." As I say this, I feel the full impact of his loss and I grope for the tub behind me, slowly sliding to the floor, dropping my head into my hands.

*I want to die, I want to die, I want to die.*

"You're a siren. A siren can't have human friends," he says from above. There is finality in my father's voice.

I glance up. His lips press into thin line as if saying, *there will be no arguing about this*. Broken, devastated, and desperate, I'm so afraid to lose my dream of having his attention that I decide not to press the subject. It's easier to push the pain down and forget, as if my happiness with Hunter never existed. Besides, I'm used to suppressing everything I feel, it only comes naturally.

"And you're okay with me being, you know, a *siren*?" I wish I didn't ask this, wanting badly for the floor to part and swallow me before I hear his answer.

"Of course I am. I'm your father, remember?"

I blink. There, three feet above me, hangs his face, smiling, illuminated with the bluish electric light, resplendent with a fresh haircut and shave, yet gray and sunken from a sleepless night. Suddenly, he looks like a pitiful old man, and I want to comfort

him; my grudges, my hate, my resolve to torture him, all blotted out by this new desire. This overwhelming yearning for being together, as a family.

"We'll talk about this later. Right now I need you get cleaned up and ready, all right? Can you do it fast? Five minutes?"

I nod, happy to distract myself from my pain, realizing that my body has fully healed in the meantime.

"That's my girl." He smiles. "Now, here is what I'll have you do."

He talks and talks. He talks fast. He explains it all. The reception. The guests. The venue. The boat. The burial at sea. The speech. The passing of the coffin. The plunge into the ocean. The goodbyes. All I hear is white noise. All I see are his eyes directed at me, for a full five minutes. I have Papa for five minutes, all to myself. It's a miracle paid for by an enormous pain and it's worth it. If only he'd give me a hug. *One step at a time, Ailen, one step at a time.*

"...you'll break out, swim to Ocean Shores, and wait for me by the lighthouse. Don't worry, there is only one. It's easy to find and it'll be empty at that hour. I'll meet you there after dark. Okay?" He stretches out his hand and I place mine into his. It's the first time we touch when I don't flinch away.

"Hunter is gone. Hunter is gone, Papa. I don't know if I can stand the pain," I whisper, unable to stop my words from escaping.

"I know. But you have me now, don't you?" He smiles and I don't know if he jokes or if he truly cares; if I should be scared or elated. I'm still unable to fully believe my luck.

"About the funeral..." I grope for words. "I thought they only scattered ashes at sea? You're not planning on burning me, are you?"

"Of course not!" he retorts. "How could you even think

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such a thing!”

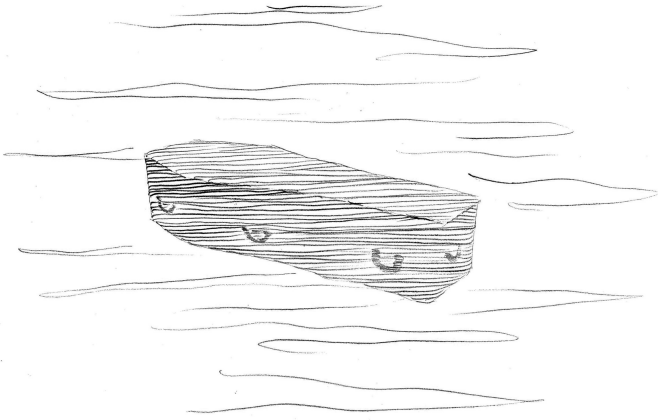
“Okay. One more thing. Our extended family, they will be there, yes?” Fear gnaws its silky torture on my chest. “What if they notice something? I’m scared.”

“You’ll be fine. Pretend it’s a performance, a school play. Your role is to play dead. You can do it, I have faith in you.” A pat on the back. “Let’s get going.”

He pulls me to my feet, I lean on him, laying my check against the brushed wool of his black suit. I inhale his signature cologne.

Close. Close enough to a hug. This will do.

## Chapter 22



### Bleitz Funeral Home

Death. Birth. Two ends of the same stick. You don't know when you'll be dangling off one, or be struck by another. They both look the same, like two ends of a casket. It's the first thing I think when I see it, regally poised on top of our dinner table. Eighteen gauge steel, square corners, painted premium white in matte lacquer, embroidered head panel, silver stationary handles, nude crepe interior, an adjustable bed and mattress. It has a clean new smell. Its weight without my body is 200 pounds; it says so on the flyer next to it. Its weight with my body will be 307 pounds. It took four men to carry it in, after father and I hastily cleaned up the foyer and I hid upstairs in my room, waiting for them to leave. I need to get inside, but my muscles stiffen, playing on the idea of proper *algor mortis*, or siren death chill. No cooler needed, I'm as cold as ice. Attending my own funeral. Washed, shampooed, and dressed in jeans and my spare Siren Suicides hoodie. Blue, of course.

I make myself move, feeling my father's hand on the small of my back, concentrating on my feet, both snug in two white

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canvas slip-ons. I touch the edge of the casket, caressing its smooth lining with my fingers. What a change from the marble bathtub, all this cushioning, designed to soften my journey into the afterlife. With a sigh, I lift my right leg, clasp the edges, and slide in, scooting all the way to the middle as I lay down. My strength is back, but it doesn't give me the desired comfort. The last thing I see is our Swarovski chandelier swinging above my head. Its light throws peculiar shadows on the ceiling like ripples of water. Papa's face swims into view, blocking out the light. His neatly combed hair forms a halo around his head, shimmering with iridescence.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, exhilarated in some strange sense.

"Remember, not a peep. See you on the other side," he says.

I don't smile at his morbid joke.

The lid drops shut with a soft whoosh. The last ray of light disappears into darkness. I smell the synthetic glue and hear Papa open our front door, step outside, and yell for help. I also hear his soul, that faint smoldering melody that I hope I'll be able to restore once we make it to Italy.

Four men slam car doors somewhere outside the house and briskly jog up the stairs. Formal greetings and condolences are offered, and then they come near me. An instrumental soul quartet—one bass, one violin, one trumpet, one accordion. Their souls trickle in to me as petrified and broken, yet delicious. Salty. Pungent. My chest rumbles and I'm terrified they'll hear it. I'm hungry. For one split second, I want to kick open the lid and devour them all at once, but I somehow suppress the urge.

*Play dead, Ailen. Remember, play dead.*

Papa leaves. I hear the staccato of his heels. The first stab of doubt pricks my skin. I wave it off.

*He promised, didn't he? He promised.*

The four men grab the coffin's handles, two on each side, grunt, and then slide the casket off the table as they lift me up to waist level. Silent prior to my father's departure, they launch into comments about how light I am and how there is no foul odor; they move on to what was on TV last night and what beer they had, whether or not there will be free food at the service, and how, of course, there will be with that rich prick throwing such an expensive funeral for his stupid daughter who decided to drown.

They carefully trot as they share their displeasure with our generation at the same time. They wonder how my body was found, and by whom. And how come none of them heard anything on the news.

Family doesn't talk about their dead in this way, at least they have courtesy to be polite and hold such thoughts to themselves. These four men are strangers to me, and they could care less.

I half-listen, half-swim, pretending I'm in my mother's womb, enclosed in softness, swinging in fluid movements, carried down the cascade of stairs, outside, and into the back of a hearse. Its old rear doors creak as they flap open to receive me. Then they slam shut.

Bodies shuffle in and make the chassis shake a little. The engine roars to life and the hearse lurches.

My heart quickly surges and sinks. I can't hear Papa's soul. He's definitely not inside the hearse. Did he leave before, in his beloved Maserati? Why didn't he stay with me? Isn't he supposed to stay with the body? Won't it look strange if he doesn't? I have no answer to these questions.

*Maybe he's driving after the hearse, because there is not enough space in here, you know that. There is only room for four, I tell myself. But I can't hear his Maserati behind us, it's quiet. I decide to wait. It will be all right. He promised, he will come. He has to*

show up for his own daughter's funeral, doesn't he? He can't be late.

The hearse crawls several blocks down the hill, turns around, slows down, and pulls into what must be a parking lot. I trace a mental map of the journey and an image passes my inner eye. How ironic. The place where my mother's empty coffin was on display for whatever family decided to gather to bid their goodbyes; a drab beige Tudor-style house, conveniently located by Seattle's suicide bridge, will be the place of my final departure as well. Bleitz Funeral: sensible cremation and burial options. I should've known. My father's a creature of habit.

I think back to that day. It was raining, and I don't remember much except for the murmurs of distant relatives above my head, people I met for the first time in my life. The building itself. I was struck by how inappropriate it looked for its purpose. The way its façade was layered, like a birthday cake. The way its windows were placed, like smeared on squares of frosting. The way its roof was colored, like somebody wrote Happy Birthday in diamond-colored piping gel on top of its greenish, sugary glaze. I blink several times, trying to rouse myself from my ten-year-old mind, back to the present. But I can't help it, victim to my own wishful thinking. I always dreamt of a perfect birthday. With a perfect cake.

The hearse doors slam, bodies exit, and the back doors open. Four pairs of strong arms lift me out and start their walk. The way they carry me in—I imagine in total darkness—it's how they would slice a cake, with a sharp knife, parting its body, smooth and velvety, with enough pieces for everyone to chew on, to taste, and to swallow, before they comment on it and move on, forgetting it a moment later.

I'm the confection on top of this macerated mass, saved for one special guest—Papa. In a couple of hours, I'll be lying in an

open casket on display, only six days after my sixteenth birthday. It's a Saturday, if my calculations are correct, a perfect day for a birthday celebration. This is my own private party, complete with flowers, food, a fancy boat ride, and a dressed up crowd. I'll be the only one donning color on this occasion.

The casket shifts direction. I feel every turn, and hear every soul around me, every engine of the passing cars. It promises to be a busy morning. The same four men carry me, conversing in hushed chatter. They pause in front of what must be a sidewalk stoop or stairs; they lift me higher and then trot forward again. Right on time, and fitting the occasion, rain starts pummeling the casket's lid. Its dull tinkling adds to my melancholy.

We enter the building, I can tell by the echo of the footsteps. We turn once, twice. I would imagine they will lower me into a cooler or a walk-in refrigerator, to have me all chilled and embalmed and made up for the ceremony, but they don't. They quietly place me on top of what must be a display table and leave. I sigh in relief. Good. I won't need to pretend to play dead while some poor funeral makeup artist pampers my face to make it look rosy as opposed to deadly white.

*Papa, where are you?* I cast my auditory tentacles a mile around, feeling for his presence. He's nowhere to be heard, nor can I hear anyone's soul I recognize.

I spend the next hour or two in agony of anticipation and from the decreasing oxygen inside the casket.

A man enters the room, gingerly steps closer, and opens the lid. A waft of fresh air hits my nostrils and it takes an effort not so suck it in with a loud whoosh. I hold my breath, stiffen, and press my eyes shut. He doesn't mind, doesn't care, this is routine to him. He checks everything to make sure it looks good, even adjusts my hoodie, smoothing out the wrinkles by my neck and straightening the tassels. I wind up tenser at every touch,



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wanting to leap at him, ignite his soul and suck it out—this mix of bad '80s music and a continuous hiss of soda cans opened in rapid succession, with an undertone of battle cries from video games. Sugary. The sickening synthetic kind you get from artificial sweeteners.

“Nice hair. Bleached blondes are my favorite,” he exclaims in a quiet warble. He must be in his early thirties, I decide, a typical basement loner with a job to pay the bills.

“It’s too bad you’re dead. Such a pretty face,” he sighs, tracing the contour of my lips with the very tips of his fingers. I stifle an urge to bite him, my diaphragm convulsing in disgust. I hope he doesn’t notice my chest movement. He doesn’t, continuing his strange one-sided conversation.

“I heard how you died, that’s a horrible way to go. I guess I’m sorry. Rest in peace, girly.” He walks away, calling out to the funeral director that the body is ready.

I breathe out. The show is about to start.

Now that the lid is open, a majestic opera of human souls assaults my ears. People have started to arrive. I swallow, ravenous. My weakened body needs new energy, soon. This will be harder than I thought. The onslaught of sound moves toward me, rapidly. I revel in it, imagining what it would feel like to have music within me, to be one of them, to live their life, so full of warmth and as rich as velvet. It seems I’ve been gone for a century or more and have forgotten how it truly feels to be alive.

Six days ago, only six days ago, I was one of them.

I lay still, frozen at the thought and the weight of it on my chest. The faint smell of lilies travels on the breeze from the air conditioner, and my tongue tastes like talc, my throat going dry. I dare to curl my hands into fists, uncurl, curl and uncurl, seeking relief, and then decide to take a quick look around, while I’m alone.

I open my eyes.

I'm on top of a table. Its right side rests flush against the wall, and the left side faces the open space of an ugly beige interior. The interior of a chapel, about thirty feet wide and eighty feet long. Everything about it is beige—the diffused lighting, the ceiling, the walls, the fake silk of the upholstered chairs. I suppose the floor is beige too, but I don't risk sitting up to confirm my theory. I face dim floor-to-ceiling glass windows, adorned by dusty curtains that haven't seen a cleaner in probably more than a year.

Movement prompts me to close my eyes. I've seen enough.

More cars arrive. Tires of all sizes slosh through shallow puddles on the asphalt road. Brakes creak, engines die. People pile out, coax their children to follow, help their elderly. I try to think of one face I remember from my mom's funeral and I can't. It's a blur. I go back to listening, it's the only thing I can do in my position. And maybe, if I'm careful I can slit my eyes open just a hairline, to see.

A general respectful buzz swirls a mere fifty feet or so away from me. Greetings are exchanged, shoes squeak on the wet marble floor. Lips smack at their newly applied lipstick in front of the bathroom mirror, toilet flushes. A multitude of noises that used to be normal to me. I can hear everything so clearly, like I'm truly part of this life.

I'm about to be the very center of attention. The most popular girl of the party. The one to whom everyone wants to talk. The one whom everyone wants to kiss, and maybe even shed a tear or two, from utter admiration, of course.

People mill around in the foyer, chattering, waiting for the ceremony to begin. I feel important. The clock strikes nine. I risk parting my eyelids a fraction of a hairline. The doors open and the crowd quietly fills the chapel, its air empty one second, rapidly breathing and shuffling the next.

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I feel his presence. I hear his footsteps.

*Papa, you're here. You made it.*

I know him by his breath, by the barely detectable limp in his right leg, and the distinct smell of his signature cologne as it fills my nostrils with hope and anticipation. Above all, I know him by the burning melody of his soul. He slowly steps up to the casket, lightly touches my hand as if acknowledging that everything is going according to the plan, and leaves without a word.

I can't help it and I open my eyes just a sliver more.

People flow in a stream of black attire and hats. Mostly women's hats, black with bows, black with veils, black round, and black flat. The few children who are present have their hair made up and brushed and clean for the occasion. Men wear dark suits. Morbid curiosity presses against their censored looks. Dull whispers spill through the cracks of their politeness. I can tell, they're dying to see me, to see what's left of me, but they don't dare break the etiquette, indulging in social niceties instead. And gossip.

My head swims in the cacophony of their souls and snippets of their meaningless conversations.

*Hello, how are you. Well, how about yourself. Oh, not too bad. What a tragedy. Nice appetizers over there, did you see? I wonder if they'll serve before or after the ceremony. Fancy flowers. I just love lilies. Look at the table, there she is. I wonder what they used for the smell. It's been six days; it must be decomposing by now. You don't say. Why wait for so long? Wouldn't fish have eaten off her face by now? Teenagers, so selfish these days, they don't give a second thought about their parents. I think it's in her genes, remember her mother? Pardon me, excuse me.*

A short, slim gray-haired woman who must be the funeral director walks briskly through the center aisle, between the filled

rows of chairs and toward the end of the walkway. Toward me. She takes a quick look around and nods; probably doing a final check to make sure everything is in tip-top shape. She saunters away, her soul impossibly minty. I curl and uncurl my fists once.

Heads turn to watch her pass, hands reach to dab at the tears here and there, for show, like white snakes out of a black writhing mass. All the relatives whom I never met, who pretend to care. I suspect none of my classmates or teachers came to see me off, because I don't sense anyone I know. Weird. I know Hunter was my only friend, but wouldn't they at least have shown some courtesy? Wouldn't they have been at least interested enough to come and see Roger Bright in his grief, to savor his pain? That rare delicacy rationed only a second time during his lifetime?

Where is he? Where did he go?

I get antsy, having lost his sound amidst the rush of human discord. I wait for him to come, to stand still and composed, to address these fifty something people, to give his eulogy, to list his happy memories of me, to speak of my accomplishments. I get giddy and suppress a smile. This will be a huge surprise. No need to wonder what he'll say. I know. He'll say he loved me, he'll say he misses me so much. He'll cry. He will. Everyone does at their children's funerals.

The clock strikes three minutes too late. Then another three. Then ten. The crowd murmurs. They wait for Roger Bright, the father of the deceased, that sixteen-year-old Ailen Bright who committed suicide by jumping off the Aurora Bridge, did you know? Just like her mother, silly goose. Poor man, his women left him.

I'm mad at this writhing living gossiping crowd. Mad at how different we are. I'm dead, they're alive. I'm freezing cold, they're warm, full of breakfast eaten at home and coffee sipped on the way. Not here out of love, but because they feel obliged. Death

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makes it hard to be excused.

The clock strikes off another minute.

My anticipation mixes with wonder.

Another minute goes by. And one more. I want to shift, to move, to raise my head and look around.

The crowd says one word, quietly, ever politely, until a little girl hears it escape her mother's lips in a whisper and asks aloud, "Mommy, is her Daddy late?"

"Lizzy," her mother hushes her.

My heart turns into a barking seal. It yelps in pain, it won't shut up. Something must have happened, something must have delayed him. Where did he go? He was just here! I strain to listen, but there's no sound of him, not anywhere near.

The sea of people stirs with unrest, swallowing me in the noise of their souls, exchanged glances, wiped tears, sniffing noses, gloved hands, and craned necks. The air moves. There are light steps as a few women scurry to my casket and position themselves a few feet away from my head. What is this, a choir? Suddenly I hear the faintest whisper in my ear.

"Aren't those lilies lovely, Ailen Bright?"

I turn to ice.

Canosa hovers close to my face. She's clothed in proper funeral attire, a black dress, black gloves, black hat, and a black smile behind her veil. I catch my shriek before it forms itself fully and escapes my lips. Surprise gives way to shock, then to hate, and then to wonder. What's she up to? Why is she here? Does my father know?

"Your flower arrangement, it's lovely. White lilies. I love lilies. Mine was made from hydrangeas. Detestable, to say the least." She delivers it all in a quick whisper indiscernible to the human ear, but I hear every word.

I correct my face, play dead, and try to ignore her.

*What should I do, what should I do.*

“Poor darling, darling girl. How very sad. Your dear father must miss you *very* much, he’s so late. I’m sure he’s beyond himself with grief.”

She snuffles. Liar. My eardrums deflect every word. My head is a balloon ready to explode. My fingers curl into fists under the white cloth, curl and uncurl, curl and uncurl.

*He’s late for a reason.*

“Ailen Bright, the girl who likes to forget, to be on the safe side. I want to remind you, don’t meddle in my business, and I won’t meddle in yours. Oh, and I was *dying* to see you in a casket, of course.”

I fume, my innards boiling. The image of her killing Hunter—the very picture I tried so hard to suppress—floats up and takes over my misery, deepening it.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes. By the way, I’ll be singing a sacred hymn for you. I’m part of the choir.” I dare to part my eyes wider.

Her green eyes stare at me from behind a shroud of black, an artful mess of silk and chiffon and gauze. Then she turns her head to face the crowd. I see the backs of three other women beside her, they open up their notes which I don’t see, but I hear paper crinkle. There seems to be no other soul ready to play a piano or anything of the sort. They’ll be singing a capella.

Then I hear Papa. He’s parking his car and is hastily making his way into the chapel.

My body is a string of nerves wound up to the breaking point. Silence rolls over the crowd with a final gulp; the volume turns to zero as if dipped underwater. He enters the building. Quiet calls trace his path, sympathetic well wishes light afire and fizzle out in his wake.

*Mr. Bright, over here. Good to see you, Roger. My*

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*condolences, Mr. Bright. Here, through these doors.*

He steps into the chapel, passes the rows of chairs, accepting, nodding, shaking hands, and responding with his usual politeness and tact. At last, he's a few feet away from me, adjusting the microphone.

Canosa smack her lips. I have to warn him somehow.

He stands tall, clasps his hands in front of his body, and rolls back and forth slightly. Feet shuffle, chairs move, and last polite coughs and sneezes die until it's silent. This is the moment I've been waiting for.

He begins to speak.

"My name is Roger Bright." He pauses. "I want to thank you all for gathering here today to remember my daughter, Ailen Bright. I would like to begin by saying a few words in her memory."

Shuffling, sniffing.

My nerves are about to snap. I want to tug at his sleeve, to let him know who one of the singers is that he hired. I want to scream, *Canosa is here, Papa, Canosa!*

"It's a terrible tragedy, to outlive your children. My darling Ailen lived a remarkable life, one filled with wonder, joy, and happiness. An obedient daughter, an exemplary student, she had a bright future ahead of her."

He never called me *darling* before, yet I hear bitterness in his voice. What he means by the possibility of *a bright future* is the fact that I never amounted to anything. I want to hide from this thought, to run, to scream my head off, but I have to play dead.

A child whimpers, a woman whispers. This is a theater of death performed for the living, lest they dare forget. Impatience prickles my skin. I want to hear those special words.

Momentary silence elapses between two gasps for breath, and then his voice rings loud and clear.

“She was Papa’s girl, you could say. She told me one day, she loved me more than her mother.” He drops his head and produces an exaggerated sigh.

*Liar! I never said that!*

The effect is immediate. A wave of compassion rolls through the air in stifled sobs and nods of approval and shakes of the hats on their heads.

My face is a mask of pretense, of concealed surprise. *Why, Papa, why? Please, leave mom out of this. Don’t touch her. Don’t spoil her memory. How can you, after what you’ve done to her. What kind of a monster are you?* My gut sears with pain, every ounce of strength deserts me.

Still, I wait.

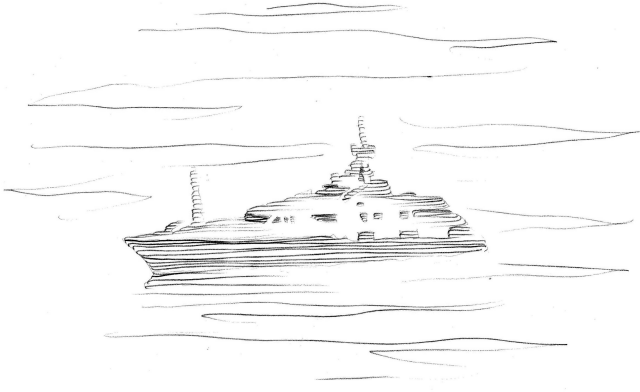
I wait for him to say it. To say how much he loved me. How much he misses me. It doesn’t come. He talks about who I could have become, of my shiny future that will never happen, of how proud I could’ve made him as a father. It’s all about him. The speech. The funeral. The guests. The attention.

I’m out of the picture. I’m not even here. He lied, again. And I fell for it, again. I fell for it like I always do. Like my mother did before me. Lies, all beautiful, empty words. He waited to dispose of me, like he disposed of her. Women, in his eyes, are made for one purpose only: to haul water on their backs. That’s it.

There will be no happily ever after.



## Chapter 23



### Strait of Juan de Fuca

*No. No-no-no. He loves me. He does. He must, I'm his daughter.* My whole being squirms and thrashes and refuses to accept the idea that my father lied again. I fell victim to the child inside, the one who is reluctant to give up what she almost glimpsed. An internal battle sweeps me into a land of doubt. One side of me clings to hope, the other screams how stupid that is. They place a bet, and I listen to my father finish his speech, catching every word, my nerves atremble. One more second, and he'll say it. Another second, and it will come. I wait with abated breath. He stops talking. Not a single mention of love. Not a single tear. Maybe it's because he knows I'm alive, as alive as a siren can be. I cling to this thought. This must be it. He steps away from the microphone. Canosa and the other three women shuffle closer and begin their song, sorrowful, with drawn out vowels. I don't listen.

My father leans in for a kiss.

"Sorry I'm late, sweetie," he whispers over the song. "I had to arrange our voyage. It's taken care of, just endure this a little more." My doubts vanish. Guilt turns me inside out. How could I

think he doesn't care? He does. He *does*. He was just busy.

"Canosa is here," I whisper back as quietly as possible. But of course, because of the stupid song, he doesn't hear me.

He stands, feigns crying into a fine silk kerchief, and steps aside, giving way to the shuffling mob; the mob of people who are related to me in some distant way and have either seen me only once at my mother's funeral, or in pictures, which, I don't know how they could have, because father never sent pictures to anyone. For some of them, this is their first time seeing me. In my family, we seem to notice each other only twice, when we're born or dead.

The choir drones on, something about afterlife.

It's a horde of hired strangers, paid to show up and make my funeral grand, streaming towards me in a line, leaning in one by one, burning my forehead with a mandatory kiss, whispering something that means nothing to me. I count thirty-two of them.

The song is finally over. The three choir singers silently trail after the crowd, but Canosa lingers. She is number thirty-three. Her kiss is as cold as ice. She promptly shuts the lid and leaves without a word.

Surrounded by darkness, I freeze, if it's possible to freeze even more in my state. What do I do now, break out? Or wait to break out from the boat, after being dumped into the sea, like my father said? I don't know whom to believe anymore. This whole funeral service strikes me as odd, as if done in a rush, without being properly rehearsed and carried out.

On top of it, I constantly fight the urge to sink into my memories about Hunter. I can't. It will disable me, rendering me useless.

The four pallbearers who brought me inside, close around the casket, silently lift me, and walk out of the Chapel, without a single word exchanged between them. They should be putting me in the hearse but they keep walking instead. It feels like they are

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taking me across the street. I hear the strum of moving cars. We must have crossed the Fremont Bridge. They trot along a path, the gravel crunching under their feet. They zigzag down to the water, to the marina where my father moors his boat.

I sway to the rhythm of waves. They must have made it onto the new boat. They proceed another twenty steps and then place me onto another elevated platform. I hear them saunter off as the funeral guests sashay in. The boat bobs and jitters with excited chatter. Everyone is ready to depart for my burial at sea. Canosa is too. She's nearby, I can feel her.

I have to tell Papa.

I claw at the silky casket innards in frustration. The last person steps on the boat. The captain shouts his signal, ropes rumble off, and the engine starts. I hear my father's voice directing people around, chatting with caterers, and organizing the event to his satisfaction.

As if on command, people hastily make their way about to find a free spot and sit down expectedly, ready for another dose of death-theater, free food, and alcohol. Their souls are in discord, a mixture of mild fear of the open water and a pinch of curiosity at the fantastic and the grand and the morbid—the deep ocean swallowing poor Ailen Bright who's only sixteen years old.

The boat grumbles its slow way through the canal. Gradually, city noises fade and we're on our way out to sea. It will take another couple of hours to reach the ocean at this speed, plenty of time to eat, drink, and be merry. Plenty of time for me to think about what to do next.

Break out of the casket early and freak out every single person on the boat, screwing up our Italy plans at the same time?

Or lay still and wait for this horrid party to end, wait for the final words to be delivered, for the casket to be thrown into the waves, and break out then, to meet Papa at the lighthouse like

we agreed?

Or knock from inside when Papa is near, in hopes that he will hear me? Hope that he'll open the lid and listen to what I have to say? *If he'll open it?*

What other options do I have?

*Oh, Hunter, I miss you. I miss you so much. I wish you were here. I wish I could talk to you. What did she do to your body? There isn't even a grave for me to come and visit.*

His face splits into that familiar grin, dancing on the back of my eyelids. His words boom in my mind.

*Hey, turkey! I don't need no stinking grave. I've got me a whole fucking ocean.*

*Hunter!* I jolt, but I know it's only a vision, only my imagination. It morphs into his face, concentrated, puffing out curlicues of smoke under the bathroom ceiling.

His lips slowly move, delivering his question. *Ever meet a real siren?* He gives the joint another puff. *Not the mythical kind. No. The girl next door. The killer kind. The one whose gaze never sits still. The way she walks, the way she talks... Every man wants a piece of her. Every man wants to hear her velvety song, the song to die for. Ever met one like that?*

That's me. He was talking about me. It was always me, siren or not. How did I fail to see it until now? I have a voice, a powerful voice. I always did. I simply needed to turn into a siren to fully believe in it. I am the killer kind, the true killer kind. I know what to do. I can hum. I can sing. I can deliver my message through the water, turn the boat around, and make it dock. Elated, I inhale, but before a single note escapes my lips, Canosa proves to me who's the boss.

All at once, thunder explodes and the air condenses into heavy clouds that roll in at an abnormal rate, spraying the boat's windows with the angry foam of new rain and sea. I can't see any

of it, but the noises deliver me an almost photographic picture. There is a general pause that I can only attribute to people glancing round in the wake of an impending catastrophe. Several women cry out, some soothe the few children who are there, men curse. At the same time, the yacht races toward the sea with a terrible speed, manned by Canosa's song and her insatiable hunger.

I hear it now. We both started to sing at the same time. Except, I only had the intention of starting, but she actually did it.

I have to tell Papa! Is he blind? Does he not see what's going on? The possibility of this being the plan all along rears its ugly head for the first time in my consciousness. I chase it away. It simply can't be.

Lighting strikes. More thunder rumbles. My casket shifts, in danger of sliding onto the floor. The yacht careens dangerously up and down, one second tilting its nose, another plunging into liquid madness at a forty-five degree angle. People gasp, the imminent explosion of terror in their gaping mouths, their frantic movements, and their quickened heartbeats, ready to flee. There is nowhere to go, however. I sense the enormous body of the ocean all around us. Their collective fear imprints in my mind like a single frame taken out of context, a snapshot of dread.

They shout. They yelp. The captain echoes commands to the crew.

"Let the feast begin," Canosa says into my ear, right into the gap between the casket's lid and its bottom part, to make sure I hear her.

In this moment, I understand exactly what price my father had to pay, for her to leave him alone. To leave *us* alone. His lack of surprise when I told him that she killed Hunter. All these preparations, all this being late. This is no funeral, no burial at sea. This is the slaughter of thirty-two innocent souls, to be snuffed out for the benefit of one. That's why I didn't recognize any of

them. It's not family. None of them are. He hired strangers.

Thirty-two people are about to die because of me. An intimate knowledge of what dying really means grips me. If I were to be completely honest with myself, I would say that my suicide was never meant to be real—it was a cry for help. I never truly intended to die, I was stupid. A fake, a hot head, through and through. The lover of a good show. I wanted to do it for the spectacle, to make my father run to me, to make him say he's sorry, to see the pain on his face and have my last laugh. I wanted to hurt him the only way I could.

Tears well up and spill from under my eyelids into the coffin's darkness.

Turns out, it's not worth it. Turns out, I'm afraid to die. Turns out, it's death I ran from all along, balancing on the precipice of a dare, always one foot on the ground, never tipping so as to not upset my peculiar stance, never crossing the final line. Perhaps it's time I face it, for real. It's time I choose to stop running and stand for what I care about, what I lost. Stand for love. For love given freely, without asking for anything in return. Without fear of loss, without anger.

"Hunter," I say. "I love you."

"Mom, I love you."

"Papa..." I swallow. This one is hard. "I love you."

"Canosa," I begin, and can't finish.

She starts her deadly song. It rings clear, soars in one voice, amplified by her rage and hunger, reaching a tremulous crescendo. Five seconds is all it takes. Glass shatters, and with its brilliant tinkling, it relieves the pressure of anticipation into shouts and cries, first disjointed, then pulsing to a mortal rhythm. Souls whisk into oblivion amidst the forming fog. I can hear them leave their bodies, one by one. Hear bodies drop. Canosa is on a rampage. She grabs a victim, a man, I think, and shouts in his ear. He faints.

She gobbles up his soul and moves on to the next. People cower, scream, ribbons of their souls escaping into her greedy animalistic mouth.

I decide to wait a few more seconds, wait for Papa to grab his sonic guns and blast her into nothing. He doesn't do it, confirming that this merciless butchery was part of his plan all along.

I'm done playing dead.

I hit the casket's lid with a terrible force and make a deep dent in it. The entire thing, all of its two hundred something pounds of steel, jumps up perhaps half of an inch and drops down with a dull thud. This produces more cries of terror from people.

The song abruptly stops.

"Make one more move, silly girl, and I will sink this boat, to have your father drown. Do you want to lose the last member of your family?" Canosa hisses into the gap under the lid, sweet as a charm.

I don't answer.

"No? Good. Then lay still and enjoy the show."

I want to scream, but not to her. I want to yell to Papa.

*Please, don't do this! I know you struck a bargain with her and you're not going to stop her. If this is the payment for her to stay away, it's a terrible price to pay for your cowardice! You have to strike her, kick her out your life, once and for all!*

Canosa's song turns to a throb of a single living being, an awful choir, as if a conductor directs a handful of tenors to contrast with the sopranos and the altos of the victims, creating an accompaniment to the feast, accented by cracks of thunder and rolling flashes of brilliant lightning. They part the dimness of my enclosure for a meager fraction of a second and disappear.

More rumbling. More rain. More death.

I boil with panic, unable to move, terrified of Canosa

killing Papa, yet unable to lie still amidst this carnage of hired funeral attendees. There are kids. There are a few kids. I have to save them.

One more soul pops with a sickening splatter in the air. The song rises to a shrill, with a snap and cackling laughter. The sinister happiness of my kind, the Siren of Canosa, full to the brim, on her way to satisfaction at last. She's not done yet, there are about a dozen people still left alive on the boat.

A little girl cries, the one who asked her mom if my father was late. She runs up and clutches the casket's edge, her heart beating a million times a minute. Canosa jumps at her. That does it. I can't control myself anymore and let go.

"Noooooo!" I holler. I tense and smash my head, elbows, and knees outward, breaking the steel enclosure apart like an exploded bomb. Pieces of steel fly around me and settle on the floor, shreds of nude crepe float up—as if torn wings of some otherworldly creature—and slowly circle to rest.

I sit up amidst expensive epitaphic remnants.

There is momentary silence sprinkled with a layer of settling dust, pulsing with a frightened soul concerto. I'm surrounded with the chill of shock. Shock of the ocean flattening out to a calm reflecting surface. Shock of the sky going limpid. Shock on the little girl's face, standing a few feet to the right of me, miraculously unscathed, crouching between the clothed platform and the railing of the boat's tail. Shock on the faces of those who are still alive and not splayed on the aft deck in front of me, motionless. Shock on Canosa's face, her body rigid in her black dress, her hands using the edge of my platform for support as she turns her head back toward me. Shock on my father's face.

He stands at the far end of the deck, his back to the entrance into the salon, right by the teak access door, hands in his pockets. Shock has yanked him out of nonchalant watching of the



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chaos unfolding in front of him, as if it's nothing more than a Bosch painting; the one I had to study in art, a slimy grim depiction of hell, hanging in some museum in Italy. He acts as if he is on vacation, staring it down, bored out of his mind. Seeing bodies of dying people as images painted onto the canvas of his curiosity.

He's hiding something.

His face shifts like a film of water.

Time ceases to exist, and a second of quiet seems to stretch into an eternity.

Across the distance of thirty feet, bypassing frozen grimaces of terror, I look deeply inside his eyes and there I see the weak old man I glimpsed this morning, sorry and unhappy and scared. I look deeper, wade past years, stir aside entire generations, and there I find him, in the deepest corner of his burning soul, a little boy who doesn't know how to escape his desolation except to play in an imaginary world. He doesn't know how to make himself feel better, he is confused. He inflicts pain on others because it relieves his own hopeless pressure. By witnessing the suffering of others, he's shedding it, seeing it in multiple faces like in mirrors. His mother must have hurt him when he was very little, not once, not twice, but many times, and he learned to be numb and to hate women. This, this open participation in an execution, helps him unravel.

Helps him live.

I am his mirror. I get it. My bubble of hate bursts, my anguish evaporates in a fraction of a second. I relate to my own father fully. He's just a scared little thing. Like me. Like all of us. He's simply trying to survive, the only way he knows how.

"One minute of fantasy is better than nothing. Right, Papa? Is that why you're doing this? Is it?" I say. Only a few seagull shrieks and the drone of the ocean answer me.

Something is holding the crowd from erupting into yelling and screaming and panicking, holding it back. The weather agrees, and turns from foul to astoundingly still. All attention is on me.

I wipe my face from the dust and speed into my past, into a time when I wanted to sing so badly that I went to choir practice every day and worked myself to a sore throat. After months of vigorous practice, I invited Papa to my first performance, but he never came. I thought he forgot, I thought he didn't care. I wanted to sing as beautifully as my mother. Maybe then, I thought, I'd be able to sing him out of his constant anger. If only for one minute, I'd be able to make him happy, make him smile. He never smiled. I mean, of course he stretched his lips into a parody of a smile, to be polite, but it never felt genuine; it never was one of those shining expressions of happiness.

Now I understand why.

I want to reach out and hold him in my arms, tell him it will be okay. Tell him that no matter what he suffered, or who did it to him, there is still love all around him and all he needs to do is simply allow others to give it to him. Allow me to love him and to stop pushing me away. I realize I've been chasing the wrong goal. I wanted him to give me love, I demanded it. But love doesn't work that way. It only works if it's given freely, without asking for anything in return.

Love.

Love is so many little things. Love is offering your last water to the one dying of thirst, when you haven't had a drink for a week. Love is giving a warm bath to the one clad in filth, when you haven't had a chance to wash for a month. Love is the warming embrace of someone who is frozen in hate, like my father, even if it means cutting out my heart and placing it in his hands, watching him thaw as I myself wither into nothing.

The Greeks were right in their mythology. This is how it

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works. A true siren sings out of love. She dies if her song falls on deaf ears, and the one she intended to charm moves along, unperturbed, ignorant, oblivious. Because virtually nobody can resist a song of true love, that is why it's so hard to murder a siren. I was afraid to die, and singing to my father was my attempt as a newborn siren to make him cease to exist. I sang to kill him. I sang out of my anger, hurt, and hate. That was my mistake.

I needed to sing from a place of love.

"Papa? I forgive you," I say quietly, and by the sudden widening of his pupils, I know that he heard me. I slide down from the platform to stand.

"Mommy! Mommy! She's alive! The dead girl is alive!" The little girl screams behind me, waking everyone from their mesmerized slumber.

At this point, the time bubble pops and chaos returns to its boiling point.

## Chapter 24



### Pacific Ocean

Two men and a woman climb over the railing and dive into the ocean, their funeral attire flapping in the wind like black raven feathers. One man shrieks uncontrollably, his plump hands pressed to his ears. One woman faints. This is much as I glimpse before Canosa lifts her arm to pin me down. Her face is distorted; her fine velvet hat is gone, revealing a mangy clump of thinning hair. Her body is twisted underneath the posh black dress fit more for a circus performance than for a funeral. In slow motion, I watch my right leg lift, aim, and hit her square in the chest so that she flies ten feet into the air and crashes on top of a dead man, black lacquered pumps flying off her feet, her multiple skirts ballooning and settling. I stand and stretch out my arms for balance, feeling a little dizzy, my focus on my father.

“I wanted you to hear me sing. You never came to my choir performance, but I forgive you,” I say to him, louder, to make sure he hears me.

Astounded, and perhaps scared, he raises his hands in front of his face in a protective gesture, takes a step back, and hits the

door. Canosa hisses, scrambles onto her hands and knees and runs at me with a shrill screech. I meet her head on; grabbing her shoulders, I lift her and throw her back another ten feet, into the corner between the salon's wall and the railing, not too far from where my father stands. I do it effortlessly, knowing that she's scared, continuing my march forward.

"You never bothered to hear me sing, never heard me when I talked to you, never listened to what I had to say. You wanted a son, not a daughter. You probably never really loved me. But it's okay, I get it. I understand why, and I forgive you."

I spread my arms into the thicket of noise, seeing bodies around me rush aside in panic, stepping on limbs, pieces of broken glass, moving forward, unperturbed.

"Ailen Bright, a girl who can't follow simple rules. I thought I told you not to meddle in my business!" Canosa's screech mixes with the screams of the remaining people. I ignore her. She is merely trying to provoke me. I'm not afraid to die. I know that she knows it and hesitates for that very reason. I have nothing else to lose.

"You told me I'd never amount to anything. You were right. I didn't, and I'm sorry. I tried. I tried really hard, I swear. I failed miserably. I'm sorry I hurt you. And for all those times you hurt me, I forgive you."

He just stares.

There is a bridge of newfound communication between us, slung across the salty ocean air, dark, shimmering with finality, as if death itself is watching us with eager interest, woken up from her usual slumber.

"You beat my mother, you hurt her, you killed her. You beat me, you called me names. We were things to you, useful only for carrying water, just as you lectured me about at every opportunity. You never noticed me for who I truly was, unrelated

to my gender. It took for me to die for you to see me, to hear me. But it's okay, I get it, and I forgive you."

"What is this, Roger? What is she doing? Did you...tell her?" Canosa throws at my father.

He only shakes his head.

She curses loudly, clenching her fists and jumping high over the deck, with the clear intent of fleeing overboard. She must have made up her mind to sink the boat. I leap and intercept her in the air, easily, landing softly with her firmly in my arms and pinning her to the railing. She swivels her frightened eyes at me.

"Please," I tell her. "Don't interrupt me." I grab a handful of her hair and fling her back into the corner again.

My father doesn't move, frozen as a statue. It must be a horrible sight, watching the two remaining women in his life possess more power than ten of him ever would.

"Papa?" I say. "Don't be scared. I don't mean to hurt you. I simply want to give you a gift. A song, just for you. Because... because I love you." I stop about fifteen feet away from him, standing in the middle of the deck, between two curled up dead bodies—two women from the choir, their black dresses torn, their hair matted.

I tilt my head up, inhale, and let out a note, penetrating and overpowering, full of tenderness and adoration and longing. It rises steadily into the sky, past laden clouds, its melody thick with urgency, guttural, hypnotic. It's the siren song, and I infuse it with love.

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

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Those remaining on the boat turn their faces to me and gasp in obvious admiration. Their faces clear, oblivious to the thickening clouds and the eye of a storm hanging directly over the boat, gathering in response to my song.

*“Give me your pain,  
Dip in my song.  
Notes afloat,  
Listen and love.  
Listen and love.  
Listen...and LOVE.”*

They listen. Even Canosa props herself up on one elbow, enchanted. I realize something else. It doesn't matter if Papa hears me or not. It's a gift. It will find his heart if he decides so, it's not up to me. All I have to do is give.

And I do. I look him in the eyes. He doesn't move. I keep pouring love into my a capella performance. There is so much of it, I simply can't stop. No instrumental accompaniment is needed, it's replaced with a flood of memories, rare, cherished moments between us weaving into this song. I see a mist of recognition in Papa's eyes. I push my voice an octave higher, then another, and another, overpowering the noise around me and silencing even the ocean itself, the wind, the seagulls.

*“I stir up your hope,  
Calm down and let go.  
My love is your slope,  
Slide here,  
Don't forego.”*

I place a hand on my heart as I finish the verse. People

stumble toward me, mesmerized, their black attire adding to this bizarre scene that's quickly unfolding. The little girl grabs my arm from behind and someone else pulls on my legs. They surround me, a mere dozen of them left, a few women, more men, and one little girl. I can't see my father anymore from behind their hungry faces, but I keep singing, giving myself away.

*"Listen and love.*

*Listen and love."*

Hands begin tearing at me, looking for a piece of that sweetness, that something to quench their thirst, their yearning for knowledge that they, too, belong, in this careless existence that we call happiness, the very thing sirens have the talent to induce. Fake happiness, to lure them to their deaths.

Hunter's words ring in my head once more. *They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped. They search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What's creepy, though, is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

"Get off her, she's mine!" Canosa dives through, pushing people aside. A streak of saliva trails from her open mouth, and she sinks her nails and teeth into my flesh.

I don't flinch, fully letting go. Nothing else matters.

"Finally. You belong to me, silly girl. To me alone." She utters the growl of a satisfied animal, eating at last.

Others join in to a tangle of disarrayed hair and squirming bodies. Limbs reach to me in unison, like dozens of frog tongues flicking at their catch, missing, wanting more. I spread my arms to my sides and reach for the air to keep singing. There is still a lot of love left inside of me, and they eat it all up.

Ailen Bright, the center of the feast.



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The desert after the main dish, the exquisite confection.

I fall onto the deck under the weight of their greediness. Hands work their way up to my face. My torso is covered with them like leeches, gorging themselves, sucking on my sugar, drop by drop. They can't rip my skin, but Canosa does so easily with her nails, and they pick up where she leaves off. The thunder strikes again, causing the boat to shake, the crowd collapsing on me in a wave, biting, tearing, wet with their feeding frenzy. No blood seeps out of my torn veins, only sea water, clear, bitter, and salty.

I feel my core open, then my throat, and I choke on the song.

"Papa!" I yell.

My neck is being torn to pieces, but my voice still rings.

"Can you hear me? Help me, Papa, please. I'm dying, I'm dying!"

Then someone takes it out. The very source of my voice. My vocal cords. They're gone. There is no electrical shock throwing my pursuers away like it did to Hunter on the trawler. It's because I'm not fighting. There is no hate left in me, only love.

My voice dies.

Ailen Bright, mute, to be buried at sea.

The mass of arms leaves me on the floor, an empty useless shell, a discarded mollusk, my vocal cords their pearly capture, their promised treasure. It's what produced their hunger, their elation. It woke them up. It made them feel.

They forget all about me, fighting for that sorry string of mucous membrane, a couple of trembling grapes that used to be stretched across my larynx, my own private conductor.

Torn and bleeding, I manage to raise my head and see him one more time. He stands in the same spot, by the door, his black silk shirt perfectly ironed, his face lifeless and ashen. He stares at

me in a debilitating paralysis, his mouth slightly open and unmoving.

*Did you like it? My song, did you like it?* I want to ask, but no sound comes out. I have no voice left. Perhaps it was a final note to melt him. I drop my head back on the floor, and then I hear it.

“ENOUGH!” he shouts and darts to me.

*I was right. He cares. He loves me after all.*

“Stop it!” He shakes me. “Stop this suicidal nonsense. You never listen to me.” He grabs my face in both hands.

“What did I tell you? You were supposed to wait. Why can’t you follow simple instructions, Ailen? Now you’ve ruined everything.” I hear the trace of tears in his voice. He drops on his knees, careless, oblivious to his fine wool suit getting dirty in the filth, cradling my head in his lap.

“Look at you. How did you grow up to be so stubborn?” His voice catches. He strokes my hair. And, suddenly, he kisses my forehead. It’s a quick, awkward peck, and it’s worth dying for.

*I love you, I speak with my eyes.*

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before? I didn’t know singing was so important to you. If I only knew...” It’s like he heard me, he finally heard me.

*I tried to tell you. I tried, many times.*

“What do I do with you now? Don’t you dare die on me. I forbid you.” He presses his cheek to my forehead, and it’s real. His pretense is gone, I can feel it.

“It’s not true, what you said,” he whispers. I wish I could see his face. Instead, my eyes stare into his shaved neck. He lets go of my head, grabs my shoulders, and presses me to his chest, so that my nose hits his shirt. I can smell his cologne, discern his scorched soul singing, and hear his heart beating.

“I love you,” he says. “I’ve always loved you. From the

moment you were born.”

I blink to make sure I’m not dreaming. This is too easy. Have I finally succeeded in getting through to him? It’s impossible to believe. Tears roll down his face in two feeble lines. I know, because they drop on my head.

“Talk to me, sweetie. Talk to me. Say something.”

We’re face to face again, but I can’t answer. Now that he wants to listen to me, my voice is gone. I can only stare, there are no tears left inside to spill.

*He really meant it. Italy. Everything. It wasn’t a lie.* I weep inside, happy.

The murmur of the crowd dies. Souls scatter toward the abyss of death, one by one, until all sound fizzles out. Did Canosa eat them all? The cacophony of shrieks stops and the thunder vanishes. The boat levels and swings slightly side to side. Papa’s clumsy affection is the only thing I feel, his concerned face all I see. I know there is danger of Canosa breaching the hull of the boat or rousing a tsunami or a whirlpool or some other disaster of this sort, but I have no more strength to worry about it right now. My eyes, they hurt. I close them.

I think about Hunter.

If he was here, he’d say, *Hey, what’s up, brat? So tell me, was it worth it? You know, killing yourself and stuff. Was it worth the trouble? Worth your pain?*

And I’d say, *Totally. It was. This moment, right here, right now, was worth dying for. I’d die for it a hundred times over.*

And he’d just nod, understanding. We’d sit like this, silent, for hours.

I think I’m falling asleep, finally, for the first time in six days since my jump. But I thought sirens can’t sleep? Is this death? My last conscious thought is, *Will I wake up to see you next to me, Papa?*

I dream about Hunter. We're ten. We stand by the lake, grabbing handfuls of flat stones so we can send them scattering against the evening sun.

I dream about my mom and the way she used to sing to me, to chase the nightmares away; her soft hands in my hair, her smile, her warm smell—a mix of cinnamon, freshly washed hair, and the hot chocolate that she used to make me when I woke up in the middle of the night, scared.

I dream about my father. About a small white house somewhere on the outskirts of Rome. It's a sunny morning, and we're getting ready to listen to the opera, him smiling at me, me smiling back.

I don't know for how long I sleep. Hours, days, years...My dreams finally end, yet I don't feel rested like I used to after sleeping. This was no sleep after all. This was a blackout with extremely vivid hallucinations.

There is a jolt.

My eyelids flutter open.

It's foggy. Dusk has cast its lavender haze over the sky. Like an empty amplifier, it hangs above the ocean, eager to reflect any noise. There is none, not even a single seagull cry, only the white hum of the shifting water. The air smells of salt and decay. It shifts to send off a barely detectable draft, a shadow of a wave, tiny at first, then larger, reaching the yacht, lifting it a fraction of an inch.

My senses slowly return to normal. I hear shuffling against the hull of the boat and a resounding shudder comes through the floor, rumbling under me in a mini earthquake.

Someone is hitting it with great determination.

*Canosa. My heart pounds fast. She's damaging the boat. She's breaching it. Water gushes into its belly with a roar. Shit! We're gonna sink. Papa! Where are you?*

I take stock of my surroundings. I lie on my back in the

middle of the deck, where I fell. My neck refuses to turn to let me see more. Everything hurts and itches. Broken glass cuts into my elbows when I try to lift myself. I lay still.

A song reaches me. Canosa's song. She hums along, like one would hum in the middle of doing something enjoyable, adding rhythm to the flow of action. I attempt to lift my head again, struggling to move my arms, but I only pant faster, exhausted by the effort.

*Papa, where did you go?*

How I wish I could speak. Transfixed, I stare at the sky.

*It's Canosa!* I want to scream. *She's sinking the boat!*

I grit my teeth, grunt, and with the force of sheer will, I manage to roll over onto my stomach. My right cheek lands on the floor. A sharp piece of glass cuts into it. I barely notice, staring ahead. There he is. His back to me, he stands at the very end of the deck, by the overturned platform, amidst the debris left over from my casket, looking over the railing. He's not moving, a solid black outline against the purplish mist, a sonic gun in each hand, his legs apart in a warrior stance. He looks like a true siren hunter, ready for battle.

*Papa!*

As if he heard me, he turns and smiles, then puts an index finger to his lips as if to say, *It's okay, sweetie, I heard you, and I hear her, don't you worry. Now, I want you to be quiet. Can you do that for me?* I blink my agreement. He turns back.

I want to crawl to him, sizing up the distance. There are a good twenty feet between us, and not a single body. They're gone. Did he throw them overboard? Or stacked them neatly in the salon?

Vibrations penetrate the air, coming from below. Canosa seems to be working her way around the hull, punching holes in it as she goes. Water rushes in. Slowly, I understand what Papa is

waiting for, what he's about to do. I press my hands down and pull myself forward an inch, then another, trembling from weakness, wanting to reach him, to help him.

*If only I could sing, I'd send a storm her way. I'd hum us all the way to Italy, like you wanted, to go to the opera every single day. Just you and me.*

Then all noise stops.

The fog hangs motionless, vast and shallow at the same time. It's impossible to tell how far it reaches. Maybe it covers the entire ocean, or maybe it's simply a small cloud that surrounds only our boat. The air turns moist and chilly. The wind dies down to nothing. I hear drops of condensation drip to the floor off the railing.

I don't like this dotted silence.

*What is going on?*

Papa stands, waiting. I keep pushing myself forward, inch by inch. A swarm of healing activity crawls all over me, knits my muscles back together, mends my bones, closes my skin, and sears my throat over my empty larynx.

I'm mute. I can't even moan. But I can hear. I listen for any sign of Canosa, any movement in the water, any trail of her song. For a second, silence is complete. Then it erupts at once.

Once a beautiful creature, and now a hideous distorted hag of a freak, she leaps out of the fog, screaming, her hair flailing like a torn bleached cape behind her.

"Go on, do it!" she shrieks. "What are you waiting for? How rude of you. You kn—"

She doesn't finish. Papa starts firing.

*Boom!*

My eardrums protest in pain, convulsing in tune to the blow. I cover my ears as best I can.

*Blaaaam!*

## Chapter 24

Canosa drops on the deck, writhing in agony.

The boat creaks and shifts a whole foot down, like a broken elevator that threatens to fall into the depth any second, but decides to hold still for a moment, to keep you in suspense. Papa sways forward, barely regaining his balance. She's at his feet, her limbs and head spread out into a five point starfish. Her black dress is gone, and her skin is brittle and taut, pulsing. Papa directs both guns at her face and fires double.

A thousand thunders explode in my skull. Closing my eyes doesn't help; pressing my hands over my ears doesn't shield me from this double detonation. It's so powerful I think I will explode. The blast travels at supersonic velocity, causing my innards to spasm, release, spasm again.

Its echo dies. Shivering all over, my teeth chattering, I dare to open my eyes.

Canosa twists on the floor about ten feet away. She lifts her head to look at me and, despite her wreck of a face, she's strangely beautiful. Her hair hangs in thick clumps, kissing the boat's floor like a magnificent woolly blanket. Her eyes open wide, irises shrunk to the bright green outlines of two large black pools.

"Ailen Bright. What are you still doing here?" she croaks. "Go away, silly girl. It's no fun being dead. It's booooooring."

I open and close my mouth, unable to speak.

"Are you deaf?" she says. "I don't want you to be one of us anymore. Shoo!" She turns her head away from me and looks up at my father. He stands beside her. His head hangs down, a grimace of pain on his face. His knuckles are white, fingers curled around the handle of the sonic gun. One of them. The other is on the deck by his feet. He's aiming at Canosa's face, but his arm is shaking.

"It will be like we never met, Roger. I promise you. I can't continue going on like this. Can you?" she asks.

## Pacific Ocean

“No. You know I can’t.” His voice is very quiet.

“Well?” she says with her typical brashness.

He nods and fires again.

My whole body sears with hot pain from the sonic boom.

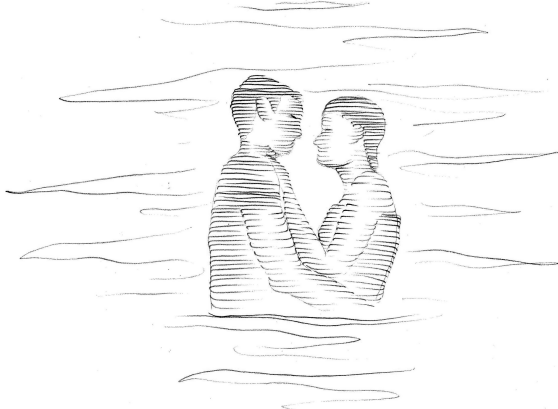
Canosa gets it worse. She shimmers for a few seconds, as if composed of a million water droplets, and then turns opaque, converging back into herself. She blinks and opens her mouth to speak again.

Papa emits another shot, and another, and another. He fires nonstop, until her body disintegrates into a foggy impression of a siren. Before she bursts completely, her mouth opens up into an O, like she’s telling me, *Go!*

Then he blasts her into nothing. I get doused by the fine mist. And the boat dips backward.



## Chapter 25



### Burial Yacht

We begin to sink. The body of the yacht tilts ten degrees, twenty, thirty. I slide down the deck, toward the tail. Papa grabs the railing to get himself away from the gurgling water. It deafens me. He shouts for me to hold on to him, stretches out his arm and grabs one of my ankles, pulling me toward him. The rest of my body swings out so that my head dips into the advancing ocean. I drink oxygen through my gills, gulping it like mad. It gives me enough energy to bend, reach out, and clasp his hand. He trots along the railing, and I slither after him on my belly, then onto my knees, my left hand firmly in his hold, my right clasping the metal bars for support. Waves boil behind me, swallowing the boat foot by foot. There is no crew to man the pumps, not like it will help any. It's too late now.

I want to ignore this like a bad dream, as if it's not really happening. I want to pinch myself and wake up, as simple as that. It's gone too far. It's not fair. I just got my father back. He can't simply die in the middle of the ocean because I'm too weak to carry him to the shore. It would be the ultimate punishment, to

watch him sink into unforgiving waves while I breathe water through my gills, floating, unable to help him.

We almost make it to the end of the deck, where it meets the cockpit. I don't know why I follow him, I just do, on autopilot, like I used to when I was a little girl. The floor tilts another ten degrees and the nose of the boat rises up a few feet at once. The fog thickens and evening dims the light. It will be dark soon.

"Hold on!" Papa shouts and let's go of my hand. "Life preserver. Right there. I just need to get far enough—"

*I'm a siren, remember?* I want to say, suddenly wondering if I'm damaged enough not to be able to swim.

I clutch the metal bars in fear and listen to his laborious breathing, to the squeaking of his shoes on the wet deck. He flings his leg over the rail and reaches out to the bright orange circle affixed with ropes to its outer edge. There is a crack and the gushing of the water intensifies. With a powerful sway, the boat dips back and starts dragging the rest of its steel body underwater. Papa loses his hold and slides down, hitting my chest with his back.

Too weak to hold him, I let go, and we both dip overboard. He curses and thrashes vigorously, to stay afloat. I bob up and down next to him, soaking in the moisture, my panic receding. I can swim, I'm all right. I will be all right. But what about Papa? I can't see him and can't hear his soul.

Everywhere I look, bubbling fountains erupt with a fizz. Wood creaks, metal parts clink and jingle. Together, it sounds like the felling of a tree—slow, deliberate, and imminent. Debris spills from the deck, pieces of cloth, black hats, shoes, several plastic containers. They dance on top of the foam and then sail off into the mist.

*Papa, where are you?* Panic pounds in my head.

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The yacht is not as heavy or large as the trawler was, but it produces plenty of racket. With a final burp, it disappears into the whirlpool it created. It takes a few seconds for the ocean to swallow the last of the boat's fifty feet of length, ten tons of its weight, its teak paneling, custom upholstered seating, and diesel engine. I dive after it.

*Life preserver. I need to get you a life preserver.*

In the darkness, guided by my instincts alone, I manage to squirm fast enough after it to hook my arm into the gap and yank the orange ring off the ropes. For a moment, the current drags me down, but the life preserver's buoyancy helps me break out and surface. I spit out salty water and look around, feeling strength desert me after this short adventure.

Papa surfaces fifty feet away. He calls out my name feebly, waving his arm. I barely see him in the darkening murk, amidst all this fog. I sigh in relief, holding on to the orange ring and kicking with both legs, moving at a pathetically slow speed. It takes me a few minutes, but at last, I reach him. He grabs on to the opposite side. His hands are white, bloodless. The platinum of his Panerai watch glistens on his wrist.

"I thought I lost you." His lips quiver from the cold. I keep forgetting that whatever water temperature feels comfortable to me, must feel like freezing to him. He's hyperventilating.

His perfect hairdo is now a layer of wet gray hair glued to his scalp. His black shirt and jacket are soaked, smelling of wet wool. The look on his face frightens me. I sense that he intends to leave me, like everyone else has. First mom, then Hunter, and now him. It's my fault, of course. Canosa told me not to meddle in her business, but I didn't listen. I would've been happily waiting for him at Ocean Shores by now.

Our faces are three feet apart. The brilliant circle of the flaming life preserver bobs between us, its four white

perpendicular stripes mimicking the cardinal directions of a compass rose. Papa is between West and South, and I'm between North and East. We're on two opposite ends of the world.

*I'm sorry. Sorry I screwed up your plan.*

"Are you feeling...all right?" It's difficult for him to ask me. I see a hint of physical strain on his face, a rare effort to be nice.

I nod, suppressing a horrible thought. *I'm all right, except I have no voice now, so I can't sing. That means I won't be able to feed. I will probably wither from my growing weakness.*

My eyes involuntarily widen.

Papa leans forward and reaches out with one hand. I cower, pressing my head into my shoulders on instinct. But he only brushes wet hair off my face, carefully, picking at individual strands and peeling them off my forehead, one by one, until it's clean to his satisfaction. Then he pats the top of my head, smoothing it until it's perfectly slick, maybe for his comfort rather than mine, a mechanical task that passes for a loving gesture. His movements are awkward and forced. I'm grateful, nonetheless. This is as good as it gets.

I raise my hand and point to my throat, fingering the spot where my vocal cords used to be, making cutting motions. I hope he understands what I want to say.

"Yes, I know," he says, looking not at me but kind of through me.

"Look," He rubs his eyes, clearly unable to say something important. Or, so I hope. I want to stop the clock right then and freeze time, because I think I know what it is.

"I regret it has to end like this." Then, after a pause, "Thank you for the song, by the way. It was surprisingly beautiful. Almost as good as opera." Dreamy, looking beyond me, he cracks a smile, his second genuine smile in one day. Not one of those

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stretched grimaces he typically makes so that people believe he's polite. But a true smile. I don't know if it's addressed to me or to the memory of a particularly amazing opera performance he heard. I don't care. The fact remains.

He heard me. He heard my song!

I purge all thought from my head. I try to forget that we are stranded in the middle of the ocean, holding on to a life preserver, my father potentially at risk of hypothermia, I'm at risk of chronic weakness due to a lack of food. I blot it out of my head. I want to be here and allow myself to feel this overwhelming thirst for closeness, and the pain that inevitably comes with it.

He studies me. "Yes, yes, I was wrong. Is that what you wanted to hear?" He shakes from the cold and looks away again.

I dare not breathe, perplexed. What did I do wrong to irritate him? I didn't say a peep. I shake my head in an energetic *no*.

He licks his lips, visibly uncertain, as if all words have escaped him. The ocean waits. So does the night, so do I. The fog thickens into an atmospheric milk, growing indigo by the minute. He looks aside, somewhere in the distance, past my head.

"I failed you as a father," he says it to the ocean, not to me, his head turned slightly away.

*No!* I yell without sound, opening my mouth, shaking my head. *No-no-no! Not at all!* After initial hesitation, I reach out to him and grab his hand. It's as cold as mine. He lets me hold it.

"Life is tough, Ailen. I wanted to get you ready for it. I was tough on you, maybe too tough. That was my mistake." He steals a quick glance at me, almost embarrassed.

I squeeze his hand.

"What? What else do you want to know?" he erupts. I shrink.

"Yes, I was young and arrogant when I met Canosa." His

eyes wander. "I was rowing one night, and there she was. Standing in the lake, surrounded by water lilies, singing. I thought she was mad. Who in their right mind would do such a thing? So I paddled closer." He presses his lips together, like he does when he gets angry. "She stole my soul. I've detested sirens ever since. You could say that she turned me into a perfect siren hunter." He steals another glance at me.

I stare with my mouth open, afraid to move. He never told me any of this.

"It was different with your mother. Your mother stole my heart. I loved her so much, I hated her." He sniffs and sneezes, shaking all over. "I failed to save her. She was a slippery thing, your mom. She twisted right out of my arms. She was scared of me. That look on her face, it haunts me every day, Ailen, every day."

He suddenly breaks down, convulsing in silent sobs, turning his head away from me. I'm paralyzed, unsure what to do, how to comfort him.

"You remind me of her so much. Sometimes, I can't bear looking at you." His usual polished politeness falls off, and I see him the way I never saw him. Vulnerable.

"I hope you can forgive me," he whispers to the sky.

My heart beats fast, I want to say, *What do you mean, you hope? No, you will hold on to me and I'll carry you to the shore. I'll recover fully in a few hours, and you can float next to me until then. Can't you?*

He stops shaking. His eyes sink deeply into his hollow face.

"It's no use, Ailen." His words are long and slurry. "You know I will freeze to death soon. Hypothermia is already setting in. Any chance of a ship picking us up in the next few minutes is next to nil. Why prolong the inevitable?"

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He lets go of the life preserver.

"Have a good life." These are his last words, and he sinks. The burial at sea is now complete.

*Noooooo!* I yell inside my head. I hear my voice ring as if a ribbon of thought passes through the water, through space, through the entire world. My scream uncoils and I feel every syllable tinkle. I let go of the life preserver and dive after him.

The water is murky and it's hard for me to see. I gulp it in, siphoning in oxygen. It tastes like tears, salty. Several feet below me I see Papa's face, his white hands. The rest is dark, clothed in black wool and melting with the dimness of the ocean. He lets out a stream of bubbles. It reaches me from below like a shimmering bridge between life and death.

I open my mouth and throw out random calls, one after another, without any coherent structure. *Hold on! Don't go! I'm coming! Don't breathe! Give me your hand!* They sink into nothing. I'm mute.

*Noooooooooo! I will carry you out!*

A sudden realization fills me to the brim of my emotional capacity. It pushes so hard, I want to burst.

*Papa, it wasn't you, it was me. I made a mistake. You're right. I need to stop this suicidal nonsense. I don't want to die anymore. I want to live!*

I say it in my head, again and again.

*I WANT TO LIVE! I WANT TO LIVE! I WANT TO LIVE!*

*I want to laugh. I want to run around, to be silly, to dance under the rain. I want to break into song and explode into a myriad of bells. I want to feel alive!*

A surge of strength comes out of nowhere and throws me into action. I kick until I finally reach Papa. I grab one of his hands. I barely see his face and I can't tell if his eyes are open or closed. Water gurgles around me. I grab on to his hand with both

of mine, and slowly, step by step, move my hands up his arm, until I reach his shoulder. I clasp him under his armpits.

His soul is barely an echo of a badly out of tune flute. It flickers now and then, and he's heavy, very heavy.

*Papa!* I shout into his face.

He opens his eyes and smiles. It's a toothy happy smile, and it lets out a big air bubble. His last. He gulps water and convulses in my arms, then his soul is gone. It just fizzes out like a feeble candle.

*No!* You can't die, not now!

I kick and thrash, yanking on his arms to swim up, but he only grows heavier and keeps pulling me down. My strength drains rapidly. My fingers begin sliding across his jacket. I grip him harder, but he slides out. I know that every attempt to recover him is futile. Hunger chokes me, my muscles pass a tremor, and slowly my fingers begin to uncurl. I watch with horror as his body slips out of my grip and plunges deeper. I try to grab a hold of him again and kick, but my legs hardly listen. Oblivious to my mute pleading, the ocean sucks him into the freezing liquid depth. I can't hum to the water anymore, to create a stream and push his body out. Stubbornly, I follow, until I don't see him anymore.

He's gone.

And I'm still here.

*Papa, I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to save you. I'll try to have a good life, like you wanted me to. I don't want to die anymore. I want to live. I will live.*

I twirl in the water, overtaken by grief, trying to find something to hold on to. Facts. Facts will carry me out. One thing at a time. First, I need to orient myself. I'm in the ocean. I need to swim up and find the life preserver, and then I'll think about what to do next. Which way is up?

I realize I lost all sense of direction in this complete



darkness. I rely on my ears and my eyes. Above me is endless quiet, below me must be the air, the droning noise of the rolling waves. I turn around and follow the sound, painstakingly moving my arms and legs. The water gets slightly warmer as dim light begins to seep in. It's probably nighttime by now, and the fog must have receded to let in the moonlight; at this depth, it looks like a stream of silver fluid. It blinds me with its sudden intensity, so brilliant and smooth. I think that if I reach out to it, I'll touch it, like something solid.

It's so dazzling that I close my eyes, sluggishly wading through the brine until I reach the surface and burst into air. I try to open my eyes, but the light is so bright that my eyes water, making everything blurry. Is it morning? Was I underwater all night? The relief of being on the surface is so overwhelming that, at first, I can't even breathe. My chest sort of collapsed in on itself. I flap my arms around, wanting to find something to hold on to, to prevent myself from slipping into darkness. I let my eyes adjust to the light before opening them.

Seems like luck is on my side. Groping around, I find the smooth surface of the life preserver and curl my fingers around it, relieved. My anxiety recedes, my diaphragm relaxes, and I draw in a sharp breath, again and again and again, short for air.

"Papa, I decided I want to live," I say, coughing out water, shaking all over and hyperventilating. I'm so happy, I want to cry.

"I'm alive. I can talk. I can talk?" I say, incredulous.

I open my eyes. Slowly, it all comes into focus.

I'm back in the bathroom, our bathroom, the only room in our house that locks. There is the ceiling that I know so well, the monogrammed towels hanging on the hooks by the door. What I thought was a life preserver is actually the edge of the tub, Papa's beloved antique, carved-marble tub, the ridiculous Bright family relic.

I frantically bend down to look.

“Oh God, oh God,” I mumble under my breath.

There they are—four marble sirens. I shuffle from corner to corner, to make sure none are missing. They look so little, only two feet tall. Here is Pisinoe, the youngest, who always wanted a pet. Teles, slightly chubby. Raidne, with her long and curly hair. And Ligeia, the shrill one, with perfect breasts. I hang out of the tub, face to face with the last creature, looking at her upside down. Blood rushes to my head and I reel with dizziness. I start coughing uncontrollably, wheezing, feeling my throat burn.

Ligeia winks her marble eye at me.

*I must be really stoned*, I think, blinking. She's back to cold stone. I look at her hands. They are right underneath the tub's rim, turned up in worship to the Siren of Canosa.

I sit up so fast, my head collides with the miniature statue wrapping the faucet. I let out a cry of pain and twist around, gazing at her intently.

She's exactly as I remember her, a bronze faucet figurine, barely a foot tall. Her left hand holds the faucet, like a zither, her right arm raised over her head in a gesture of mourning. Her hair wraps curls around her body in tapered, sophisticated lines. I reach out and touch her. She's solid bronze.

“You're just a statue,” I say, chortling out one hysterical laugh, and coughing again. Nausea spins my vision.

I make myself look at the clock on the wall.

It's three minutes past six. Six in the morning?

I study my palms, warm and pink, with real blood running through them. I look at my soaked hoodie, with white letters spelling Siren Suicides across it, and my favorite jeans.

“Hunter, what the fuck did you give me?”

I lean over the edge of the tub again. A stub of a joint lies on the tiled floor, somehow defiant, as if it knows something I

don't, flipping me the finger.

"Ailen? Last warning. Open the door or I'm kicking it down! One..." Papa's voice comes through the door.

"Papa!" I shriek. My heart pounds in my ears and I begin spinning as if down a whirlpool. I grab the edges of the tub to steady myself. "Hang on, I'm getting out!"

"Why didn't you answer before? I've been knocking for the last three minutes. Out, now!"

"Sorry! Dressing!" I shout, full of glee.

*He's alive! That means, that means...*

I crawl out of the tub, water cascading down me. I strip with unbending fingers, pulling hard at the sticky jeans as they cling to my skin. My hands shake and it takes forever.

"I can breathe. I can talk. I'm alive. I'm okay. It was just a bad trip," I mumble under my breath, to assert myself. Another rush of dizziness sweeps over me and I lean on the wall, coughing again.

"Two...Don't make me get to three, Ailen," Papa's voice rings through the gap.

"Almost done!" I grab the nearest towel, blot my face, and my shoulders, and wrap it around myself. Then I grab my wet clothes and shove them behind the toilet, hoping he won't see. My eyes fall on the joint, and I bend to pick it up and throw it out the window, then I stop myself. I stand tall and walk up to the bathroom mirror on the wall.

A startled face looks back at me, wet hair sticking out to all sides in a crazy halo, deep purple circles under my eyes, and my skin devoid of any color, looking deathly pale. But my eyes shine.

"Ailen Bright," I say. "What do you know, you're alive after all."

I turn around, walk over, and unlock the door.

"Papa!" I'm so happy to see him, standing on the other

side of the door, meticulously dressed in his fine silk pajamas, deep maroon with barely visible rosy stripes, his hair smooth as if he didn't just climb out of bed minutes ago, a dab of cologne from yesterday's grooming still wafting off of him in the delicate scent. I love it all and take it all in, wanting to rush over and gather him in a hug.

He opens his mouth and launches into a string of swear words and accusations and warnings that one day, you just wait, one day, you will turn out just like your mother. I ignore all of it like white noise.

"Papa," I say. "I'm so happy to see you." My voice catches.

He doesn't hear me. I nearly forgot his typical conversational pattern. He yells back, waving his arms, froth forming at the corners of his mouth. His eyes bulge out of their sockets, his hands flying dangerously close to my face. Instantly, I know what will come next, and I decide that I've had it.

I take a step toward him, grab him by the shoulders, and shake him roughly.

"Listen to me!" I shout in his face. "Did you hear what I just said?"

Utter shock makes him freeze with his mouth open, his pupils wide.

I talk into the next few seconds of silence, letting my arms fall back to my sides. "Papa, I love you. But you've got to stop screaming at me all the time, okay? It's my birthday today, have you forgotten? I'm sixteen, I'm a big girl. I'll be fine. I'll turn out just fine, don't worry."

"What...What did you say?" He doesn't grasp it, his face ashen. His fingers spread in incomprehension, as if willing to grab something and strangle it, yet not sure what it should be, perhaps for the first time in his life.

I look into his face.

## Chapter 25

"I'm sixteen, Papa, I'll be fine. I'm okay, really. No need to freak out and control me all the time. I'm my own person, and you've got to stop this. Today. Now."

"Oh," he says, and takes a step back, away from me, bewildered. Then he takes a step forward again.

"How dare you talking back to me like this." He begins his usual tirade. "You little..." He raises his right arm to hit me.

I'm ready for it, and I intercept it midair, grabbing it with both my hands, arresting the blow before it happens. We perform somewhat of a dance, a movement that brushes my hip and dissolves. I let go of his arm.

"Papa, if you hit me one more time, I will hit you back, I promise you that. I don't want to do it. So, please, don't hit me ever again." I look him in the eyes.

He falls silent, locking his gaze with mine, and I hold it. I don't avert my eyes, I don't hide. I have no fear. He senses it and glances at his feet briefly before raising his eyes back again, amidst awkward silence.

"I won't let you do to me what you did to mom, okay? But I want you to know that, no matter what happened in the past, I still love you."

He grunts and looks to the side, as if we have a third invisible person who is part of the conversation. "See? I knew it. Same genes. It's a pathology." He looks back at me. "You're just like your mother. Crazy! It's what I was afraid of. All th—"

"No!" I interrupt him sharply. "I'm not crazy, and don't you *ever* call mom crazy, you hear me?"

He shrinks right before my eyes, and I realize that he's scared, scared of this absence of fear I'm displaying, unsure what to do with it.

"I'm not interested in spending my morning, listening—"

"Shut up!" I yell, my hands curled into fists.

For a brief moment, I see a little boy standing in front of me, terrified, unable to move or breathe. Then he's back to his usual self, except shaken and pale. He's shocked into silence.

"You *will* listen to me, because I'm your daughter and I have something important to say."

"Can we talk about this important stuff later? I have to use the bathroom, or I'll be late," he nearly whimpers, and I pause, astounded.

"Bullshit! No you won't. It's fucking early and you know that." This is the first time I openly swear at him, as if a lid flies off my suppressed feelings giving me freedom to talk, letting me say what I meant to say for years.

"I have a question for you, actually. Do you know what women were made for?"

His face floats somewhere between shock and anger. His eyes bulge, veins pushing against the skin of his neck. He opens and closes his mouth like a beached fish.

"Answer the question," I say.

"Don't you talk to me like this, young lady." He's shaking. "I'm your father, and you do as I say." But I see the glint fade in his eyes.

"Women were made to love and to be loved, Papa," I say.

"Where did you get that idea?" he asks.

There is a knock on the front door. My heart expands at once into all corners of every room, making the whole house pulse. I beam, knowing who it is.

"Here." I tap my head. "Here is where I got this idea." I take a step, unable to restrain myself, then turn around, remembering one more thing.

"Oh, and...uh, I smoked a joint. It was good weed, you know. I think you should start doing it, Papa, it might do you good." I tap him on the shoulder, and before he has time to react,

flee down the stairs, jumping them three at a time, skidding to a stop at the front door. I fumble with the handle for a few seconds, my shaking hands refusing to function properly.

At last, I throw it open.

“Hunter!”

There he stands, wet, looking up at me from under his bushy eyebrows. Droplets zigzag off his rain jacket, bright blue, my favorite color. His hands are in its pockets. It takes all my willpower to not launch at him and squeeze him really hard. I’m afraid to freak him out, so I hyperventilate instead.

“Hey. Happy Birthday, brat.” He grins, wipes his wet nose with one hand with a loud sniffle, pulls out his other hand from his pocket, and hands me a crumpled envelope made of blue recycled paper.

I take it with shaky hands.

“Oh, thank you, thank you! Oh...” I don’t know what else to say, bursting with glee. I want to jump up and down, feeling my heels lift off the floor.

“Um...can I come in?”

“Oh! Sure!” I say, and step aside, blushing under his stares at my chest, right where the towel started sliding off. I yank it up, tuck the end back in, and scowl at him.

“Hunter.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He raises his hands in defiance.

I shut the door and hold the envelope in front of me. “I think I know what it is.”

“Oh, yeah? I don’t think so.” His eyes open wide, he lowers his hood, and dog-shakes his head.

“Morning, Mr. Bright.” Hunter looks up behind me. “How are you doing? I wanted to be the first to wish Ailen a happy birthday. I hope that’s okay?”

I turn my head. Papa stands at the top of the stairs, gravely

looking down. Then he turns without a word and slams the bathroom door shut behind him.

“What’s wrong with him?” Hunter asks quietly.

“I’ll explain later,” I say, and begin jumping up and down like a little girl, pressing the towel to my chest with one hand, holding the envelope in the other. Hunter follows me with his eyes, mimicking my movement with his head, nodding up and down.

“Jesus, girl. I make you that happy, really? Come on, open the present already.”

“I know what it is, I know, I know,” I say, grinning from ear to ear, short of breath, feeling glee spread through my limbs and unable to stop.

“I’m all ears,” he says and leans on the doorframe, studying me in his lazy manner, squinting his eyes.

“Two tickets to Siren Suicides tonight!”

He gasps in genuine surprise. “Cut it out. How did you know?”

“I saw it in a dream. Well, not a dream... Okay, I’ll explain. I had a *bad* trip. I have to tell you all about it. That shit you gave me, it was fucking strong!”

“Shhhh!” He presses a finger to his lips. “Your dad will hear.”

“I don’t care. I told him this morning that I smoked it.” I stop jumping and start rolling from my toes to the balls of my feet.

“You *what*?” Hunter’s face contorts with a puzzlement akin to a puppy that’s been chasing its own tail and can’t understand why it’s so hard to reach.

There are so many things I want to tell him, I can barely controlling myself. The worst of them is controlling my urge to bury my face in his chest.



"Can I ask you a question? It's important."

"Right now?"

"Yeah, right now." I stop moving. "Have you ever lived? Like, really lived?"

"Are you okay?" He reaches out to touch my forehead, suddenly serious. "Did something happen?"

"No. I'm fine, just listen." I wave my arm around, clutching the envelope. "I don't mean, pretending to live, you know, when you smile politely, say *hi* and *bye* and *thank you* and stuff like that. You get good grades, you do what your parents tell you to do, but you secretly hate your life. I mean, have you ever lived *for real*?" My hands shake from excitement and a surge of adrenalin, my feet cold on the stone floor.

"Hmmm." Hunter rubs his face.

"Have you ever felt like flying, like nothing mattered, nothing at all, except now, except you and this feeling of weightlessness that you hope will never end? Have you ever felt like there was no yesterday, and no tomorrow, only now? Have you?"

"You're stoned." He grins.

"No, no, I'm not, I swear. Well, I was, but not anymore. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is..." I lick my lips. "I'm sixteen today, and I wanna start living. But I don't really know how, I've always only wanted to..." I stumble, afraid to say the word *die*.

"You always wanted to what?" He steps closer, taking my hand.

I lean on his shoulder and speak into his wet rain jacket. "I need your help." I raise my head and stare into his blue eyes. "Will you help me? I want to figure out how to live in the moment, find out what it means, make friends. I'm so lonely sometimes, it hurts. It doesn't matter if I'm around people, I still feel like an outcast. Whenever I..."

## Burial Yacht

I pause for air.

“...whenever I go to school, and—”

“How about I help you shut up, for starters?” he says.

Before I can say anything else, he's kissing me. His damp jacket touches my skin, his warm hands cup my face. I try to mumble, to finish the sentence, but I can't. I'm drawn into the kiss, unraveling. My self-control evaporates. I grab his shoulders, and I claw at his back. I press him hard to me, curling my arms around him in a desperate grip. I lean into him, into the outline of his body, letting myself be carried away, letting myself be loved. All the while, I stare at the front door, remembering the morning my mother left me, realizing that I might never find out for sure what happened to her or her body. And I let it go.

I let it all go.

I close my eyes. One day, I will die. We all will. But, until then, I will live. No more thoughts of suicide, because life is beautiful, full of love.

It's all right here, in my heart.

## **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.

Ailen Bright is more lost than ever. Her father has betrayed her yet again, but keeps her longing for his love alive with some almost-heartfelt confessions, though few and far between. She and Hunter can never be together without fighting the urge to strangle each other with their bare hands. And to top it off, two-faced Canosa won't leave her alone. Her resolve to do the right thing is wavering as she tries to protect the ones she loves, simultaneously searching for a reason to keep on living, and the final chapter of *Siren Suicides* comes to a tumultuous close, bringing death, life, and love.

"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."

— Graham Milne  
writer and blogger

Cover design/illustration by  
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