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The Afterlife (Siren Suicides, Book 3)

a novel by Ksenia Anske

101,899 words

Homer, Odyssey 12. 200 ff:

"...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 nay 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.'"

Chapter 1. Dry Lab

I burn. Or it feels like my body is burning, like I'm at the stake, my spine nailed to its post, my misery its fire. I can't see, darkness is overwhelming, but I can smell my own hair singed with heat, hear my skin crack as it starts to blacken and curl and split. Sweet vapor of my juices wafts up my nose, or is it a stink of linoleum? My brain is about to boil. What's happening? Am I alive? Dead? Is this some sort of siren hell and I'm stuck in its hottest room for 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 entered. The afterlife. One of three destinations 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, larynx, and then promptly dies on the back of my tongue, stifled by a wall. I'm gagged.

My whole body shakes in a burst of dry cough. I'm certain that if I was dead for real, coughing would be the last thing on my body's agenda. My throat muscles constrict in another spasm and I cough some more, making funny whooping sounds through a

bundle of cloth stuffed into the cavity of my mouth. Cloth. Right, I'm gagged. I just realized it a minute ago and have promptly forgotten. I press on it with my tongue, attempting to register the sensation fully, to hold on to it, to make sure it's real. It seems to be. 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 appears to be made of sand paper. My lips sting, stretched out to the biggest 'O' shape they can make, pulling skin tight all around my jaw, unhinged to near breaking. There is tape on my mouth, its glue odor tickles my nostrils.

I groan, breathing through my nose, or, rather, passing fire, as each inhale and exhale burns me with blistering air. My chest is aflame, my gills feel cracked and dry. They ache in a manner an open wound would, each nerve ending assaulted to the point of screaming. If I were a lobster, this is what it must feel like, to be thrown into boiling water and be 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 desert hell.

Darkness begins to recede. I think my vision must be returning to normal. There is tingling greyness 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 are closed, *feel* closed. At least I hope they are. It makes sense. If my blood was red, the light would have pink undertones, but my blood is colorless and my skin is so white, to the point of having an icy sheen to it, the unnatural color of the dead. Or living dead. Or undead living. Sirens, on other words.

I attempt to open my eyes. They're stuck shut, swollen, heavy and hot, and it takes a few tries to make a slit wide enough to see, blinking several times, producing a smidge of a tear to moisten them, to make certain what I see is in focus, what I feel is right.

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

On second try I understand a simple truth that chills me to the bones and breaks my skin into goosebumps, providing at least imaginary relief from hot temperature. It's not just any room I'm in, it's padded. Series of square pillows cover walls the color of washed out sand, reeking of synthetic leather. Oh, the nightmare of a madhouse, where crazies get locked up into rooms like this, bundled into straightjackets that won't let them move. I'm afraid to flex my arms or legs, not willing to

discover whether or not this is my fate exactly, concentrating on one thing at a time.

Room, let's continue with the room for a moment. It's the size of a typical bathroom, or a prison cell, depends on how you want to categorize it, 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, there is none. Each of my coughs comes out hushed and disappears into 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 now anyway, no chance of that thanks to a gag.

I cough again, wheeze.

Floor shifts and I sway, now 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, taking it as my own dizziness. This means I'm still on the boat? What boat? 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 ocean 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, another one, and can't, they all feel numb. My whole body feels numb, like it's not there. I try to lift my head and look. Tough luck, my neck muscles are not cooperating. Shifting 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, tense into a string of will, 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 a 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, I think. Ailen Bright, you're the first siren pupa.

Off-white cotton, perhaps same material fills my mouth, holds me in a cocoon. Imagining who did it, how long it took them to wrap me up like this and weather or not I'm naked underneath makes me want to puke. Forget about the trawler, I'm the insect here, an ugly larva cleaned with ocean water, washed with shame, rinsed and dressed in layers of gauze. Who said I'm human? I'm not. I'm a monster from scary movies, an embryo that's been waiting for the last sixteen years to hatch, to break through its shell and feed on human souls. Will I ever complete my metamorphosis, my imaginal crawler development stage? Will I ever reach maturity, spread my wings, fly? As a butterfly or some other winged creature? And if I do, what pattern will be painted on my wings? Beautiful lines resembling lakes and rivers or a terrifying outline of a skull, reminding you of death and making you run?

There is no way I can shake my head to stop myself from conjuring up these pictures, my usual counterattack, so instead I try to 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'll hear.

He. My father. That's it, his face was the last I saw... where? My head hurts from thinking. 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 make myself 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, it feels right when spoken, it fits me like an old well-worn glove, never mind it sounding like gibberish through the gag. "I'm a siren and that's all that matters. I have *awesome* -- as Hunter would have said it -- powers and I can get myself out of this shit." Pause. "My father is a siren hunter and he wants to kill me. We were on a rowboat w--" Hunter? What happened to him? Here my thoughts break, interrupted by tingling fingers.

Later, I tell myself, I'll continue thinking about this later.

Right forefinger first, I try to bend it. 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 attempt of using inertia and roll over.

There 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 promptly retch into the gag, overtaken with hunger and revulsion at the smell. I can detect a dozen of chemical composites, all blaring into my nose their trumpet of industrial revolution. I strain my neck and turn my head left, to be able to breathe or at least avoid inhaling this synthetic goodness.

It takes another 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 getting out of this situation, however, but I can't help it, fuming, mind blank, no thoughts in it, nothing, only fury at helplessness.

One minute goes by, maybe one hour.

Breathing through the 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. Another floor shift and I roll flush with the wall, use it for support to lean away a little, my back about a foot away, bend my knees as much as the cocoon allows, and hit the wall with my feet. Once, twice, three times. Pause to breathe and nearly black out from effort, noticing the feeble trickle of my energy seep away. But my legs moved, they did. It gives me hope.

I grunt in anger and hit again. Nothing, no sound, no movement. Not even the tiniest vibration. 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 me. I attempt to reach 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 this time. Fury seems to be a good remedy for scraping off last bits and pieces of strength and throwing them at one specific object of hate. Like a victorious shriek of a fatally wounded predator right before dying.

I know what I hate, I hate these walls. I hate my cocoon. I want to break out. I can't quit now, *can't*. I bite into the gag and hit the wall again, then again. Pause to rest. Hit again. Repeat. I ignore the ringing in my ears and rainbow circles of my blurry vision, close my eyes, concentrating 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 across my skin in a march of goosebumps. I can feel it even through these walls, it's so strong. For one strange instance I like that 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, the loose pebble of glass, as if someone is peeking through its lens, amused but bored, seeking that new fascinating combination of reflection symmetry, or, in simple speak, colored glass mosaic.

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? Is it night or day? What was it that needed to be done here? Nothing comes to mind except one very clear goal. I have to hit the wall until someone hears.

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

But my throat sears with fire when I attempt singing. 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.

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 breathing, concentrating on the noise.

An echo of... a jingle of keys? Yes, 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 clucking revolutions of what sounds like a handwheel 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 produces a swoosh against high threshold of the room, reminding me of rubbery latex gloves brushing each other.

I was hitting the wall on the wrong side. Directly across 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 then a burned tang of butterfly wings on the flute solo enters my hearing. It's off-key and badly performed, in a way a struggling street-artist would do it for change. It's enough for me to know who it is. It takes over me in a wash of memories, flooding me with images at once, and I drown in them, remembering being caught, the trawler in the ocean, Hunter's kiss, Canosa tipping our rowboat, the net, the terrible drum rolling us out of the water, on deck, Jimmy the tall fisherman, and Glen the fat one whose soul Hunter helped me devour in one of those fish processing onboard freezers. And then Papa, and his gun, and me letting him hit me with his sonic gun, willing to see how far he intends to go.

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

A waft of cold air rushes in, I nearly choke on it, taking it in through my nostrils, greedy. Dark rectangle of the door opening widens and I raise my head to look my father straight in the face, straight in the eyes, brightly blue against the dimness behind him.

Hello Papa, you came in to check on me, I hope to transmit with my eyes, what a treat. You'd be surprised to find out that on some level I 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 metal clank. This is the first time when I don't see what he wears, 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 attempt to read, to extract meaning and know how to behave in the fear of his anger.

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

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 aquired from years of being

slapped and hit, to know exactly where his hands are at any moment without looking.

There is nothing right now except his two dark pupils that burrow into my consciousness with vivid hate, this time unmasked, borne from a deep place inside his being, perhaps one that's beyond mending, that's been torn out of him 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 decided to fill it with hate, because keeping it empty hurt more than filling it with something, any junk, anything at all. To survive. Yet there is something, something that's still kindling, and I latch on to it, holding his gaze, talking to him in my own silent way.

But you know what? I ask with my eyes. There is something else, something I didn't consider in my constant terror, it never even occurred to me, never crossed my mind until I died and was reborn as a siren again, having found instances of this knowledge by accident. I know it now for sure, as a fact. I take a breath and swallow, which is more like a throat contraction 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 his 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 air in the room shifts with both of our certainty on this account.

A terrible grief floods my gut. To my horror, tears of understanding cascade down the side my face, flooding my left cheek with rivulets of salted water, gluing my left cheek to the fake leather of the floor.

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

Oh, Papa, I wish I could heal you somehow, I think, hopping back on the highway of sorrow. I blink and shut my eyes closed, willing my lids to keep running water. Good luck. Tears keep streaming down left side of my face, pooling below my cheek into a tiny puddle and I sniff.

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 lose it and 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 has driven him to seek love of a

cold undead creature instead of real living woman. What level of betrayal a son must 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 hurt her down and tear her apart, with my teeth, my nails, my screams, my everything I have. 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 fucking thief, hear me? Do it... NOW!"

In this moment I realize something else, the futility of my attempts. There is no use trying to die in front of him in hopes of playing a morbid joke on him, of hurting him, it won't work. He doesn't care, he rather wants to see me dead, at some point, when he gets his courage up to really do it, because I seem to represent his fear, and perhaps I also look a little bit like grandma. More. There is only one thing I can do, keep singing to him, hope to rekindle more of his soul. Keep singing despite my feat that he'll never hear me, afraid that he's permanently deaf to this sort of thing. He's not, he heard me once, on the boat at Lake Union, he can hear me again. It's not that he doesn't want to, maybe he does. It's just that he can't on his own, he needs help. There is no apparatus that is able to receive my signal and transmit it into intelligible wavelength that can be transcoded by his brain into a jolt of his heart, that he can in

turn interpret as a feeling. The one and only feeling that's worth living for.

Love.

I just have to keep trying, even if it means dying in the process. It will be worth it, I will know that I did everything I could and will go in peace.

No more than a few seconds must have passed, and I'm amazed at how much critical thinking is able to pass through my brain when I'm clear of my goal, there is no haze, no stopping, it simply flows.

He lets go of the wall and takes a step. I look up. His eyes are empty, this time I know why, and I get it, nodding.

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, he takes another step, eyes still empty. I prepare to not give in. There is only one way to fight emptiness. By being empty back, by being a mirror and reflecting his emotions.

He squats next to me and raises his hand.

Chapter 2. Padded Cell

I recoil on instinct but catch myself doing it and arrest it before I close my eyes, relaxing facial muscles as much as the gag would allow. And 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 slapping, it's so unusual and on some level creepy, because together with this strange demonstration of affection his obvious distaste hits me with such force, I wince. I don't want to see his face, but I make myself, never averting my eyes. A familiar sight of greying hair pulled away from a strained forehead with an expensive gel, those raised questioning eyebrows, groomed with tweezers to perfection. And, top it off, framed with almost girlishly curly eyelashes, two big round eyes drilling into mine. The contrast of emotions on his face is incomprehensible, throwing me onto a precipice of terror.

This, I think, is my father. Part of him is in me, part of that mad sinister whatever, his DNA, his biological build, is making me who I am. I visibly shudder, mentally noting to look in the mirror one day, 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 would have to dig up somewhere to be able to tell.

My father hovers his hand over me in a gesture of parental impulse to console. Air slowly fills with chlorinated smell of faucet water, freshly scrubbed skin, and soap. I breathe in through the nose, ready to faint, noting a trace of his favorite cologne, Bulgari for men. Even here, even on a fishing trawler, he packs stuff like this with him? Jesus.

"There, there. Quiet now. So nice to have you back." His voice comes as soothing, his face blocks the lamp.

I shrink out of habit, my tongue fat and dry, lips numb and sore, my limbs tied into cocoon, my torso bent, its left side on the floor, right side up, a nice target for his shoes, to be stepped on and kicked and kicked. I expect no less, empty and ready.

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 tell me how you really feel, tell me you hate me. Come on.*

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

He leans a bit closer, mouth tight.

"Sorry, I couldn't quite hear you. What was that you said?" A hand curled over his ear, all attention, 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 going in my mind through a repertoire of every single foul word I know, from bastard to asshole to creep, which is not much, and here I wish to borrow some of Hunter's cunning, he always swears so deliciously sharp, it opens my mouth in jealousy. So, I add *fucking* as a mandatory adjective in front of each word, also because my father always forbade me to swear. Armed with this lovely package, I try saying each string into gag, one by one.

Fucking bastard, fucking dickhead, fucking-

Nothing but a pathetic hooting comes out, mixed with ragged nasal respiration. 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, stage one done. I manage to stretch my lips a hairline more, smiling.

Now I notice he's dressed in a suit, immaculate, as always, as if about to depart for an outdoor opera performance somewhere in Italy, no doubt flying in on a private jet, although he can't afford it yet, not even with his antique bathroom fixture business booming as it is. But I know he dreams about owning one, as he casually dropped in dinner conversations, or, shall I say it, monologues full of reasons *why* he's not doing it, how he can't find a perfect one, waiting for new models to be manufactured by Finmeccanica or Piaggio Aero or some other Italian brand. He repeated those names so many times, I have them ingrained in my brain forever. And I say, his reasons are bullshit, he doesn't have that kind of money, as loaded as he is, yet still each time he managed to mesmerize my mother into ogling her eyes at him, full of naïve wonder.

I dig my teeth into cotton cloth at the memory of her, continuing to study my father, and I can't believe what I see. It seems like over these last few days he has taken his obsession with clothing a notch too far. There is a cashmere scarf - a cashmere scarf! -- carelessly draped over his shoulder, like he's out for a stroll, shielding himself from the mild September breeze.

He looks out into 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 such... fashion." He glances at me, indicating my position on the floor and him standing, then looks back at nothing.

"It seems to me, 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." Pause. I strain my neck to keep my head tilted up so I can see him.

"What you don't understand is, 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."

The rest happens very fast. I glean the bottom of his shoe, made of 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 cotton. It hurts like hell, no, worse, it hurts like cutting open a wound the 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 mastery of suppressing pain. That's what I do really well.

My father, he stands and looks. Cold and calculating.

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

Mirror his feelings, Ailen, mirror. And 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 brain.

I witness the sole of his shoe one more time, its tip slimy, marred in my own juice, 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, 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 must be as close as it gets, not sweating but rather evaporating.

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 memory makes me wonder where he is, but I forcefully disregard it, to not fall apart, to stay in control, in favor of this new game and intending to win it. This is not passive-aggressive like Hunter explained. Oh no, this is so much

better. *This* is violent to the point of mutual joy. Perverted, if you will. A contest of absence of any feeling.

It'll take more than that, Papa, you know that. Go ahead, do your fill. Make me see it, go on. I say with my eyes and smile, seeing my message reflect in his face. Good.

If he's disturbed by my defiance, he doesn't show it, continuing to drone his lecture, still looking into distance.

"What you don't understand is, 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." Pause. "What I want you to learn is, 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, grinning from ear to ear, or hoping it would appear like that, as much as I can with the gag in my mouth. He can see it, because a muscle twitches slightly on his left cheek, freshly shaven, always.

"Oh, did it hurt? Tell me how you feel." He squats and strokes my right gill with one finger, gnarled and long. I tense to stop shuddering and not let him feel a single vibration. 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 me and is gone. I don't waver in effort to withstand his scrutiny like I usually do, for the first time being able to sink past my 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, 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 with a lens on top. If you look long enough, that's all there is to it, really.

I'm fascinated by my discovery and can't stop staring.

Papa's pupils widen for a fraction of a second. I'm mesmerized by their movement, like I made them inflate.

Unperplexed, he continues. Is there a slight tremble to his voice that I hear?

"What I want you to learn is, discipline is the answer." His pupils grow. "Learn to suppress the pain, learn to carry on even when you feel like you want to die."

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 a maroon silk sock framed by the hem of his pant leg and then I

can't breathe. Blood swells in my vessels, fills my eyes, pulses in my ears. My gills open and close like a gaping mouth of a fish thrown on sand, aching. A siren can't be strangled to death, I know that much, yet I suffer the pain all the same. I will myself to still and manage to suppress it, mentally departing from my body and observing it from the outside. It's like witnessing your own bones and sinew crushed by an executioner, but from a safe distance of a spectator, in the comfort of your own private couch, slurping soda and watching yourself perform on TV.

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

We're in the middle of a silent fight. Who will win?

One minute goes by, maybe two. He presses down harder. Sharp sole-edges of his brand-new shoes cut into my jaw and collarbone. I don't flinch, don't make a single sound, don't blink, holding his stare and not looking away, no longer scared by his eyes, the very source of my multiple nightmares from the time when I could recall them in the morning.

At last, foot off, he lets go.

"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 in disgust and he steps away from me as if from a 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 survive in this world as a woman, in his eyes, as a weakling, a second sort. 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.

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 this just come out of my father's mouth? Impossible.

"Perhaps. Perhaps you are. I intend to test my theory." Another pause. He always takes his time to deliver the punch line, holding me in suspense, relishing my terror. Not this time, this time I'm ready, yet what he says next shocks me, stuns me.

"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 stay alive."

A chill runs down my spine and a sense of déjà vu. In my teenage naivete I forgot. He told me about this idea before, how could my memory have misplaced it? At the siren meadow, while being flattened on the lawn between rows of benches, face first into dirt, 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, catching other sirens. Clever, wouldn't you agree?* And then he chuckled to the accord of his own pathetic joke.

He failed to mention exactly how he'd do it. I get it now, by stripping me of my voice. The idea of it fails to fit in my mind and before I have any time to react or utter a moan, he's pounding on the door with his fist, no, not on the door, on its viewing window.

A small rectangular sheet of glass glistens, reflecting fluorescent light, revealed from underneath 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? For hours? Was it part of his game, to watch me squirm and squiggle, wait for me to break down? I tremble, sending goosebumps marching up my skin.

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

I want to gasp, to be deaf. I want someone to pierce my eardrums for good, so as not to hear. Not now, not this. Not the melody of the happiness I can never have, no matter how distorted. Canosa was right, this is torture. Double-torture, in my case, to hear the soul of my father, partially revived, by me. And now to hear Hunter's soul, 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 and can't. Door opens wider. Hunter takes small steps inside, looking beaten and haggard in his dirty jeans and sweatshirt, matted hair hanging over pale face. His head is down, lips pressed together. He holds on to the door in a way a drunk would steady himself, gripping it, avoiding looking at me, mincing his feet, making annoying squeaking noises with his sneakers.

"Come in, come in." My father urges him. Hunter doesn't move, frozen, left hand on the door, right kneading jeans pocket. 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 c--"

"I said, pick - her -- up." This comes through pressed lips, and I know inside my father is boiling.

I myself am shocked into numbness, perceiving the transpiring conversation like it's some kind of a bad dream. Another minute, another moment, I'll wake up and it'll be gone, no big deal. No such luck. My private nightmare continues.

"But you could simply send her away without h—"

"PICK HER UP!" A vein pulses in the hollow of my father's temple, his hands curl into fists.

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

"And 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? Pops in my head. Will you really go this far, Papa, you will, won't you? It's the final test for you, to see if you can do this to your own kind, to eradicate your own nightmare, and I'm the one representing it for you, am I? I get this. I understand, but you know what? You're no more than a stinking coward, making someone else do the dirty job for you, that's who you are. You're weak, with all of your forceful bravado. I recite this in my head burning a hole in my father's back and he flinches. Did my message reach him on some level? I don't care, it's not important. What's important is that I feel calm once more, not willing to give up, madly hoping for the best, fueled by insatiable belief in human goodness.

Hunter takes a small step, stops.

I shift my focus. *Hunter, 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 like the perfect irritant to my hearing and I have to constantly fight the desire to turn it off.

I search Hunter's face from below, but he avoids looking at me directly, studying his feet, taking a few tentative steps and bending over me.

He rolls me on my back, then sits on his hunches, slides his right arm under my shoulders, his left under my knees, and heaves me up with a grunt. His eyes drill into my navel the entire time. Warmth seeps through cotton layers, causing me to suck in a deep breath and let it go in a sigh. Hunter's heart beats over a hundred times per minute, muscles shake in effort, faint odor of sweat mixes with his typical aroma of pine. Pine, linden flowers and sugar, his natural smell. I take another inhale and melt into his body shape, happy.

I pretend like I'm a swaddled baby, hungry and distraught, yes, and in need of care, badly missing my mother, yet for a moment held by someone I love, someone who I know loves me back, as much as I tend to not believe it. This is enough to turn time around and put it on its head, making one second stretch into

eternity. My head plopped on his shoulder, 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 of it, Hunter, having barely made a step towards the door, follows a lurch of the boat too perfectly and loses balance. His arms let go and he drops me on soft floor, then falls down on his butt, hangs head in theatric humiliation.

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

Nice try, I want to say. You forgot how to lie properly, dude.

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

"No, no, it's not what I mean. Man, you got it all wrong." Hunter nearly stutters. He never minces words, 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,

picturing Papa's eyebrows fly up in question. Wait, what agreement? Did he hire him on again or something? No, immediately I know what it is. He bought Hunter's help in exchange for keeping me alive, I'm sure of it.

"No, of course not. I'll try again here in a minute. Just... stretching my legs is all." Hunter lies and leans over again to hoist me up, his face a tight mask of grief and strain.

Hunter, don't believe him, he's bluffing! I mumble into the gag. *Don't do this, please. He won't dare killing me, trust me, he's too weak! He's a fucking coward underneath all this yelling and being angry and...* Hushed muttering comes out. I growl, frustrated.

"Don't talk, Ailen, please." Papa's appears over both of us and promptly puts his show 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 strange sadness. "Carry on, son." Last remark is directed at Hunter. I detect no jealousy in me at the word *son*. It doesn't bother me anymore, 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 bundle of cloth, a siren pupa. Hunter springs up lightly for momentum, I jump in his embrace, caught

for a fraction of a second free mid-air. Hunter catches me by my waist, rotates me upward and folds me over his right shoulder.

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

Habit makes me escape into a vision of something else, something not from here, because no matter how brave I'm trying to be, the idea of my voice being taken out horrifies me, and my intuition tells me that we're not going very far. There is, after all, only that much room on a trawler, and judging by furious swaying of the boat, we must be hitting pretty large waves that can only occur miles and miles away from the shore. Besides, I can feel the enormous amount of ocean's body with my skin.

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

I shut my eyes, searching for sanity.

Chapter 3. Chem Lab

Prom. This is it, prom. I imagine going to senior prom I never had, never will have. What else? It's every teenage girl's dream; a beautiful dress, a beautiful date, right? Well, it's mine, and I decide to have it now. This is my minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, and this is how the duality of it plays out. I'm wrapped in cotton, but to me it's a fine gown made of ivory silk. Pearly white. Hunter hugs my knees to keep me from sliding off his shoulder, but I feel like he hugs my waist and pulls me closer, to glances of other couples. He sports a shaky gait to keep moving forward and avoid hitting walls, but I think he's leading me to ballroom's entrance. He hobbles ahead through the ugly, dimly lit corridor, but I know we made it inside, on time, and are carried 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 rudely out of my vision. Hunter hesitates. I feel his chest expand with air as if he's about to say something, then it falls. He must have changed his mind. I smell the stink of machine oil, glue, and decay, and turn my head to the left to look.

What sounded like music is no more than loud staccato of the trawler's engine somewhere close by and ocean's rumble outside. I squint, glancing up. Fluorescent tubes and pipes fill low ceiling like a bunch of trumpets cramped together. To the left another identical door complete with the hand wheel protrudes from the wall. It peels old whitish paint and sports a yellow sign that spells *Chem Lab* in black letters two thirds of the way up, and, below it, *CAUTION, Hazardous Materials Beyond This Point*. The picture of what it must look like inside shakes me up so hard I nearly slide out of Hunter's grasp half a foot.

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

"Sure." Hunter heaves me up and back on his shoulder.

My nose hits his back. I swallow shame and turn my head to sneak a peek. 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 waft of chlorine hits my nose, damp and cold.

My father reaches inside without so much as a glance to find a 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?

He shifts the switch to 'on'.

Bright light blinds me with a thousand suns. My eyes water, making everything blurry and I have to squint.

Hunter carries me in. His sneakers squeal a few sad steps on what must be polished steel floor, and in another second he slides me gently into something hard and cold and hollow, holding the back of my head in his hand and then letting it slide in with the rest of my body. A round container of some sort?

I blink like mad trying to make the afterglow vanish from my vision to take in the room. The light is unforgiving, blinding me with its fierce mercury vapor, streaming down from low ceiling in shafts of brightness and buzzing like an annoying cloud of flies. It takes a moment to stop seeing floating blotches of glow. My vision finally adjusts, and in this precise moment I wish my eyes were gagged, not my mouth.

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

Ever since I can remember myself, nearly every day I was being punished for something, 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 could be locked, to make sure I didn't get out. At first, when I was very little, I tried screaming and slamming my little 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 to it. At least I could move around. I had water, I could pee if I needed to, and I had my sirens, my four marble sisters and my big bronze sis, Canosa, to talk to, to cry with, to feel better in the end.

This is different.

This is déjà vu gone insane.

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 grey painted-on metal, most likely steel; its decor consists of operating tools hanging from the 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 clawfoot 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 another. I'm only guessing it's an iron clawfoot, mainly because my father is in love with these and its rim curls in that standard way. It must be standing on some sort of a raised platform, because they're not that high usually, and if I wasn't constrained by the straightjacket, I could reach out and almost touch the ceiling, which is very low, at about six foot 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, a foot away, its end-hole roughly three inches in diameter. What's this for, a douse of sea water? 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 layers of cotton. My guts fill with lead.

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

My father closes the door shut, rolls the handwheel 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 the outcome of 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 begin rolling down my face from the burn, there is so much chlorine in the air.

"How..." I hear Hunter's heavy breathing.

"How do I know... you'll hold to your part of the deal?" I can hear Hunter's knuckles cracking, 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.

"--know for sure, that you won't kill her after it's done? Huh? For all I care, it's just another one of your sick experiments." He spits loudly. This is bound to irritate my father who is pedantic to extreme, especially when it concerns *his* things and *his* places.

Now I can see Hunter's bluish profile. 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, looks over him coolly. "You think you have a choice?" The expression in his eyes turns my bones into glass, brittle, ready to shatter.

"I need a guarantee." Hunter throws, desperation in his voice. "Some sort of paper or something. With your name on it. And signature. Can I get that?" His voice catches at the end, in an 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 type of 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 Crossby. 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 themselves idiots when talking to him.

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

"I'm not going to argue with you. I have to time for this. Once again, yes or no? Or I can *make* you get out of this equation."

"Is that a gun?" Hunter exclaims.

Tub's rim blocks the lower part of the room for me, and I can't tilt my head left or right far enough to see exactly what

is going on, but by my father's arm position it appears he is pointing something at Hunter.

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

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

"Good, I was starting to get worried. She's all yours." My father steps away, yet as much as he tries to sound cool, there is trembling. Nervousness? Excitement? Will he really go this far? Is he scared of himself, perhaps? Or scared of finally facing his own fear, witnessing someone else banish it for him?

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

Hunter leans over me, his hands quiver as he reaches for the straps, pulls them from underneath me and circles them around me, fastening me in to the tub, tight and secure,

glancing every once in a while at me, hot tears dripping from his cheeks on the cotton of my straightjacket, blooming there in roses of wet warmth. I cry back, holding nothing, suppressing nothing, letting it all go, 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'll read it.

Hunter's body is tight with tension under my father's watchful eyes, his hands shake badly. Steel locking loop-hooks of the chains clink against painted iron, and he keeps missing the holes, struggling with separating prongs from the loops to latch them, slowly succeeding, one chain at a time. How many are there, a dozen?

I study Hunter's concentrated face, his pressed lips, but he turns sideways, purposefully avoiding me, maybe ashamed or feeling guilty or helpless. I choose not to moan, not to make a sound indicating that I'm in distress, to show my father who's winning this game here, me again.

I won't make a peep, Papa, I promise.

He studies his nails and I burn a hole in his forehead, staring, and he finally steals a glance.

Why, Papa, why? Why are you doing this to me? I know deep inside you love me, still, don't you? I try conveying. My father

quickly glances away. Another victory. I sigh through the nose, blocking other senses and letting myself hear.

Hunter's soul echo penetrates my being, so horribly off-key, a mix of sad sweetness, disjointed violins and clanking dishes. It is designed to haunt me for the rest of my life, as long as we're close. But for a moment I let myself get lost in it, just to retreat from reality to sound, the sound that only I can hear, making me both loath him and desire him, which overtime is 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. Desperate bitch.

Canosa, I hate you, I think, but I get your pain. And it sucks, I tell you. 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 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 way to the wall and stretches out his arm, groping for something. Something I don't want to see. I close my eyes, as if will make it any better. It doesn't.

An overwhelming helplessness buries me from head to toe in 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 is 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 a terrible knowledge of being locked with a stranger in the cellar of doom, when hope slides against hope, in the last attempt to grab onto something, knowing it's too late, sliding down, sliding.

NO! I can win this. I can do it.

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 desperate wish alone, trying to concentrate on distant souls of marine life, anything I can stumble along, feel with my skin, hear souls of, fish, whales, animals on the shore, people on boats. Any living breathing being, their pitiful melodies joined into a chorus of life itself. I want to catch and take hold of 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 pressure to perform, to work their asses off, cast out my inaudible cry for help, make it ring, reverberate across miles and miles of space. Dull echo of something else besides Hunter's soul rolls gently on a buzz and pierces through my chest. Seems like some souls have answered me, or maybe I 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 of here. What happens instead is this. Preparation for my surgery are over, and it's time to play detached. The world attains an elastic quality to it, shimmering with primitive animal fear, because of what I see above me.

My father's face blocks the light. He stinks of disinfectant and sick anticipation, wants this so bad, can tell by sweat prickling his forehead, evaporating through layers of carefully applied perfume.

"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, 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 the hell did you make me? To torture me, to become your favorite toy to kick and slap and torment? Just so you yourself would feel better from whatever shit that's eating you from inside? Using me as a tool for that? In that case, I wish I was never born. Not for this. I wish I never saw your face. I want to erase it from my memory, forever.

And yet I think 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 own 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? What would be the point then, 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, ok?" My father's voice says above. So caring, it makes me want to puke. So steady, it seems he has no feelings at all. "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 bad weather is my doing, but then cast the thought aside. It can't be, not without singing or at least humming, and not like I can move the whole ocean, anyway. Or can I?

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

I vaguely remember Hunter dragging me to the public bathroom at Pike Place market, telling me on repeat that we need to get rid of my voice, because my father can track me by my voice. Is that why he dragged me to 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 do feel how my skin gets slightly thinner and more supple, never having

noticed it before, never having a moment to relax and simply reflect on being one. Doesn't look like I'll have a 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-a-second I think it did. This is a 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 and he lowers it.

"I'm waiting?" Comes warbled through the water, amplified and distorted at the same time, yet I understand every word.

I see my father's hand grip Hunter's shoulder.

"Steady, boy. 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 is nowhere else to retreat. At the same time, I feel new energy pass through me, my

skin sucking it in from the water, and perhaps because there is no way I can be more afraid that 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 for it, empty of any feeling. Except I know I won't die, I know this is only about the removal of my voice, yet it feels the same.

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

I hold my breath and yank my perception outside, turn myself inside-out in a way, dissociate myself from my body to the point of being a casual observer, like I'm the one operating, not the one being operated on. 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 over the years and drive him mad with my silence, no matter how hard he hit. It was my weapon against him, it is my weapon now. My mind is clear. My breathing slows down. This is tolerable. In fact, I'm strangely curious as to 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, it rushes up my nerve endings, tingling.

Hunter hesitates.

"Go on." My father urges him on.

Hunter throws the scalpel to my side and straightens. I hear the instrument slide off my side and float down the tub, into the gap between my back and tub's bottom. It turns a few times and lands with a quiet metal clank. Hunter steps back.

"I can't. I can't do it. I'm sorry." I hear tears in his voice.

"Well, that's truly unfortunate. I thought we've closed this topic. I suppose I will 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, for Christ's sake! 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, boy. Per—"

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

"Pull yourself together." There is a sound of physical struggle and slapping. "I thought this might happen. What a waste of time." There is anger in my father's voice. Hunter whimpers.

At this moment the boat lurches, hard. Lights go out for a few seconds this time. I hear more struggle. Lights go on again but water still shakes above me and all I manage to detect are two distorted figures, one of them leaning over.

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

He's making him do it.

Chapter 4. Iron Tub

What do you do when the one who's supposed to love you, your parent, betrays you? What do you do when the one you trust most yanks your trust out from under your feet with violence the extent of which you cannot grasp with your little childish brain? And what if, after all is done and you're done crying, it's explained to you that it was done in the name of love? How do you continue functioning, how do you continue giving, loving, believing? These questions gut me their horror as I watch the blade near my throat, tiny air bubbles framing it like gems. I have no answer. I'm blank. The only thing I know is that I have one, two seconds at the most. My eyes bulge out 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 tight, not wanting to see this. I've tried everything there was to try, there is nothing.

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

"Look, Ailen, look." He says.

I feel my eyelids being pried open, fingers pulling at 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 reborn, 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 going on, ogling around.

Hunter's hand is inches from my neck, the scalpel held firmly in between his fingers and my father's fingers on top of his, in an iron grip. With one sharp shove the tip of the blade gets pushed right under my chin and traces a vertical line down to the concave spot where my collar bones meet, cutting through several cotton layers in the process, smoothly, with a whispering ripping noise. I relax a little, when another swing of the blade slices through my skin and goes deeper into muscle, in a way a very sharp butcher's knife would make a groove in a

chunk of meat. A crunch of parted cartilage rips through my ears in a loud gush. I don't know how deep 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.

Clear viscous slime oozes out of the hole in my throat and floats up in a cloud of goo, in a way frog egg-mass floats up in a pond after being freshly laid. My heart deserts my chest and hikes up to my larynx, pumping madly. This feels like 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 manage to be gentle, palpating their way around and finally stumbling on what must be tissue around my vocal cords. I can't see what's happening and can hardly feel anything except the hot pulsing insanity of pain.

Then he touches them, touches two protruding nubs at the edge of the glottis, the space between vocal folds, the very membranes that produce my voice with their vibration, and it's like touching the eye of a storm, causing it to erupt.

At first, nothing happens.

Then a mini-earthquake shakes the trawler, no, it shakes what feels like an entire ocean, starting with small oscillations and reaching crescendo of seismic tremor from water

all the way to sea bottom, making everything around me expand, wanting to explode. 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. Water sloshes out of the tub in rhythm to the boat rocking wildly from side to side. My body sort of turns to liquid as if someone threw a stone deep inside. I'm a circular wave that grows amidst gigantic ripples, rises to horizon and shimmers 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 with a loud yelp and I hear him collapse on the floor. A weird succession of images percolates in my mind, from a working hairdryer dropped into water, to a bursting electric bulb, to lightning striking a solitary figure on the road, to Hunter touching an open wire in the rain. Turns out, a siren is like an electric eel, happy to shock anyone who dares touching her voice. This explains why my father was so bent on having Hunter do it. Is this why he staged it 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, flicker blue one last time and go out. A 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 almost night club like liquidity, with red light pulsing in unison to blasting bray of alarm.

I nearly black out from sensory overload and weakness.

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

Something is happening to my body, but I'm not entirely sure what it is, letting it flood me with sensation. It's pleasant, it's the touch of the water directly to my core. Chlorinated or not, it's still my life force, seeping inside me through the rapture and filling 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 what I said? Are you deaf?" My father's voice is on a 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! GET UP, NOW!" There is a kick and a moan, and the shifting of steel and plastic rubble sliding on the floor, and the creaking of wooden boards, the running steps 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. It's me who's bitter, helpless, like a wet discarded cotton roll soaked in tears.

Useless, useless, useless.

Broken, torn apart, left to die.

"UP, YOU LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT!"

Hunter's words flash through my mind again, the ones he said when we had our joint on the day before my birthday, when he asked me if I ever met a real siren. I joked back, saying, *You call this real?* and pointing at marble Ligeia. And he said, *You know what I mean. Not the mythical kind. No. I'm talking about the 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, my ability to keep going 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 things to me you used to do when I was little. You can't just take my voice away by force, it belongs to me and me alone, unless I choose to give it up freely. I'm my own being, capable of living without your constant control, and I'm not a thing to be played with, I have a name. My name is Ailen Bright, I'm a siren, and I'll show you what it means. Watch.

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

I'm coming, Hunter, hang on!

And with this, I begin sort of gulping moisture from water through my skin, not precisely inhaling it, but more like absorbing in a way a sponge would, directing a lot of it through the cut in my throat, at the same time straining to expand, to break out of cotton cocoon, to snap off the chains, bend open their links and make them fall apart, wiggling out of their gripping belts. Several seconds of my effort amount only to some metallic grinding and no more, the chains being as rigid as ever. I grunt with effort, soaked, inflating. Grunting is good, grunting means I am starting to produce noise. Chains are good too, at least for the moment they're holding me in place against the tumultuous swaying of the trawler, sloshing water 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, or below it, concentrating on my breath and on the fabric of the straightjacket, picturing their fibers soaking with water, becoming soft, less elastic, at the same time I tense and make tissues expand. It works. A few threads tear, then a dozen, a hundred. But not enough, not nearly enough to break out of the whole thing.

There are heavy footsteps, shouts and a slamming of the open door. More shouts.

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.

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

My skin cells begin regenerating, multiplying at an alarming speed, eating away fabric like acid and at the same time mending and closing my throat, knitting it shut. Underneath that every single muscle that's been cut stretches its filaments one towards another into an embrace, similar to grass growing caught on tape and played in fast forward, linking protein

filament with protein filament, producing a contraction that settles my neck's tissue into a seizure of sorts, before it falls completely still.

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 ocean night is full of drizzle and it hears me.

The entire process of my healing must have taken barely a few seconds, because the steps are only now reaching the tub and someone leans in. I snake out my arm, now free of cotton, and close fingers on the neck of my victim, pulling him down into water. Jimmy. Poor Jimmy utters a cry in a bubble of air and slides out of the water on the floor, unconscious. I mentally note that I automatically don't kill him, saving his soul to snack on later.

Cotton gone, the chains still hold me fast.

Fine, I'll take care of it later. For now, I keep humming, directing my power upwards into the atmosphere. This is the beauty of sound, it can penetrate the walls. There, in the expanse of velvety darkness, first feet and then miles away, droplet to droplet, rain carries my hum all the way into the cloud. Slowly, it begins shrinking, collapses in on itself like a giant magnet and pulls moisture from miles around into one

spot, hanging heavy over trawler, moving across the sky with it. There is a rumble of electricity and a crack of lightning, caused by the force of my voice. I feel like a conductor of a giant orchestra called weather, hushing the background music and bringing out the front, the heavy artillery, making it charge.

I hum more, add intensity.

Something ruptures up there, in a way water breaks before delivery. It has reached a critical mass and gushes down in one focused stream, similar to those two hundred drops I caught on my tongue when competing with Hunter yesterday, 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 a beach.

How many seconds go by? Eight, nine, ten?

Where is Hunter, where is my father?

I no longer hear them, nor the surrounding noise. I'm in the zone, humming Rain by Siren Suicides, a very appropriate melody. I pull and nag and coax every single water drop in my vicinity to move, call on the ocean itself. Now even the rascal glow of the emergency light flickers, the boat careens dangerously to the left, sloshing most of the water out of the tub, together with the first scalpel, then it rights itself

back. The tub must be bolted to the platform it stands on, which is in turn part of the floor, because neither moves, but chains slacken from the force of my jerking around, and I hear the links beginning to give and unfold.

Good.

Red light pulses again, but not with a regular rhythm of a signal, but with the sputtering of a failing electrical circuit, until 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 shit, 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, imagining their evil faces from the books I read, opening their toothless mouths, wanting to swallow the trawler in an almighty whirlpool and suck it to the bottom of the sea. There is loud rumble and fizz, followed by cracking and groaning of wood and metal, before bolts begin shooting out of the walls and the ceiling and land on top of me like empty bullet shells. Dust from splintering wood on the ceiling covers me in a thin layer of powder. After a few seconds of this, the trawler seems to not be able to withstand the enormous force of water pressure anymore. It starts to collapse and I win.

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

I work my fingers, clenching and unclenching them into fists, then find the loop-hooks and break them one by one, breaking their hold in the process. One chain done, ten more to go. They're holding me suspended, about ten inches from the bottom of the tub, in a manner a floating bridge is slung from one shore to the opposite one, except in my case it's me stretched from head of the tub to its end, hanging inside like a kebab to be roasted on a stick.

I undo every chain hook along my body, starting from my shoulders and getting all the way to my knees, my clumsy fingers slipping, my body sagging down into the tub as I go. After unhooking each chain, I yank it together with its fastening

bolts out of tub's body and unceremoniously throw them on the floor, one by one, until, at last, I'm free.

In this instant, a loud crack traces the floor above and water begins falling down in freezing sheets, causing me to feel the first pangs of panic and stopping my humming at once.

I reach to my face and rip off the tape, together with a few hairs tearing out of the back of my head. It takes three tries to get off every single layers of it, until I reach to the ball of cotton, now soaked through with my saliva and stinking of bitter bile. I grasp it with unbending fingers and pull it out, gagging and coughing. Then I take another few seconds to bend my head down over my knees and retch, buried by a sudden wash of nausea. Whatever juices I have in my body, they hand out of my open mouth and at last I force myself to wipe them, finding 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, and I'm stark naked.

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

"Hunter!" I croak, cough and sputter water out, sitting 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. Slumped against the tub platform, lays unconscious Jimmy, the

unfortunate guy who happened to interfere with me in the most unfortunate moment in his short fisherman career. I consider sucking out his soul quickly and decide against it. It's a pity, but there is 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 my father, leave him to sink? Rescue him to? Haul them both on my back? It's impossible.

I'm momentarily stumped by this idea, not knowing a clear answer to this, remembering my promise to myself to find good in him, to try and revive him all the way, and somehow not finding needed motivation after what has just transpired.

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

Boat lurches again and I fly to the other end of the lab, hitting my head hard on one of the protruding hooks, emitting a yelp. Jimmy moans as his body slams into the wall next to me.

His head is above water, but soon he won't be able to keep afloat and drown.

With a sigh, I lean over and stick my hands under Jimmy's stinky armpits, pulling him in front of me, carefully stepping backwards 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 direction of the door. "HUNTER! ANSWER ME!!!"

The door is open, 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 at the most 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.

"HUN—" I begin and bump into someone with my back, 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 the day before, in most critical moments when I think I've lost him, my inner child breaks out, and for a split second I'm happy to see him alive. No need to squash it this

time, however. My father's wet face grins in a sinister ruby red glow of the emergency light, almost blood-red. He's standing in my path, in the doorway, holding on to it with his right hand, Hunter slumped on his left shoulder, his left arm around him for support, making him half-stand, half-hang in his embrace.

We lock eyes and he smiles very sweetly.

"I thought I might find you here." He says.

"You. What—" I breathe and suppress the urge to cradle Hunter's face, to call 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.

What I see next doesn't register in my vision at first. It takes me a long painful moment of rapid blinking to believe that what I'm seeing is true. It's not two actors in a movie, but two very real people from my own life. My father holds something in his right hand, something that was hidden behind the doorframe.

It's a gun.

He points a gun to Hunter's head, not the plastic sonic weapon used on sirens, no. This looks real, like real steel with real bullets.

"One more step and your boyfriend is dead." He says in a leveled voice, though I still detect a hint of fear in it. He knows that time is not to his advantage. We're sinking.

"You wouldn't dare." I whisper and lick my lips, curling my fingers into fists involuntarily.

"Who are you to tell me what I would or wouldn't dare?" A childish note creeps into his voice, and I have a feeling it's not me he is talking to, but his pain and whoever it is who inflicted it on him, who didn't believe in him, leaving him scarred.

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

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

Fast as lightning, he straightens out his arm, shoves me to the left which causes me to stumble and lose my hold on the fisherman. He slides out of my hold and my father shoots him in the head, into the dark water at our feet, to a sickening sound of the target getting hit and a wild echo of a gunshot across the lab and trailing into the corridor.

"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 know that I failed. "You shot him!"

Then I sense the sound of Jimmy's soul moving up and out, towards me. Involuntarily, still bent over, I suck it in, letting much needed strength course to my chest, to my heart, through my body. I raise my head, wondering if my father knew this soul would feed my strength, if he did it on purpose, but fail to read his face in the pulsing red glow.

Hunter's still unconscious, and my father is back at pointing his gun to 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."

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 towards the narrow stepladder, the only way out of this metal beast before it gets consumed by the ocean.

Chapter 5. Lifeboat

They say your whole life flashes in front of your eyes, in a split-second right before you die. A lucid dream composed of tender moments, moments of love, if you had any. And after it you see some sort of a dark tunnel with light at the end, so resplendent, so beckoning, you want to go there, to hopefully be at peace forever. You take a step, forgetting you have feet, legs, transcending into a sense of levitation, of complete dissolution, of serenity. How cliché. What they don't say is what happens when you witness someone else die, for no purpose. It flashes just the same, 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 the place of this person. I've killed people before, for food, I've seen Canosa do it. This is different. This is mindless murder.

Thoughts curse through my head as we fly with incredible speed towards the ladder, bumping into pipes sticking out here and there, and then coming to an abrupt stop, draping over steel bottom rung like three heavy sacks filled with sand, one on top of another, on top of another. Darkness throbs with red flickering light. The boat's tilt must be close to a thirty

degree angle now. I remember reasing somewhere that once it careens past forty five degrees, the sinking is inevitable and happens within minutes.

I find my face pressed into my father's chest, hearing his beating heart, sensing his diaphragm rise and fall, his warmth touching my forehead.

"No!" I weep into his shirt, soaked and smelling faintly of the 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 phantom. I don't even know the guy, he was supposed to help Glen kill me. Why it makes me weep from grief as opposed to getting mad like it did when my father killed Pisinoe, I can't comprehend. Perhaps the fact of being so close to it, to seeing him do it without purpose, perhaps because a part of me has agreed that sirens are indeed monsters and hence deserve death, or perhaps because the lower rank of women has been so firmly ingrained in my mind by my father's constant lectures, that it's now ruling my emotions? Making men are more precious in my mind, more important? This can't be it, can it?

I swallow.

My father comes about and jerks up, attempting to sit.

"Off! Get off me! Get--" He yells over the rumble of 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 ever touched him. I remember him drop me into the trunk of his car, Maserati Quattroporte. This is as close as we get to a hug, and I wish he would drop his gun, drape his arms around me, let me sob into his shoulders, tell me that I will be okay, that we all will be okay, that everything that happened in the past will be forgotten and we'll start new, and it will be always sunny, warm, and loving. Only life doesn't work this way, life has a knack of refreshing your thinking just when you thought the present is pink and the future is about to turn rosy.

It sends me a reminder, by dunking the trawler another foot down, digging its sharp fingers of panic into me, siren or not.

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

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

I glance at him. An 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 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 produced by a whip or, for those more technologically advanced, a sonic weapon.

I'm helpless, barely detecting an off-key melody of Hunter's soul but not seeing him in the dark, and my quiet rage completes a hundred and eighty degree turn. It aims at me, wild, because it can't just evaporate, it has to go somewhere, some place where it can hit and dissolve. I'm an easy and convenient target.

Tears burn my eyes, my muscles scream for action, yet I hold still. The rubber of my fisherman suit drums to mad patter of leaking water from the ceiling. My arms hang loose, unsure if they can move or it's best not to stir. Several feet of swirling water ripple with momentary agony of disaster, splashing around me. I sit easy, swaying together with the boat, slowly finding my way to hold on to the rungs of the steel ladder.

"MOVE IT!" Papa yanks me out of stagnation, and I nod.

Hunter's body is slumped against the ladder, hugging its very bottom, like a torn rag doll dropped into puddle by its puppeteer, eyes closed, nose bloody. This is as much as I can detect in the darkness, half of his face floating in and out of the water. Why of all things I'm paralyzed right now, eludes my foggy mind. Too much is happening too quickly without any

explanation, without any place to root myself and to hold on to, without someone to pat my back, to give me an arm to lean on. There is only me and my resolve, to revive my father's soul, to stop Hunter from loving me, to persuade Canosa and two other remaining sirens from bothering them, and after all is done, to make myself disappear from this happy picture. Because I don't fit there, don't fit anywhere.

I hang my head.

I'm tired, so very tired, tired of constantly fighting, fluctuating up and down and left and right, one minute knowing who I am and another doubting it again. It's exhausting and I wish someone would simply tell me, *Ailen, this is who you are and this is what you do and this is how you do it*. I want my mother back. I want her to hold me. I want this to end like a bad dream, to wake up and be at peace with myself, at peace with--

"I SAID, MOVE IT! MOVE! GET HIM UP!" Papa yells, shakes me, cold gun in his right hand pressing 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, like I'm hearing it for the first time, actually hearing it for what it is, detecting its phoniness, its fake perverted feel. I utter a sob. My helpless rage blooms into a carnivorous flower, it's

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. What exactly is wrong with me right now, what happened? I have to answer him, to say something, but 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 onto the ladder with his free hand and pressing his back against it to stabilize himself, though it looks like the ladder is nearly vertical, so he is leaning against it like against a wall, because the trawler continues tilting.

He shoves me rudely towards Hunter. It's my permission to act, and I fall to my knees, 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 or is about to.

"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, to make myself numb, to return to that place where I can find myself again, find what seemed so certain just minutes ago, suppressing the growing rage at myself, making it steady, thumping on it with reason, reason to get Hunter out of here alive.

I hold my mouth shut, lest something unpleasant decides to slip out, lean and 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 in bind with another, stepping carefully up with my bare feet, curling my toes around metal bars, leaping up to grab the next rung, and the next, until I make it to the upper level and extract both of us out of the hole and 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 early morning light and fresh ocean smell, breaking over the turbulent noise of the rain in the open ocean.

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 agility I didn't think he possessed and sitting on the edge a little sideways, his legs dangling down.

"THERE! GO! GO!" He points at the opening, propped on his fours for balance. There is a moment of quiet, of no movement, a momentary stillness before eruption.

"NOW!" He barks, and I move. Water gurgles above in splashing waves, and there is another tug down and a dangerously 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 into a splash of a 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 in an effort not to react to what I hear, not let the commotion, the slapping noises, and the cursing turn me to the place of no return, where red rage will obscure my reasoning and turn me into a monster. I'm trapped by this impossibility of releasing my fury. My helpless rage is close to driving me insane. Surely in this chaos I can easily snatch Hunter's way right from under father's nose and escape with him. But the risk of attempting this and having him killed

in the process is too much to bear, and I slowly make myself go down to help both of them.

Facts, Ailen, facts, bury your head in facts, this is how you will survive it.

And I do. I ignore my father's shouts, his insults in an attempt to get me moving, I try to block out Hunter's moaning, his effort to tell me something, because if I decide to try and understand any of it, I'll come unglued and all three of us will get swallowed into the depths of the ocean, with me being the only one who'd make it back alive.

I touch the floor, lean and scoop up Hunter, who is unconscious again, and then methodically make my way up, step by step, hearing the resin of the overalls squeak, gripping the rungs with my toes, ascending, my arm firmly around Hunter's waist, hearing him mumble something into my shoulder, concentrating on ignoring the whooshing water, the creaking, the snapping, facing the rain and making it on deck.

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

Lightning strikes, briefly illuminating rolling storm in rivulets of angry rain, and a few seconds later rolling thunder deafens me with an earsplitting accord. A sudden premonition tells me this might be the last day I'll see my father alive, see Hunter alive. Does this mean I will die, or they will? I have barely enough time to register this emerging meaning, closing my eyes to concentrate, when 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 the weather in his pink shirt, his ruined Italian wool suit and Italian leather shoes. Curling his shaky fingers around it, he's aiming his gun at Hunter in a gesture that must mean approval for my actions, urging to me get him up and into the lifeboat.

I nod, indicating that we're still good about 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 overwhelming greyness of an 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, either having already escaped or died in the process.

I pause, taking in the scene.

Its predicament, its terrible beauty arrests me for the moment. Colorless background of dull water meets 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, leap into the waves, swim away and never come back, yet my feet won't move, my limbs won't listen. I can't run away, can't run away anymore.

Moving like in a dream, like in slow motion, I grab on to ropes stretched in a pulley mechanism designed to lower the lifeboat, and with a powerful yank tear at them, breaking the elaborate on-loading system to rusty screeching. I hop away and watch the lifeboat drop on deck, screech and slide across its remaining twenty feet into 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, two concave oval halves, both orange, top and bottom identical, a welded ridge in the middle, with two hatches in its roof, covered with orange waterproof covers, and a series of circular windows adorning its front, each large enough for one person to peek through.

The rest happens very fast.

Trawler growls and tilts, rapidly reaching the forty five incline angle and beyond. Yelling into Hunter's ear to hold his

breath, hoping he'd come to his senses and hear me, letting him slide to face me, I hug him tightly, jump and dive, emerging a second later, hearing his breathing, to my satisfaction, circling about the bobbing lifeboat and then leaping out of the air with Hunter firmly pressed to my chest, plopping right into the middle between both lifeboat hatches on the roof and feeling it shift to the side, but not before I have time to rip off the lid from one 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 alone 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 from 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, love him in a way every little girl loves her father, idolizes and adores 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 into a froth of turbulent bubbles, white foam on the surface of the ocean created by the sinking trawler, a few

lifesavers floating around, the only things left indicating that seconds ago a fifty foot long trawler was here and now is no more. The whole monstrous thing is gone, victim to an enormous body of saline water, a gigantic frog that just swallowed a particularly annoying insect, legs and belly and all.

About twenty feet away I spot a bobbing head.

I swim across the whirlpool, held back by clumsy fishermen suit catching on water and not letting me move fast enough, then dive and emerge directly under 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 cold. Light drizzle dampens his words. I'm in a suppressed rage daze, moving automatically, focusing on the task at hand, afraid to lose it like I did before, crawling on top and worming inside, my father urging me in and the following me, 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 places in total, strapping belts hanging loose across them, contrasting their orange color to 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, in a way one wakes up in the morning to a sudden noise after having consumed either an incredible amount of drugs or alcohol of getting high the night before. 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, complaining - *not* about losing his trawler, no - about his ruined outfit. It doesn't make any sense in the situation we're in and I actually listen to it, turning around, my mouth open.

"Do you know how much I paid for this suit?" He mutters. "Finest Italian wool, elegance at its best. Look at it now, it's ruined. It's—"

An incredible thought passes my mind. Is he embarrassed by having had to accept my help? Because that's what it sounds

like. I've never seen my father being 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 and carefully lowered him here, knowing 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 on to your word and did as promised. It's a start." 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 and push it down. He thanked me for not leaving him out there all alone, and I smile, returning the favor.

"You're welcome." I lean in an urge to... in an urge to I don't know what. To touch his hand, to hug him? And a second later I'm sorry I did it.

A contortion of repugnance crosses my father's face, wrinkled his forehead, and he points his real gun at me, simultaneously groping behind him and yanking a sonic weapon of the wall with his left hand, pointing that at me too. How considerate, now I know that this was indeed his siren hunting trawler after all, stocked with 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, I think. After a second or two, I slowly lean back against the smooth wall, feeling my legs dangle over the seat and my feet catching on warm drifts of Hunter's breath below. My thoughts drift again, turning into an ache of dull pain. I manage to suppress my momentary anger by turning it inward, and now it's hurting me, eating me inside. It's tearing me apart and I want to collapse, one part of me loving him, another hating him, both of them not being able to peacefully coexist.

I utter a moan and he points the sonic weapon at me, its muzzle wobbling in his hand.

Chapter 6. Pacific Rim

The worst part of hating your own parent is looking in the mirror and seeing that parent in your face, or, looking at your parent and seeing *you* all over your parent's face, in my case, my father's. His big blue round eyes are the eyes I inherited, so is his pointed nose and angular cheekbones, lanky limbs on a lithe body. I wish it didn't go farther than looks, but it does. It works its way into my core, this similarity, stemming from the fact that I'm not only physically branching from him. Whether I wanted it or not, I was raised by him; I soaked up his atmosphere, his way of living, his teachings, mannerisms, his way of talking and walking and even thinking. His fears are my fears, his fury is my fury, his memories are my memories. We are one, yet we are two, like opposing parts separated by a horizon line, one above and one below. Therein lies our constant struggle to split apart. Yet we can't, forever bound to be father and daughter.

There is mumbling and shuffling below, indicating Hunter's unrest, but at least I know he's conscious enough to realize that anything he says at the moment might not be to his advantage and he's better off to stay quiet. Which he does.

"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, words minimal on purpose. I can tell he's covering up his unrest and is not doing a very good job at it. The thought, nevertheless, gives me pleasure. And sadness. Sadness that it has to resort to this, to arm-wrestling over what should be given freely, the freedom to be, something that has been squandered in my father when he was very little -- I'm guessing, of course -- something that he tried to squander in me and failed, then realized he did and, refusing to believe it, is digging his panicky fingers into my very being, not willing to let go.

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 superior, and I know that he feels the same.

"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, sitting calmly about two feet away, knowing that he won't shoot me.

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

"Look what you did!" Here comes his usual attempt to make me 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 sunk only now. "You," he jabs the sonic weapon at me, "you keep destroying my property. You--" At first he searches for words, then proceeds to explain how much it really cost him to get it, to have it all equipped and set up, what kind of a deal he got, 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--"

I tune in and out of his monologue, mostly 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, something that makes me worthy of his bother? His face grimaces, spelling out each word that I don't hear. He lost

his jacket, 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. Fingers curled around two guns, knuckles white from strain.

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

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 in a private solo, for me and me only. An exquisitely imagined déjà vu, if you will.

He keeps talking and moving his arm about, for a second forgetting to aim the weapon at me and pointing it at the boat controls instead, and 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 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, and I daydream that he means he's about to give me a warm bath, to gently shampoo my hair, hug me in a towel, help me with pajamas and tuck me in, kissing my forehead good night. Something my mother has always done, something he never did, not once, in his life.

"--again, do not open your mouth unless I ask you a question or tell you 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, hate that's been reserved for my father, that now turned around and is devouring me instead. Because I can't hate him anymore, not after what I've seen, what I've heard. In fact, I hear it still, the barely audible flute and butterfly flapping of his revived soul. Perhaps it sounds a tiny bit louder, perhaps it's my imagination.

"Excellent." My father says, and lowers both guns to his lap again, glancing down. He hangs his head, he knows 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 soul and my sudden hunger overwhelms me. I press my chin into my collar bones, draw a deep breath and convulse in a series of coughs, each threatening to tear me apart, aware that any noise I make irritates Papa to no end and makes him yell at me to be quiet.

So it is now. Revived to his angry self, 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, and we both know it doesn't work anymore, it's on its way out.

He's like a little child throwing a fit, because his favorite toy has been taken away or someone has interrupted his favorite cartoon, and I watch him with a mild smile playing on my lips, which he notices after a while and falls silent. I search his eyes to see if he noticed the change.

He did. There is this stunned wonder quivering again, but only for a fraction of a second.

"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, like nothing happened. We simply ended up in the middle of the ocean for some odd reason and now need to make it home. The whole siren hunting thing sort of 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 its okay to talk, you're not allowed to open your mouth. Nod. So I know you understood." The metallic coldness is back in his voice, he's recovering from his lapse into vulnerability and is no doubt mad at me for being the catalyst for it.

I nod.

I won't cry, 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.

Waves drone on, licking the lifeboat, throwing an occasional sprinkle through the open hatch.

Hunter shifts below and appears to slump deeper into his seat. I sneak a peek down. Smooth white surface of his section gleams in a pool of shadow. The whole interior reminds me of a train cabin, about twelve feet long by six feet wide, with seats along the walls that are made from some fabric coated in plastic. Fiberglass?

Papa pushes a few buttons, shifts a long stick that's got a round black grip on it and a motor comes to life. He grabs onto 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.

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

Considering it safe, I lean a bit more to the right and 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." 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 I did, and him calling Hunter *son* doesn't bother me anymore either.

I try to read him and understand what the man wants, what he thinks, where his incessant drive for hating women came from, if my theory about his mother is correct. Never did it occur to me to simply ask him about it, and I decide to wait for an opportune moment and try. After all, like Hunter said, it's not *that* bad between us, he is a human being and I can talk to him. Simply talk to him and find out.

His attention is on Hunter right now, and on steering the boat. It's 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 now is planning to remove my voice, even after everything that happened. It's like he possesses some kind of stubbornness that gives him reason to go on no matter what. To hold on to. To not fall apart.

I want to pinch myself. Do I really understand my father now, his motivations? What will happen if I simply ask him? I'm still not sure, afraid to inflict pain on Hunter in the process

and keeping my thoughts to myself, looking out the window into the grey expanse of the Pacific.

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

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

"Well, we're on our way to Seattle, 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."

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, sonic gun is no longer wavering in his hand, aiming steady. He has this pained expression on his face, then a shudder of disgust, as if digging in a pile of rotten fish with 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 of you, made into a mess. We will get to that part. Now, answer my question."

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

"Come on, Ailen, it's just a question. Do it." He says. I think I hear a trace of tears in his voice and such finality that it makes me shudder. Like he decided on something serious and doesn't give a damn anymore. It wasn't me who sucked life out of him, it's the impossibility of getting out of this predicament, or so it feels. And it also feels like 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 boy forever stuck in his boyhood, playing with expensive toys, making rash decisions, enjoying your hunting 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? I know I am. So tell me, how much did it cost you, Papa, huh? Your heart? Your soul? When will you stop? What will it take for you to wake up and admit it? Admit your pain and stop running away from it? It's what you do, it's what you taught me how to do, 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, his gun-grip tightens, but I think I detect a flash of surprise and a hint of fear. And he didn't interrupt me, he let me talk.

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

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

"All right. 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, 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 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, I sense it, makes himself ignore my words, 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 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, publicly, in front of Hunter, and I expect he'll never forgive me. Though I know that I struck gold, that my hypothesis is true. I've seen it in his eyes, before he shot me. I've seen it in his broken posture, in his trembling hand, in his slack mouth, its usual strength gone, like his teeth have been kicked out and his lips sunk in, making his cheeks look hollow, 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 in shock of 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."

I'm numb all over, my vision is blurry, my hearing echoes, bitter saliva fills my mouth and every single muscle vibrates with hurt. 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, to bite my tongue really hard, to keep silent. Tears spring from my eyes. I hate it, I hate it.

I hate it!

Slow purring of the motor reminds me that we're still floating somewhere in the Pacific ocean.

"Sometimes I wish I was mute." I say under my breath, barely moving my tongue.

Papa doesn't hear me, back to his usual self. His voice is on the verge of that all too familiar binge, caught between working jaw muscles for now.

"Let us continue. We have a lot to cover, like I said before. I would prefer to not be interrupted 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 want to." Hunter says through teeth from below, with 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'm afraid to look up at him, focusing on my bare bloodless feet, my upturned hands, bluish in color, my fisherman overalls, orange, wet and shiny, willing myself to overcome the agony of the blast and stay alert.

"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."

He means both of us. 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, his eyes are directed to the seat underneath 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 says, and whatever trace of his vulnerability was left, is gone for good.

I blink, wondering if I have somehow imagined the whole thing, and promptly close my mouth. 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 and catch the words just in time before they roll off my tongue, opening and closing my mouth at Papa's stare.

"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 falls silent.

I hear him and I don't hear him at the same time. He didn't mention Canosa. Canosa was the one who found us, who dipped our

boat. They must have made a deal, she must have helped him catch me so that she can remain untouched, that must be it. She bought herself her freedom.

A pang of pain pierces me, pain that's worse than 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 questions.

"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 make mistakes, 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. Three words of the questions we asked each other when stoned out of our minds, *have you ever*. Me asking him, has he ever wanted to die. Him telling me how he'd do it, if he had to, the whole

motorcycle racing thing and crashing. I squeeze his hand back three times, to indicate my understanding.

"—and don't forget, siren hunters don't leave witnesses." My father throws, steering the lifeboat wheel, 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 to everything my father says with enthusiasm. The gleam in his eyes is feverish, akin to the one you'd see in someone ready to die and not giving a shit anymore. It makes me mad. If he doesn't care, that means he decided to make a spectacular exit. Knowing Hunter, I can only imagine what that's gonna be like. I want to scream, to grab him by the collar 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.

"Remember, Ailen." His eyes rest on me. "If you complete this job, your lover boy will stay alive." He smiles,

emotionless, his impenetrable mask of indifference back on his face, his whole body back in gear, tense and sinewy.

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 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.

I drift off into daydreaming, into memories. In my mind, I'm back in the enormous stone relic of a Bright's family bathtub. I'm a small fragile thing curled up in the middle of it, empty, pressing my face into cool polished marble, crying, feeling hot tears drip off my cheeks and trace delicate lines of sorrow across the marble pattern. I've done this a thousand times, gazing into the interlocking mosaic of crystals, the serpentine impurities of color, silver grey and sparkly on the

background of nearly perfect white, tracing them with my finger, recognizing faces, creatures, landscapes, after a while seeing them move, watching their mouths open and close, talk to me, soothe me, tell me I'll be okay. They're like old friends, always there, always ready to spread their cold fingers around my heart and hold me. I wished they would be warm, but this was better than nothing, this was marvelous. No matter what happened, I knew they'd be waiting, eager to listen to my stories, never interrupting me, patiently taking in everything and anything I say, under the eyes of the forever watchful bronze Canosa hugging the faucet above my head, the big sister to four reclining sirens.

Comfort spreads its soft blanket over my misery. Before long, I think I see a familiar pattern emerge on the white fiberglass wall of the lifeboat. I tentatively reach out and just as I touch it with my fingernail and barely trace a curve, it disappears. I'm back in the boat, yanked out of my spacing out, having to face rude reality.

And in reality the white wall is no longer white, it's overcast by evening light streaming through 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 Strait of Juan de Fuca into 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 either harbor police would want to investigate what a lifeboat is doing, floating freely along city canals, or someone would call the cops. But nobody does, and finally I feel the boat come to a halt, familiar metallic clinking of the boat masts echoing through the cloth of the hatch-lid, interrupted by a startled seagull cry.

We're back at our marina, under 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, it seems.

"All right, 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 two out. NOW." My father says impatiently.

"Sure, sure." Hunter mumbles, cracks his back, pull himself up to my level, "Ailen? You all right?"

"Yeah." I say, my tongue feels wooden, arms and legs stiff.

"NOW!" My father yells, and that makes me move.

Hunter positions himself between our two seats, flips the hatch cover open, grabs the sides of the opening and worms out

of the hole, his feet dangling down for a second and then 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 weak girl, 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 gentle lake waves, studying each other in the dark. My bare feet at present must be directly level with my father's line of vision, and I feel like there is no ground under my feet, only another layer of hidden terror, and maybe more, in the future.

I inhale 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 Fremont bridge as if trying to beat crawling cars to the other side. To my right traffic darts across Aurora Bridge, a good hundred and sixty feet over Lake Union, the world's second famous location for suicide jumpers, a beautiful sight from above, at this hour in the evening. It must be close to 8pm, just after sunset on September 10th of 2009, three days after my birthday, if my calculations are right, judging by the sky and the amount of human soul presence on the streets.

I tilt my head up. Dusk spray-paints the air in rivulets of lilac haze, seagulls squawk their hungry calls, darting around at random. The smell of fallen leaves mixes with impending

wetness threatening to gush from scattered clouds. The air is cold yet not freezing, pleasantly tasting of early fall.

I stand and glance to my right again, remembering my fall. I jumped off this bridge three days ago, into what? Into this. Into being trapped again, worse then 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 descending night, landing in the middle and falling over.

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

"Oh yeah? Really. 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 passing through me and searing me to the spot. I don't want to move, 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? Not one bit. 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.

"Excuse me, but I have to piss." He exclaims and that changes the subject. He proceeds to unzip his fly and lets out a steaming stream of urine into the lake.

"Hunter!" I bark in a loud whisper, averting my eyes. "There's people around. It's a public place, are you out of your mind? And it's gross! You're gross, eewww!"

"I don't give a damn," He says and zips his pants back up.

"Kids, you'll have plenty of time to talk later." My father's voice says from the boat, and we both turn around to listen. His head sticks out from the open hatch, sonic gun in his right hand, pointing at me. Of course. By now I'm used to this sight to the point of taking it as part of my life and not panicking anymore.

"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 evidence, 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 with the sonic gun to a couple 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 because it doesn't look suspicious.

I squint into distance. Rare yachts break up the slow drone of the freeway, and the night darkens fast. I realize my father wouldn't dare shooting Hunter here, in the open, for fear of attracting attention, still not comprehending the very idea of him doing it. It's beyond what I can understand, but right now I don't care. 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, tugging at my hand, stepping 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 familiar position, me on the front bench, Hunter on the rear one, automatically grabbing 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 rapid drizzle. Raindrops trace our faces, but neither of us makes an effort to wipe them off. With the last wave of the hand through the window, my father's face

disappears into the darkness of the lifeboat, its engine purrs to life and after a short while the whole thing lurches forward. There are no goodbyes, no last minute instructions, not even yelling. We're two puppies dropped into pond, on our own to survive, without a backwards glance, whine all we want.

We silently watch the boat maneuver out of marina and into Fremont canal, drifting at first, then picking up speed and making its way west, towards Puget Sound. Where exactly is he going? Does it matter?

"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, wanting to hit him, 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 happened to me -- to us -- from the morning of my birthday until now. I mean, I feel lost... Lost and confused." I glance up.

"And I'm sorry." I say, hearing the sound of the lifeboat engine trail off into distance and die completely. "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's words drop like stones into water. I feel like he wants to say something else too, but he doesn't, perhaps embarrassed. While I gaze at his face and past his face, through his face, rather, he unties the ropes and manages to push 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 say, breathless for a second, sensing the oncoming grip of hunger stir 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 says rudely. There is that teary look again that he's trying to control, and yet a grimace of irritation lurks somewhere underneath it too. I wonder how hard it is for him to battle his need to twist off my neck, but 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 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 fever, no, 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 liquidy 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, breathing rapidly.

"Okay." I say and freeze.

He takes both 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?" He says, and I know he's serious.

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

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

"So you mean, meant -- *have you ever* -- three words, right, for number three?" *Do you seriously wanna die? Why?!?* But I don't say it out loud, still clinging to the hope that I'm wrong.

"Yeah. That's right. That's the one. Only I changed my mind." He says.

I want to scream what I wanted to scream at him in the lifeboat, 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, 10 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 for 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, again, truly 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. One of us, at any rate. So I thought... Before it's too late. I... um..." He licks his lips again, and I can tell he's very nervous.

"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 latticework of low wooden fence that runs along the bank underneath the Fremont bridge. The bridge itself looms its blackness about thirty feet above us, groaning and rumbling each time a car passes overhead, tickling me with human soul concerto, making my chest rumble. White and red lights reflect in the butter of water and a dank smell of rotten wood enters my nostrils. Cold breeze ruffles my hair. I barely register any of this, enthralled by the idea of what Hunter said, hearing blood rush to his cheeks, 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 *possibility* of it actually happening and my eyes widen to rapid beating of my betraying heart. A myriad of memories of awkward attempts at making love while stoned stir my chilled muscles. I hiccup.

"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 oversize fisherman jacket apart, tracing the lines of my collar bones underneath,

gently, slowly; and a different type of hunger sears me from neck to knees.

I have a strong desire to faint on the spot. Still, I refuse to believe him. This can't be happening.

"Of course you want me, I'm a siren, right?" I swallow another hiccup. "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 a feeble shaking manner of a schoolgirl who's been called to the principal's office for the first time.

"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 my chin.

"I know it's hard for you to believe me, 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 it so hard to believe? Don't you? Don't you want the same?" His voice catches at the end, his head tilted unconsciously to one side, childlike and honest.

"Me?" I pass my tongue over my lips and suppress an urge to scratch my head or hug myself or dive and hide under the boat.

"You really want me, *really?*" I whisper, beginning to shake like a sick person shakes from 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 wipe, sending them up into sky in a sort of an invisible steam, as if the lid held over my feelings flew open. I tip forward and place my lips on his as an answer.

Slowly, like a man in a dream, he takes me into his arms. And then he's kissing me. Wind gusts throw raindrops under the bridge and into 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 a queer sensation of being watched.

I ignore it.

Nothing matters right now, nothing. Only this closeness.

With Hunter's help, I shed the sticky unpleasant fisherman's jacket, then pants, then my logic and sanity, all together, throwing them overboard, bobbing on the boat in the middle of the night, trying not to tear his hoodie off, lest I pull too hard, wanting to heat up on his energy, glue to it, let it tingle my skin, like a homeless would do in a shelter, hugging a heater, shaking from freezing outside for hours.

"You want to do it right here? Right now?" The last of my doubts escape when we break the kiss to take a breath, Hunter wiggling out of his pants, goosebumps springing up on his skin, 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 boat 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, and with words,

"Sorry, just a second,"

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 and with words,

"can you move out of my way for a sec?"

sit up and break the back bench as well, tearing at the remaining pieces with fervor akin to one trying to break out of the 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 like a lunatic, ogling me openly. We both grin like lunatics, naked, sitting in a boat in the middle of a lake canal, risking to be 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 of rushing blood, not wanting Hunter to get any splinters or to lose the magic of the moment, like it happened before. I'm determined for this to go all the way, suddenly horny, 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 resinous fabric with my teeth, 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 wooden slimy 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, and

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

"Fuck it." He says, and falls 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 mind it. 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 face leaves mine and tucks 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 d—"

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

"You're weird." I whisper, willing the last of my resistance 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 prevent their teenagers from doing, or hope they do, 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. Right, another sick addiction. But why can't we be addicted to it? Why is it looked down upon, as something dirty, something forbidden or to be ashamed of? Why did my father always avoid the topic as something gross and horrible, giving me strict curfew times and not liking any boy I met or told him about, warning me of adult dangers without really explaining the details, avoiding them like a plague? Why? I don't understand.

It feels like love. What's so bad in 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 so 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. And 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 room of my dead heart with life, with love, with music so divine, it has no name. Only exotic sound, outlandish in its timbre, the one 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 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.

Low moon shines on us with her watchful eye through the break in the clouds, creeping to the edge of the bridge shadow where we hide. An hour must have passed, or maybe two, but it feels like it's been only one minute.

Shivering, we're helping 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 knees to his chest. I secure the fisherman pants around my waist and sling over cold unbending jacket, then mirror his position.

We sit across each other, dazed.

"I can't believe we actually did it. It's like, something unreal." I say, trying to separate myself from the dizziness, blinking at 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, called, *making love*." Hunter reels with this smug satisfaction only a horny teenager can have after waiting for months for a special moment.

He pronounces it *makiing loooove*, in his typical singing theatrical manner, and grins, his teeth chattering.

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

"Thy miss 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 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, so I desert into facts again, my favorite crutch. "I totally will." I warn him with a shaky fist.

"Go ahead, that'll make me horny again." I can see his grin in the darkness, wide and crooked, his teeth shining white, reflecting 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, hard.

"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 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 golden bells, reverberating through the night around us. Hunter's burned soul melody envelops me in the familiar warmth, off-key but nonetheless very desirable. And maybe 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.

And 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 to live another minute, another moment, wanting to suffocate myself, to go underwater and never surface, to be

swallowed into nothing, into bliss without pain, without existence. Be rid of this mind and body that I hate so much, be rid of myself.

"Hunter?" I say.

"Huh? Hang on, I'm not ready yet..." He starts, then upon seeing my face changes his expression to somber.

"What? 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 it change? When I was ten, twelve, fifteen? When?" A wave of tears burns behind my eyes, I blink to chase it away.

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

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 towards my body. "I'm a dirty plastic bag of a person who got stuck in a puddle, torn. A plastic bag without bottom cause it fell out, without handles cause they both broke. Remember that dancing plastic bag in American Beauty? The movie?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"It's like that, only after it's been filled with too much water and stomped on in 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'm 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 gone. All gone. It's barren."

I take my hand 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, caressing water between my fingers.

"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 open ocean, you know? 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 reflects around his pupils.

"Promise me, what I will tell you right, after you hear what I 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."

"What? You can't! What about your mom..." I say.

"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 my mind, wondering how come moon shines 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 itself, first slowly, then picking up speed, tracing a full circle. That nagging feeling of being watched returns full force, and I break the kiss on a promotion that everything is about to go wrong. It turns out, I'm right, but a wee bit too late. As always, when enthralled by kissing.

"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 that we're supposed to track down, hunt 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 meant to interrupt.” Her voice jingles merrily. “It’s rather entertaining. Wet and sloppy, 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 naked 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, sitting on their butts and gripping the edges of the boat like mad. Luckily, I don't hear a single soul, not on the bridge, not on either shore. Not that anyone would venture out here past midnight anyway. Perfect timing. I flick my eyes to Hunter in a momentary panic, as if asking, *What do we do now? We haven't even discussed how we're going to catch them, 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 in September at night, don't you think? I like your hair, though, as always. Your hair looks awesome."

They giggle, Canosa falls silent first and studies me from under her long curly eyelashes, her face stern. Ligeia and Teles

continue giggling, 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 and Teles with 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, tilts her head to the side, and her wet locks roll off her bare shoulders. No doubt, a practiced movement for show.

"Shhh! Shut up, remember what Canosa said." Teles hisses into her ear, clasping the edge of the boat.

"So? What I say is none of your business, so get off me. Get your fingers off me, you bitch! You're annoying me." Ligeia says. They both remind me of two typical high school girls from a mean girl clique, or a popular one, or both. It's like I'm reliving own high school nightmare, again.

"What's up, Teles?" Hunter says, naming the siren by her first name, for the first time, I think.

"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. I turn my head to meet the one and only, my big siren sister. 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 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?"

"For an apology." She balks, like it was the most obvious thing in the world and I have had 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. Words escape me at an alarming rate.

"How dare 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 to serve your purpose, for your sick little game with my

father. I'm no more than a game piece 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, actually. 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. I wonder who she learned this from. 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 catch, I must say."

Hunter twists his whole body back to face 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 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 at the other end of the boat.

"I'm glad you liked it." Hunter says.

"Wait..." I begin, and fall quiet, unsure of what I wanted to say, afraid of putting Hunter into jeopardy somehow.

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

"What is it, girl, cat got your tongue?" 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, grabs her hand and drifts to the back of the boat, where Hunter sits and my big sister siren floats.

"Canosa, can we please eat him now? Pretty please?" Teles says, the perfect side-kick, so gullible, I want to throw up, looking at her cute chubby face, now adopted into 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 monster at the onset of her hideous hungry smile. Femme fatale as she is supposed to be.

"His soul is burned down, stupid." Canosa promptly fists Teles forehead. "Don't you remember what I told you? To keep your stupid 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.

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 not even ask Papa for sonic guns, I mean, how stupid could that be?

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 a hurry. They can't stand being close to each other, hating their torture. I'm sure I will feel the same very soon, in fact, I should be feeling it now, since me and Hunter have been together for a while. For a whole of the previous day and a whole 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, like a player watches its game pieces, trying to decide if it's time to cut one, or two, or all.

As if to confirm my premonition, making me think that death heard my thoughts and took my suggestion, darkness becomes absolute. All stars dim, replaced by three pairs of eyes shimmering around us in the waiting silence, eerie electric-white glow emanating from their bodies.

"Enough diddle daddle." Canosa proclaims, and all three sirens clasp 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 his soul, so she or another siren could kill him, it's not an easy task. And as far as I understood, a siren hunter can't simply die from the hands of a siren, if she were, for example, try to strangle him. Still, whatever it is she planned, 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, that would send Hunter into 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 time they come, it will be too late. I could attack the sirens. Three against one? I don't stand a chance here either. I could... Or I could simply do what I always wanted to do. Let go of the fear, let go of this miserable life, stay together in the face of death, until the very end. The chase will never cease, I'll never have piece, forever hunted, 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, 10 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," reading my mind, looking me deep in the eyes, taking both my hands and squeezing 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?"

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 say.

"Yeah. The first part is done, isn't it? Like I said. Perfect timing." He smiles with a finality of someone who knows death is near but refuses to give in to its terror. His hair moves in the light breeze. I can hardly make him out, seeing only flashes of teeth and shine of his hair in the glow from the sirens.

Siren 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 this bravado he's trembling like a leaf in the wind.

I study him, his arching eye brows, his face split in two, in the manner that I love so much, 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 were such close friends -- are close friends -- that's why he was the only one who got me, got my playing with death, my daring, my willingness to risk life, not caring much for it.

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

I'm ready to die.

I expect terror in me, or resistance, or something, but there is nothing. I'm empty, and the decision comes easy, like a relief after a long bumpy ride. I must be at the point of complete exhaustion, from myself, my own mood swings and constant decision doubting, the perpetual up and down, from balancing on the precipice between life and death, and from everything that's happening around me, one mad dash through murky waters of madness, from suicide, to siren, to siren hunting, all of it.

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, a few seconds of utter despair that pushed me over the edge, only now we're doing it together. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch sirens drift, 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. What are you waiting for?"

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

"Ailen Bright, I'm amazed. What's wrong with you, silly girl? You give in just like that? Without a single attempt at struggle? Without 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, dropping poison into silence.

I notice now that we're surrounded by a thick wall of fog. No, covered by a bowl of fog. Our rowboat sits underneath it. That's what they were weaving with their humming, creating an invisible pocket to the outside eyes, so they could dine on us in peace, without witnesses.

Ligeia breaks her humming, tilts her head to the sky and begins to sing. 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, several yards above, then twists in a reverse vortex and heads directly towards the boat, dropping its force onto Hunter, his eyes hazy with her song, a thin trickle of smoke streaming out of his mouth in rivulets of ribbons.

Mesmerized, I focus on his eyes, arrested by the beauty of a pause before a storm. When everything stands still, about to erupt, hanging on the edge of hesitation. And it hits me.

"She's reigniting your soul! Without looking you in the eyes! How the h—" I begin to yell, noticing with my peripheral vision Teles swimming closer to me, throwing jealous glances at Ligeia, and then feeling her fingers around my neck, cutting off my hysterical speech and my attempt to lunge at Hunter and kick him out of 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, gagging.

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 dull white. It smolders, it's coming alive again. Or so I think, gawking at it, choking and clawing my fingers over Teles', to no avail. She's surprisingly strong, despite being chubby.

"How do you like it, sister? I say it's *fair* price to pay back 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, and clamps her fingers to the point where I think my head will explode from blood held in it like in an overinflated balloon.

This is a 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 took them to get back, to make sure their torture me first, before administering their fatal blow. Astounding.

You forgot something, girls, I want to say, You forgot the fact that I'm a siren too, 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 try and kick her, but without oxygen, although still functioning, my muscles don't want to move.

At last, I cease resisting, storing 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 giggles into my ear.

All I can do is stare at immobilized Hunter, not able to make a distinction any more if it's the echo of his soul that's pouring out of his mouth, or the surrounding fog pouring in, or his actual soul has been revived and is now being devoured by Ligeia. In either case, whatever is happening to him, is making him pale, deathly pale.

I glance up, but there is nothing there except thick milky whiteness. The night is gone. The time itself is gone. We're in the middle of nowhere, about to vanish for good.

Maybe there are places of death, places that attract people to them like a magnet. Maybe this is one of them, directly under

the one hundred sixty seven feet high bridge, very convenient. This was my mother's place of death, and who knows how many people before her. Hundreds? Thousands? This is our place of death, and we're a speck of life about to be swallowed.

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

My body goes numb. I feel the last of my resistance leave me. Even my attempts at breathing stop, my diaphragm relaxes. Perhaps responding to this, something shifts in air, as if we all agree, as if death itself is happy with this outcome. Something passes between us all, me, Hunter, 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 deep 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.

Drowning in the bathtub water was not enough, I think, that's why it didn't work. How about drowning in dead waters of Styx, the river that Greeks believed connected Earth and Underworld, the great marsh of human misery on the way to

extinction? How about being dragged into the labyrinth of muddy streams, accompanied by 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 to the side and begins sliding down a whirlpool like a coin down the 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 due to overdose.

It doesn't come to claim me, however. A series of rapid events ensue in the matter of seconds, so that my confused brain barely has time to register them.

A car honks somewhere above in the fog.

Someone gasps on the shore, a human soul.

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

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

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. Boat spins one more time on inertia and eases out. Fog breaks up into dirty rags, letting in the night, until it gets blown away by light breeze completely. Velvet of the sky consumes us. Still blinded by the whiteness of the fog, I can't see in the dark what's happening, but from the shouts and struggling noises 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 at attempting to eat it.

Air pierces with girl fight calls. I was right.

"You stupid bitch!" 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, the bud of fury poking at my ribs, gingerly, eager to get out. This is my chance. Canosa is yelling and fighting both sirens, Teles hisses at her, then lashes into a long string of swear words. Light penetrates 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, clinging to his exhausted frame, 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 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 trying to convince him otherwise, simply going with it.

Is this what you call love? I mock myself, I want to turn around and slap myself in the face, hard. What kind of love is this? It's a joke. Amazing job, Ailen, simply amazing.

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

No matter what it will cost 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 angry teenage outburst to focused rage. If I will strike, I'll strike with precision this time, no more splayed efforts, overwhelming emotions, uprooted lakes or capsized boats. Not again. No. This time I'll be the siren I was meant to be, ruthless, marauding, fatal, all of this performed with a grace of an innocent girl done slightly amok. I only wish I had a matching outfit, some tight washed out jeans and a cool hoodie, with Siren Suicides written on it, in blazing silver. It's hard to be graceful in a stinking oversized orange fisherman's jacket and overalls, but it'll do. I roll over onto my all fours, dig my toes into 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 towards the boat. They're a few feet away, eyes cast down, possibly reconciled with their roles and ready to finish us as preplanned. Teles throws murderous side glances at Ligeia, Ligeia sucks on her thumb, hurt in her face. 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 thing of discipline she knows is how to hit and yell, like *that's* going to work. What it does is, it keeps them busy. None of them notices me standing up.

We seem to have drifted away from Fremont bridge closer to Aurora bridge and the Burke-Gilman trail about a hundred feet or so to the 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, acquiring a stance that signifies victory no matter what.

"I'm ready to fight, bitches, come and get me." I say, sensing 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 spits out each word through her teeth and places her hand over her left breast, cupping it.

I ignore her. Whatever her personal ache in regards to my father is at play here, I don't care. She's not able to penetrate my thick determination with bitterness like she usually does. She's pushing my typical bruise buttons, but it's not working. I'm immune, protected by focused rage, feeling it grow into a hot blanket around my head, feeling it glowing.

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 address 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 the thought and the 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 k—" She says, placing both her hands on her chest, but I interrupt her again, pressing on.

"--so she can live a long happy life, after you two perish. Just wanted to pass 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 both are 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. Oh well, I tried.

All three of them are digesting what I said.

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

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 before.

"Kill her!" Canosa suddenly explodes, pointing at me with both her index fingers, pitching into a shrilly command, "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 approaching sirens, her figure growing small 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 think it is.

"Not true. They were fighting, and I don't have three arms!" She yells, eyes wildly rolling in her sockets.

I decide to throw in one more thing.

"And Pisinoe too. She tricked her into feeding in broad daylight, right over there." I point at Burke-Gilman trail. "I tried reasoning with her, but she wanted a pet, so she got this poodle, Lamb-chop was his name. We struggled, then I grabbed her and the poodle and we dove and... It was too late, I wasn't fast enough. 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. I open

my mouth and close it. It seems like there is no need to say anything else, they got the idea.

Ligeia jumps out of the water, her graceful lithe body sparkling in the moonlight. She hisses,

"I knew it. I knew it ever since you laid eyes on him. I was stupid to let you. I should've pulled you away right there and then, I shouldn't have listened to you, I shouldn't..."

She lands square on top of Canosa's head, tackling her under and momentarily pulling her underwater, mumbling all the while a string of things that shouldn't have done, blending into Teles's pleading. They surface and cough. Canosa desperately reasons with them both, convincing them of the fact that what I'm saying is a lie, an absolute lie, that she would never imagine doing something like this to her own sisters, she would never. Their talking quickly escalates to shouting obscenities at each other, to tearing at other's hair to outright fighting.

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

Then I feel pity, a deep ache that tears at my guts, for watching them being reduced to a pack of animals, all out of 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. He's afraid of women, period, his act that of a macho bravado covering up the frail frightened boy underneath. It's sick, and it makes me gag.

The boat shakes dangerously in their wake, and a sway back and forth, struggling to keep my balance. My rage is in full bloom now, singing doubts with its hot metal rod and throwing me into action. I have perhaps seconds, while they wrangle, and I shift my attention to Hunter.

"I hope we'll never be like that -- you and me -- never turn out like them. I swear to you, I'd rather die than 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 underneath the white noise of siren's fighting cacophony. The impossible delicious sweetness of homey noises and endless comfort, fragrance of summer wrapped around beautiful whines of Vivaldi violins, promising to taste sweet. Ligeia revived him somehow, and my nightmare is starting all over again. My heart rate speeds up to incredible highs, pounding in my ears and calling my hunger upward.

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

STOP! I shout at myself. *This is exactly what they want, for you to lose control. It's what you always wanted, Papa, to provoke me into 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, as I am now. 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 about discipline, discipline is everything, remember? Well, you taught me exactly that, and I thank you for it. It's an amazing skill, to be able to suppress your pain, to hold it in check, for years, grow it, groom it, and then unleash it in its fully bloomed power.*

I shake all over, unable to stop this monologue in my head, wishing with all my heart to remember this tirade and deliver it to my father, to throw 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? For what purpose? You didn't think I'd have enough brains to figure out your play? Too bad. I think 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 weak coward, scurrying away with your

tail between your legs, barking like a hysterical dog, barking at everything and everyone, but afraid of the real fight, the real face to face confrontation. What a pity. I have a coward for a father. A bullying immature coward.

Time slows down, so does my heart. The world around me acquires a kind of liquid viscosity that can be grabbed at will, oozing its slime through fingers. I inhale and hum, moving the rowboat silently to the shore, away from the sirens who now resemble a bunch of snarling sharks fighting for a particularly tasty piece of meat in a feeding frenzy.

I hum some more.

Shrieks escalate to wails of such grief and rage that not only my spine but my whole body seems to turn to ice, getting brittle, threatening to break into a million sharp pieces. The only thing that prevents this from happening is my pulsing escalating fury. It dampens out all thought, all fear, 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 high on my excitement, humming louder.

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

At once, it recedes and we get thrown onto the bank, boat's hull hitting grass with a dull thud, wooden plank groaning under impact, the whole thing threatening to fall apart but miraculously staying together. Whereas I braved the 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, splattering flat on the bottom of the boat.

Hunter hits his head on the gullet, moans, opens his eyes and stares at me, looking both dead and alive, as if he's seen me for the first time in his life. I'm terrified about what will happen next, staring back at him and not breathing, sensing the boat slowly sliding underneath me 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, my attempt at singing out the first soul I encountered, only to open my eyes and realize it was Hunter, Hunter all along, him grinning his crooked smile, with that familiar dimple in his right cheek, his hair bunched up, raindrops on his eyelashes, his blue eyes. And me, gaping at him, thunderstruck by magnificent melody of his soul. And, 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 to start 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 grow large, to the size of two black pools, glistening in the night.

"Ailen?" He croaks. "Is that you? What's that? A new fashion or something, orange overalls?" He talks on autopilot and finally his eyes clear up. "What the hell happened?" His chest heaves up and down and he glances about.

I listen, with all my being, and there it is, a 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 roll to whites, and he promptly faints. Seems like talking and lifting himself was enough strain on his body.

Moonlight paints the night with white glow, fading, yielding to early dawn. Boat drifted a few yards and I hum to guide it back to the shore. The siren fight echo blares all over the lake and it feels like it's about to explode. Add to that

continued car honking from 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. Siren's hysterical battle chorus, their boom of otherworldly rage ceases, giving way to one frustrated cry, perhaps at their realization that we're both gone. I twist to 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 powerful strides.

"Shit!" I say.

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

Waves lick the shore, splashing over 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, dirty white hair sticking up this way and that, dressed on orange from head to toe, grinning like a maniac.

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 dirt, the bow's hull scrapes against rocks. Great. I quickly glance back and see sirens cry a few paces behind me, their dismay sounding rotten, desperate, like a week-old stew reeking of spoiled meet, too slimy to swallow. They

must have banded together after all, and are about to gang up on me, I'm sure. I pay them no heed, trusting that in the right moment my siren instinct will kick in, my harbored fury will spill and drown them.

I hop out of the boat into shallow water and pull it up so 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 the trap, this time without the sound of a fancy Pershing yacht engines, or the low growling of the trawler, or any other mechanical noise. It's simple oar splashing, urgent. 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 doubt about it.

I turn to look. There, passing under the Fremont bridge, about five hundred feet away, on the hazy line between water and sky, his dark lithe shapes bends and straightens, bends and straightens again, oars fly up, dip down. An elegant silhouette pierces the dawn sky as it glides along Fremont canal, slowly nearing the spot where sirens fought not too long ago, now on their way to strangle me. No more luxurious engines or fancy big

boy toys. He looks pathetic. The pin from sudden terror bomb drops in my stomach, as usual in his presence, but I ignore it.

You can explode all you want, I tell it. 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.

Strangely, it falls quiet, hushed by that same compulsion curtain that descended over my eyes not too long ago. I let it fall all the way, eager for a fight, wanting to fight, wanting to go kill someone, anyone, just for the thrill of it. I'm a siren, after all, a devious femme fatale that makes people do things with her voice, am I not? I suppose I need to practice this skill, it's the only way to get better, right? Right. Onward. It feels good to give in.

"Good morning, how did you sleep?" I say into distance. "Nice ride. What, you've got no money left for a yacht? Pity."

I smile, simultaneously allowing myself to feel what exactly is it that I need right now, that I want. I was never able to do this in the past, always focusing on other peoples 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 hours away, serving them in the hopes of being given positive attention. The only person who didn't take advantage of this trait of mine was Hunter. 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 known existence to me, to serve. Not anymore.

"How about you serve me this time?" I say, watching bulging water near me at alarming speed, their arms and legs moving about in eager swimming strokes 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, my father including, who cares to be afraid anymore? It doesn't make any sense, I'm beyond fear now. 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 making sure I get Hunter out of trouble.

Something is missing, something important to make me feel confident one hundred percent. I rack my brain, search 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. Gather my mind. Rest. 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 the fact that I didn't instinctively call him Papa, like I always do.

All it takes for a full cup of water to spill is a drop. One single drop. A drop too many, a sound too much. The wail of the cop car does it. I drain into an empty 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. To never give up trying. I'm one of those annoying types that don'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.

This instant, right now, for the first time in my sixteen years of life I'm glad we're related, and I intend to use this willfulness to my advantage.

No more than a few seconds have passed since I launched onto my train of thought, watching it flash through my mind in an express fashion. It's over, gone, and I feel better.

My hands still under Hunter's back, I tense and pull him into a sitting position at the same time 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 throw myself at them, taking two giant steps through waist-high water and stopping one inch from their faces.

I utter a yowl so loud that it blows away their hair in a gust of wind, splatters their faces with my saliva.

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

I wait for them to talk, glaring. They're visibly taken aback. Canosa seems to be hiding underwater, sending out Ligeia and Teles 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.

"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, the way wind falls and birds

stop chirping before a tornado hits. 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 thinking I'd rather have him deaf and alive than dead.

"SHUT UUUUUUUUUP!"

The effect my scream produces is beyond my wildest expectations.

Chapter 11. Troll Avenue

I think the best way to describe my cry is to liken it to the 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 of generating it. In other words, I could kill myself with it, could I? 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 sound energy pouring out of my throat and flying out into the world with the explosion of a supersonic bullet. My ears ring, my eyes water, my gullet is on fire. My arms and legs go numb so that I almost collapse, grabbing 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, burrow deep into my spine, send a rod of ice from the base of my skull to the tips of my toes and back.

This happens on the inside.

On the outside, a sharp near-whistle issues from my mouth on the long vowel 'uuuu', sounding more like 'aaaa' at the highest register of the shrillest soprano you ever heard. It

ends abruptly on a 'p'. The consonant arrests the scream's flow, accenting its acoustic reverberation. In the matter of seconds, the whole thing grows from a high-pitched yelp to a spiking squall, ululating multiple echoes across the perimeter of about one thousand feet around the spot where I stand, judging by the noise it emits.

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 and broken in one spot, not in a spattering detonating manner of a blast, but in a way a strong wind would rattle wind chimes, the sound effect blown up to enormous proportions and dying as quickly as it was born. 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 4 in the morning.

Sirens get the full blow. Their faces are inches from my open mouth. 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, their buoyancy null. They grab onto Canosa's arms like two little girls, holding on to their mother when faced with a crazy bum in the street. I guess, if I inhale enough air, I can move objects with sheer force of airstream.

"And don't you dare getting close to him, ever again, 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 something that might be called a satisfied bully smile.

"Father?" I make an effort to 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 horizon, where a rowboat slides slowly on inertia, because my father has dropped the oars and is now observing 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, hundred feet from the nearby parking lot, the famous suicide jumpers' landing spot. By that time I'll be gone, but 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 across about a hundred feet, towards the boat that is floating in the middle of the ship canal, in between two bridges and directly across me. I

watch my father cover his ears and I know he heard me. But a new feeling rises to grin at me its ugly smirk. A terrible fear.

I'm scared. Scared of the power I have. Petrified, even. *Again.* It's like each time I let myself to 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 can, you just can't, you're not good enough. Who do you think you are to be happy despite all 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, covers me with guilt and forbids me to come out, or else. So I sit there, peeking out in fear, flooded with broken possibilities and crying silently, breathlessly, reminiscing on what I have, this power in my voice; thinking how I used it, carelessly, not knowing what I can do. Now that I do know, suddenly I'm afraid again it won't work on command, I won't be able to summon it unless 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 a task at hand, to stop ruminating about it, my whole body shivering, my throat parched.

I pull Hunter out of the boat and onto the ground, away from water, cinching him under his armpits, taking several steps backwards up the grassy part of the bank, digging my heels into slimy dirt and sliding in it, finally making 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 water for almost a day and a half. I gently lay him down on his side, arms folded, knees bent. His eyes are closed, his wet hair is plastered to his forehead, his lips have a bluish tint to them.

"Hunter!" I shake his shoulder. "Hunter, are you ok? 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 lick the hull of the boat and hit the shore, smoothing out my footprints in the ground. The rowboat moves hesitantly, its hull hisses through grass and then it bobs on the water.

I lift my head. Dawn pencils air in 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, 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 arrived at the parking lot. I hear door slamming and shouting. It's time to move. I survey the water and see no sign of my father. He and his rowboat vanished.

I squat next to Hunter, facing him, slip my arms under his, grunt and attempt to 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 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 happened to me? I picked up a whole Ducati motorcycle at the Pike Place market and threw it into the street. It must have weighed close to four hundred pounds. And Hunter is only, what, one hundred eighty, ninety? The only logical explanation to my exertion is my recent yelling. 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, stubbornly, with blind determination.

I take a deep breath and try again, hoist him up all the way this time, take a few tentative steps. My legs shake, knees threaten to bend and send us both flying forward. Having blown off my energy on shouting that stupid good morning greeting, I need a fresh soul, to gain back my strength.

If you look at the map and try to understand what path exactly lay ahead of me, you will see Lake Union on the right narrowing down into Fremont canal, that neck between them crossed by two spans of bridges, Fremont on the left and Aurora on the right. The north shore is where Burke-Gilman trail runs along the water, jutting out under the Aurora bridge like a bottom lip, curving outward. I stand on the very tip of its curve, and I can't see those approaching from behind the bend, neither can they see me. Yet I can hear them. And I can be observed perfectly well from either bridge. It looks like

currently there are red and blue lights flashing on both of them.

The parking lot is situated about 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 cops emerge, judging by the sound of their souls and the clicking of their guns or keys or handcuffs, something metallic that they're carrying. They 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 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 cow... Is he okay? Are you guys all right?" He asks, his large girly eyes round from the obvious shock of the fact that a fragile girl is able to hold a teenage boy on her shoulder. Or maybe he doesn't like my clothing style. Either way, his face looks comical, the freckles, the soft big parted lips, 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, right hand on the brake, left resting on top of his left knee, which is bent because his left foot is on the raised pedal, mid-turn. His right leg is on the ground. His roundish belly heaves with heavy breaths. He must be close to forty, trying to bike himself back to how he looked back in his twenties, I'd imagine.

The bicycle is fancy, bright blue, shining with color like only new bikes do, so is his gear. I can smell its synthetic newness, mixed with 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 towards us, and I gather whatever energy I have left to shout.

"FREEZE!" They do. "DON'T MOVE FOR 1 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 tall and skinny, his legs open wide, mid-stride, hand in a pocket pulling out something, soul chirping and spicy. Another one stout, sporting rectangular glasses on the bridge of his nose, a very serious and concentrated look on his face, dark, almost purple 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 towards the lake. I will get off the trail then and continue on foot along the road that runs up the hill under the bridge's belly and butts into the spot where the bridge juts out of the ground, ending in one of Seattle's 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 an upper torso of a troll, digging his way out of the ground and towering above you about eighteen feet, his huge nose the size of your butt, long hair covering one eye, his left hand clutching an actual Volkswagen Beetle, the old one, and his right hand's fingers splayed and groping at the ground, mid-pull. He's made primarily of concrete and has replaced with his presence a previous dumping ground and a place for drug dealers to exchange their wares.

Nonetheless, it's still occasionally occupied by homeless people. They like to roll away from public eye into sleep behind the troll's broad back, and it's here that I intend to hide for a while, to lay Hunter down, rest, and snag a soul or two, to get my energy level 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 clothes would be good too. I'm sure his jeans and sweatshirt would look better on me than this clowny orange suit I'm in.

I walk with the pace of a snail, my knees weak and my hold jittery, pause, let Hunter slide down and heave him on another shoulder, staying in the shadow, on the side of the trail, so that a few oncoming bikers don't see me and sail past. I freeze a couple early dog walkers on my way to the Troll avenue, where

I dart across the road, as fast as my load will allow me, and march on the sidewalk, concentrating on my feet. Left, right, left, right.

Several cars whiz by, not a single one stops. Good. By the time their drivers figure out what they saw, they probably think it was their imagination.

It takes me a good twenty minutes to reach the troll, the hardest part of my track being the very end of it, with 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, when I finally 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 with 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 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, and propping him into a sitting position, sitting next to him, both our backs against the cool cement back of the statue.

"We made it." I say. "I didn't think we would, you know?"

I close my eyes and hear two things.

The blare of a police siren, which either means that that asshole biker must have called the cops upon coming to his senses, or maybe that other cops showed up and found their fellow colleagues entranced and immobile. Whatever the case, they seem to be closing in. I decide I will hide out and maybe they won't see me and drive past. Maybe—

Another soul enters my perimeter of hearing. Many did before that, in cars, on foot, all scurrying to their destinations in the early morning chill, none alerting me to all 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, muttering bubbling through hair or a scarf, a cloth that prevents me from hearing clearly 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 a calm of an overgrown garden, like the fast-forwarded tape of plants growing, 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.

So what? I think, too tired to life myself and take a better look, too tired to try and remember where I heard it before. There will be more people coming on either side, as the morning grows late. You're too weak to attack, rest a bit, ignore it, it's nothing.

But it's not nothing. I have a sense of a bad déjà vu. The soul, a he, stops, as if looking around, and suddenly 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 and 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 from 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 dirty hair, dirty face, clad in an oversized dirty orange fisherman's suit, 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 Pike Place market and was on my way to dive into Puget Sound.

"I don't believe my eyes. There we meet again, little birdie, so we do. And where are you going this time, pray? Huh? 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, swallowing letters.

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. Where survival rules.

Hunter moans to my left, deciding to wake up at the wrong moment. This is not how I imagined our reconciliation to look like, 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 out my arm, 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 towards me even more, shuffling forward on his butt and raising a cloud of cement dust. With his other hand he clamps on my ankles.

"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 face is within a foot of mine, and I can't utter a sound, paralyzed by his stink and brashness. My inability to believe in the fact that I'm attractive kicks in at the wrong moment.

He lifts himself up and reaches into the opening of my jacket, towards my naked chest. I watch this with shock and reel with such revulsion and hatred that, 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 arm-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 the fuck 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, trembling, splayed on the sandy ground ten feet in front of me, in the dark 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 across his face, his pig-eyes unblinking under huge matted brows. He mutters something that vaguely sounds like please-please-please non-stop.

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 face, his shaggy face opens into a toothless mouth, as if in wonder.

I begin to sing.

"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 on 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. In a way 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 in in 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 mushroom man's face, smoothes out his wrinkles. He radiates innocent delight not unlike he probably experienced decades ago if not more, from his mother's kisses, from his mother singing him a lullaby, if she ever did.

"Listen and love..." I chant.

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. He looks happy. Another few gulps and he's done for.

"Give me your life

"End in my song

"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 perma-freezes 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, after all.

There is an annoying noise, and it's disturbing my glow. Irritated, I come out of my tunnel vision to a police siren 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. Not being afraid anymore, feeling 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 propping 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. A 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 whale is upon me now, sending ululating echoes and then promptly dying. Someone finally shuts it off.

"Thank God," I mutter, looking up. 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. Pavement crunches under the stopping tires of a cop car. The brake comes up, the door slams, 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 Mexican 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 after ogling my naked chest? I want to say, but still keep quiet, wondering what he'll do.

"Are you hurt?" He says, taking another cautious step.

I stand 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 back to me. "Can you tell me your name?"

Another cop comes out of the car, slam door, approaches. Before I can compose myself, he emerges into the dark, takes out his flashlight and shines it into my face, so I can't quite make out his features.

"Whoa, it's smoky in here. It doesn't smell like smoke, though, does it?" He intones in low baritone and waves 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 recent feeding, wanting more, deciding on whom I want to strike first, or maybe both at once. I can do that, can't I? I ate dozens at once on Lake union, no doubt scaring the shit out of my father.

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 uniform a tad too tight, a sea lion type of a mustache gracing his face, 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 beer bottles. The sound is so intense and rich, that I'm instantly ravenous.

I cast my eyes down to escape the brightness, contemplating to play 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?"

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. Freezing 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.

"So you can talk, that's good. I'm afraid we'll have to take you in, to establish your identity." He says nervously and carefully steps around me, into the shadow, checking out the space. Morning arrives and dimness escapes from under the bridge into a general muted greyness.

His eyes never leave me and 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 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 authority and control hate towards this poor man, who, I'm sure, only means me good and wants to help me 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.

"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 thirty sixth. We have a possible dead body. I repeat, backup needed."

He stands. "Miss—"

"Don't touch him. Don't you dare touching 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, and I spread my arms acting 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, thinking about grabbing Hunter and making it for a run

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.

"Do you need any help, officer?" One of them says.

"No, we're fine, thank you."

I turn and glare at the guy who spoke up and at his stupid greyhound dog, wondering if I want to kill all of them, him, his dog, the old lady with her mouth open, grocery bags in her hand, or do I simply stun them and kill the cops only. Whatever devilish nature has been sleeping under the covers of my innocence, has been for sure brought forward by the siren in me, because against all logic I play along, a faint smile on my lips.

"They're on their way." Miguel delivers, emerging from behind the troll.

"Good. One more time, can you please tell me your full legal name?" Scott says, his flashlight lowered, a tired expression on his face, and 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 ok. 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 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--"

And 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 worst fear buttons in people, because his pupils widen and his professional reflex kicks in.

"FREEZE!" He promptly jumps up and pulls out his gun, pointing it at me. Miguel does the same. They shake visibly, and

I both loathe and admire myself. 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.

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 greyhound. The man and the dog 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 Seattle motorcycle drill team, the typical backup squad to be called to a crime scene. They respond first because of their mobility. Their engine hum buzzes around my head like a swarm of bees.

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 latest neighborhood news where the robbing of 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 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 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 joint in.

Another minute, and they're all gone. The sudden silence is overpowering. I wait some more and zip up my jacket, suddenly aware of the fact that Hunter will 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 ok? 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 as they used to as he pulls himself up and stands, head hanging.

"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 fucking awesome." He says, as closed off as I felt he would be. "I see you had breakfast already." He throws in, nodding in the direction of 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 it's his spot." I leave the arm touching part out, embarrassed. "Anyway, I was hungry and..." I decide to try and save my 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, did 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 problemo." A trickle of familiar theatrical undertone creeps into his voice, and it makes me happy.

"Let's get the fuck 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 me, his face full of sadness, and 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 realize the futility of our attempts at an escape. 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, weather we can bear them or not.

I can't take a single breath, can't close my mouth. My eyes fill with tears, heart pounds. I gag, want to take in some air, but can't. I try to rip myself open, to let this feeling out. Good luck on that. I want to turn back the time, to reverse everything that's been done. Words jam in my mouth, I open and close it like a beached fish.

"Come on, Ailen. Let's do it, before somebody else helps us. I'd rather die on my own terms." Hunter says with terrible finality.

I cough, hoping to find my voice again. It works, feebly, giving away my emotions. "What do you mean, your own terms?" I say 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."

Chapter 13. Interstate 5

So we stand, motionless, peering into each other for what seems like an eternity. I try to pass a gallery of images in my head, remembering the day we met at the lake, spinning through all those hours spent together, to find a 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 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. My head is blank. 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 this." I mutter, at a loss of saying anything else.

"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 against all hope to preserve some kind of normalcy between us and knowing that it won't happen.

"We've talked about this before, 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 say quietly.

"When you jumped off the bridge -- I hope you take it the right way -- I was jealous. Jealous of your, how to call it. It was a brave thing to, it took serious guts."

"What? Are you out of your mind? Suicide is not about bravery." I squeeze his hands hard, glaring.

"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 years now, since mom got cancer, and then 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, "so 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 his, I was too 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 of 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, 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 towards 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 is there to 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.

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 who got thrown a bone for the first time in days. The echo of Hunter's burning soul envelops me, melts me, smoldering. The ugly need to twist his neck and make off with his head nabs at the corners of my existence, and I jolt in horror.

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 strange excitement. It's something I have control over. It's something I can do on my own without being directed. It's my life and I can take it if I want to. 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?

I grimace madly, like a lunatic who has no understanding of the consequences of such thinking. But I don't care. Because Hunter grins a smile of a boy who doesn't care either, 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 or a picnic.

"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? Cause I think we got ourselves a new toy." Hunter pulls me by the hand around the troll statue. We step out on the road.

Two police motorcycles are parked on it with their lights still flashing, both keys left in 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 a George Jetson's sky mobile about to take off into the future. And *what* future it will be. 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.

"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's voice says 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 gas and making tires squeal.

I step behind the back to the its rear tire if fixed between my legs, roll up the sleeves, wedge my hands underneath both sides of the trunk, grab pipes that hold it and pull them apart, hard, grunting in 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 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 that looks like a continuation of his multiple clothes. I unzip it, hold my breath so 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 felt it might be 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 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 there."

Beside myself with joy, I unzip the fisherman jacket, toss it 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 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, tearing two thick strips off the pants bottoms with my teeth. In the end both pant 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, baby. 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. Nothing at all. Just emptiness, 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 pipes that run around the perimeter of the saddlebags.

"Hey! HEY!" The man is running towards us.

"DON'T MOVE!" I shout. He stops mid-step.

There is a momentary pocket of silence, 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 glowing sunrays tear at the clouds.

Hunter turns the key in ignition, pushes the start button, 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 a 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-quickenning. Fast. We're a white drop of speed, first on empty neighborhood

streets, then against slow moving highway traffic, a sea of grey 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. Ours is a wheeled escape tittering and tottering on the edge of existence, in danger of tilting at the weakest gush of wind.

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. I say to myself.

We dart along Highway 99, across Aurora Bridge and into Seattle downtown that busts with life while the rest of the town is still sleeping. The city is swarmed with morning souls, carrying their bodies in cars to and fro, sipping their first cups of coffee, puffing the air with delight after each gulp.

The roads are dry. Sky turns pink. Ripe morning enters the air. Wind rips at my face, ruptures my bubble of fear, guilt, and shame; my regret, my disappointment, my hatred and my hope. My ears hum with 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 siren meadow in Seward park, except backwards.

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 a 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.

Police siren gets off in the back.

Bweep! Bweep! BWEEP!

"We've got to lose him!" I yell over the wind howl.

"I hear him!" Hunter yells back.

I turn my head to the right, marveling at giant cranes a couple hundred yards away, at the waterfront. When I was little, I thought they were dinosaurs, their huge feet in the water, their necks stuck in the cloudy sky. I believed they were our own Seattle version of Loch Ness monsters. I'd nod to them whenever we drove past them, and I'd imagine them nodding back. I nod to them now, on a whim, like I'm nodding to my childhood, sending it one last goodbye.

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 two Seattle stadiums on our left, first

Qwest Field, then Safeco. By now both of my feet burn from 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. Runs the red light, turns left into the road that leads to another onramp, rides up the hill, swerves along the loop and into relatively empty Interstate five to surprised looks from north-crawling traffic and honking from the cars heading south. Another cop comes ablaze 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 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 back.

"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, 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 angry shouts and beeping, blaring sirens behind us. In other words, cop morning fun.

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, another certain knowledge appears 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 will scream! I want to try something!" I shout. There is no indication that he heard me.

There is no time to waste on waiting. I tilt my head at the sky and open into a guttural animal wail, a wild a cappella. It starts out soft, then gradually grows in volume. I hike it up a pitch, higher, *higher*, overpowering the cacophony of traffic punctured by 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 ones, their lot connected by covalent bonds, or, in simpler words, 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, transparent. I want you to move, move faster, move at fast as you can and create hot steam.

They hear. The atoms. A many great quantity 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 like rolling thunder.

Never mind the tunnel of dry air that parts 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.

Air in my lungs is running out and I badly need another breath but am afraid to break the flow. I continue bellowing, lose myself in the sound, touching sky's turquoise bell. I'm its clapper that produces this percussion, this divine concoction of resonation, this...

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 buzzing heat.

"Whatever it is you're doing, it's awesome! Keep doing it!" He shouts at me briefly turning back his head.

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.

Traffic thins out. We keep riding fast, 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 make police officers turn or something of this sort, by shouting a command at them, but I'm worried about Hunter being hit by cold air and losing his grip on the ride. It's so smooth, so thrilling, he's obviously in the zone.

Time stretches, or maybe it shrinks, I can't tell. City buildings gave way to low-strung malls and houses skittered along the highway this way and that. I hear the mechanical wail of the sirens 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, whizzes ahead, skids across two lanes to the right and veers into closest exit, a cloud of smoke dissipating behind us. The engine emits 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 my left knee scrape the asphalt, happy that I'm wearing tough fisherman overalls and not flimsy jeans.

"Woohoo! We popped a wheelie!" He yells in a kind of 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 mud and stop turning. Hunter kills the engine.

At the same time, I break my wail. Warm pocket of air slowly disintegrates. We both hop off at the same time and Hunter drops the bike on the 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, taking leaves out of my hair and brushing it.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Hunter answers, not looking at me, thinking.

"Wait, where exactly are we?" I ask.

"I think somewhere in Puyallup. In the glorious suburbia."

"And why did we stop here?"

"We're almost out of gas." Hunter dog-shakes his head.

"Oh. Shit. That's just great." I say, surveying out 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, warm air? That was fucking awesome." His dirty face splits in a wide grin, his appearance muddy and shaken but happy, like that of a toddler after a bout of some particularly good mischief. He wipes his palms on 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 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? Cops will be here any minute." I say.

His face smiles but I sense the mask underneath is empty as if all life has been sucked out of it. Ashen.

"Just drop the whole gas thing. Listen. I have an idea. No pun intended -- and I fully respect your decision in this matter, okay -- but I say, drowning is overrated."

"Not like I can drown NOW." I mutter.

"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, temporary, 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.

Air grows thin. Sleepy suburban houses stir with life, souls tinkle on from slumber like pieces of orchestra beginning its session of tuning before a big concert.

"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 from the intersection. "A Streetfighter. Baby, we're in luck." That explains his stopping point. He must have noticed something important while I missed it completely.

I follow his gaze. The house is a big typical craftsman style thing, squatting low over a rising manicured lawn, walls painted an unidentifiable shade of not really beige, not really sage, and not really grey, but something in the middle. Its size suggests a huge family, and 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 in the after morning-rush hour, with not a single soul out. I hear a garage door open and close and a soft engine of the car roll into

distance, a few blocks away. Most people by now must have left and are bouncing on their way to work or school. 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, making it remind me of a bee.

"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 the 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 home, and this is stealing." I add, but he doesn't hear me.

"Man, I always wanted to ride one." Comes from below, 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 Harley's saddlebags.

"It has passenger pegs!" I exclaim and place my feet on top, curling my toes around for a better grip and opening them into horizontal position.

Nobody runs out of the house, nobody stops us. It seems fortune is on your side when your end goal is death. 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.

Here we both gasp.

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. 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 make it appear rough yet peaceful at the same time, 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. And then silence. Overpowering silence without the usual racket of civilization.

"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.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our performance, the one and only show. Against the backdrop of the 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 a 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.

Blue shimmer of atmosphere rushes past us, rolling blankets of fog creeping 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 gigantic hairy heads dipped in fire. Dump smell of fallen leaves mixes with the crispness of fall, fresh and chilly on touch. Obnoxious mechanical blaring is on our tail, together with helicopter blades whooping above. 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.

"There you are

"Without me you cry

"I surround you..."

I press my arms tighter around Hunter's waist.

"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 moisture to my design and keeping it warm at the same time, wondering if one day I can master a cloud castle and realizing, there won't be such a thing as one day, today it will be over.

"I adore you

"See me or I fly..."

All other noises hush. I sing more.

Eerie whiteness spreads out in thin tentacles of mist ahead of us, to our sides, behind us. I create a dense cover of haze underneath which we speed like a speeding shark under a layer of sea foam, lifting its wake as it moves, barely visible to anyone who happens to look down.

I listen for police. Their annoying ululating has diminished. Hunter gives me a thumbs up with his left hand before gripping back the clutch handle.

I tap him on the shoulder in response and keep signing.

"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 grin toothless smiles along the ribbon of the 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 a forest.

My left ear picks up Hunter's rapid heartbeat and breathing, with my right I concentrate on listening into the distance behind. 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 sort of a roof, but it's really just three circular beams lying across two more beams. 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 says MT. RAINIER NATIONAL PARK on it. Up ahead are three wooden cabins with windows and a flag in the middle of the road. In fact, the road parts in two around the middle cabin. Then I see it's no cabins. It must be entrance station buildings where you're supposed to stop and buy a park pass.

"We've lost them. The cops." I say getting off the bike and stretching out my legs.

"No, you lost them. Thank you." He turns and takes my face into his hands, 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, void on its left, which must be opening into a sleepy valley shrouded under a layer of dew, I imagine. I can't see it from here, but it's what I've seen on postcards and pictures online, because my father never took us here, his distaste of anything dirty stretching into a policy of no hiking except a light stroll through the city, and I had no friends with cars to take me here, and Hunter's old truck wouldn't make it this far.

"I've never been here before." I say. "What's it called? I mean, what part of Mount Rainier are we going up?"

"Paradise." Hunter says.

"Seriously? It's called, *Paradise*?" I'm astounded at the pun.

"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, and all I can say is, "Can't you guess?", not able to explain the turmoil of this sudden emotional explosion.

"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, looking out curiously at us as if with a couple dozen sunny eyes.

"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 next words come out suppressed as if they never meant to be heard by anyone.

"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 lay 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 fake hope. It only pushed back what I knew would happen all along. She doesn't even recognize me anymore, asks my name every day. So what's the point, tell me, what is the *fucking* point to continue 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 and took his breath.

"At least you have a dad."

That slaps me in return, hard. A surge of hate fills my throat.

"You call *that* a dad?" I shake yank my hand out of his to curl it into a fist. "That control freak, that sicko woman-hater, asshole, pervert, that..." I catch my breath. "That..."

Tears spill 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 sky reflected in two blue pools, his irises, pulsing with care. It fills me with brilliant pain that's borderline pleasure, and hunger rears its ugly head, straining to hear Hunter's burning soul, the off-key shuffling of slippers on the floor, the clanking dishes being set out on the table to dinner, the chirping of the birds, all against the background of Vivaldi's summer season. There but a smidge of it that I catch, and it does its intended job.

It takes an enormous amount of will not to lunge at him and tear him apart in one go. My chest lights on fire and threatens to burn me. I hug myself fiercely, hoping it would help.

"Let's just do it." I whisper through tight lips, hoping against all hope that by sheer force of my yelling I will

explode and finally stop existing, images of Hunter smashing on the rocks into a million pieces polluting my head.

"You ok?" 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."

On impulse, I lean in and he's kissing me. Desperate to feel most 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 feel my hair, I ball up the collar of his clammy shirt into fists, watch clouds drift and reveal 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 would sound like, flying into abyss, cascading down the mountain rocks, crashing through pines, and deciding that I will see Hunter through his fall, to make sure he dies 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 tip 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. Me, an ugly duckling, beautiful? 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 and we whiz up the path, past the entrance and ignoring the shouts of the ranger who stick his head out of 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 most vibrant and happy. Sky-dome aglow with September morning, I gobble it up with my eyes. Cool wind full of autumn smells, I suck it through my nose. Thick brush dotted with deer souls, I absorb their distant tinkle with my ears. Mountain air, I taste it on my tongue like a nectar of vastness and freedom akin to standing on a peak's top, hugging rough rock, yelling to the world, *look at me, I made it!* And, above all, Hunter's burning soul, although smoldering, it's still a sweet penultimate note to finish it all off.

I begin to count minutes.

Seven minutes pass by, thirteen minutes left to the top, if Hunter's prediction of twenty minutes is right. Engine revving makes air vibrate and scares off a spotted owl. It's the only mechanical noise to disturb early afternoon stillness, because of course what idiot would escape police up the mountain and not down. They must be searching for us in another place.

Not a single car ahead of us or behind us, not for miles out. A racer's dream. An empty circuit to die for. We're like a wild card entry, competing for Grand Prix. The final obstacle to win is to get airborne, two teenagers ecstatic to fly before they realize their wings don't work.

Each turn makes my heart stop, and each turn it's not *it* yet. Not quite. We ride higher still, twisting together with the road.

"Right there!" Hunter yells and points across the valley. I dare to my right and then down and wish I didn't. We're riding on the top edge of a narrow valley with a river at its very bottom, and he points to a cliff across. So our drop won't be spectacularly 14,000 feet high like I thought, but only maybe five to six hundred feet. Still, it's breath-catching. A layer of fog palms tops of trees, ever so gently, torn into patches of needlework by the sun. I dare not breathe, so as not to blow off whatever is left of it. Because it's pretty, reminiscent of my mother's songs that suddenly pop into my head.

Six minutes left.

We take a sharp right turn together with the road. Douglas firs and red cedars and hemlocks recede, give 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 rapidly dropping air temperature. I consider singing to warm him up and then decide there is no need, and he probably won't like the idea, liking the chill. I just know it somehow.

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. Become one solid being instead of two, if only for one minute.

I listen to low thumping of his heart and imagine riding inside his blood vessels at full speed, bathing hot and red and scalding like boiling tea after a walk in a winter afternoon. Straight to his heart that's still beating. A living heart, pumping real blood. Mine is dead, pumping sea water.

Four minutes left.

Two more turns, maybe three. Pieces of crumbled rock fly from under the bike's wheels and skitter down left side 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 glistens and sparkles. It must be close to 2 or 3pm in the afternoon. The sky has cleared off clouds. The sun shines down the valley, rendering it grey, covered with a layer of milky thick mist, just like I saw in the pictures. No, better. Much better. Where the fog ends, everything else starts. The forest, in a multitude of greens, from jade to emerald to malachite to almost lilac.

One minute.

I nuzzle my face left and right and all over Hunter's back, trying to absorb as much of him as I can. His smell, the shape of his ribs curving out from the delicate spine to smooth torso sides, tense with apprehension. As if in answer, Hunter guns the

throttle. 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 in a 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 in 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 a split between over and under the horizon, light blue and dark blue. Blue is my favorite color, so what's the difference what shade it is, right? Or if the line happens to be jagged instead of straight, who cares? Or if the road is perfectly leveled or

tilts a little due to a drunken road worker's oversight. None of it matters. Only its path, from one reality into another. There, where it bends, we do not.

Three. Two. One.

Ahead of us is an observation point. The road keeps going beyond it, up and turning to the left, but this seems to be the perfect spot. It must be the place Hunter was talking about. Only there is a two foot high stone fence along the edge and 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 we're heading. Perhaps a car crashed into it, or it crumbled?

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. There is not a single car parked in the little parking here. The parking lot on top of the cliff is empty. Just our luck. My last thought is, surprisingly, a fact. I think about the ranger who must be driving up now to catch us for not paying the entrance fee. Then my thoughts stop.

"We're on!" Hunter yells, confirming.

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 up and then over us, dropping behind with a creaking thud as we keep rolling forward.

Our hearts beat in unison and threaten to overpower
motorcycle buzz. 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 forward by sheer dare,
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, because at the same time, on impulse, I reach out to him. Joined, we spread our arms like wings before the wind tears off our madness feathers. 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 dust. Or maybe it's smoke, I can't tell. On inertia, we arch away from the slope just enough to avoid the trees and propel down into rocky valley. Wind flaps our shirts. Hunter falls face first, I hover over him. One second passes. Another second, and I get hit by a fully blown panic attack. What the hell are we doing? Air grows thin and freezes my guts. Wind rumbles loudly, tears at me with its fingers. 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, idea, everything! But it's too late to turn back. Too late to do anything at this point. Another five seconds or so

and we'll be mush at best, 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 coma.

No! Stop! Stop it! Turn back! You just did the worst thing in your miserable siren life! I want to scream at myself, feeling the words pulse in my head like hot irons. *Fuck this! Stop it! Do something! NOW!*

Hunter's fingers clench mine with the force of a corpse in its final death grip, bone-crunching and icy. We tear through milky fog, our clothes instantly damp, faces teary, eyeballs chilled to a hurting point. The forest is near, or, it's rather spotty clumps of trees, pines lined up as spikes, ready to puncture. I briefly think about trying to create a pocket of air or something of the sort to cushion our fall, when the direction of the wind shifts. We hit a dense air mass at the wrong angle and spiral out of control. Mind ruthlessly tossed aside, my body takes over and lets my siren survival instinct kick in.

I scream.

My desperation passes through vocal cords with force and exits it at way over one hundred decibels, qualifying to be the loudest scream ever uttered, as if anyone cares. A battle cry, a

death growl, a rebel yell, all combined into one frightening holler. We're two seconds away from hitting the ground, about to drill into it like two high-speed screwdrivers. 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 to myself 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. No way. 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 furry hands slap my face and cover me in a shower of needles. We tumble over and spiral. I lose 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 wet ground, softened by 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, in a way a falling stone sends circular waves when thrown into a lake. Solid ground temporarily turns into a pudding made of dirt. A shockwave travels through my spine from collision. Its force seems to break my every bone, stretch my every muscle to a snapping point. Still, I don't release my arms, pressing them tighter. It's my death grip. 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. 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? How exactly is this supposed to work? I'm confused and stumped, continuing to roll down the slope towards 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 I could to understand

what my abilities are, my strengths, my weaknesses, how to use them. What I'm good at, what I'm terrible at. Wouldn't it be great, to have something like that, siren or not? Because no matter where I turn, I can't get any clear answers from anyone, constantly running, left to my own devices to find out by trial and error. And this must be the biggest error I ever made.

My head hits a rock and for a second complete darkness surrounds me. I refuse to let go and continue tumbling through the murk, through the underbrush, 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 is hugging his bent legs, my entire body is flattened by the fall and surrounds him on all sides, or so I imagine it 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. Rolling stops. Silence falls down in a hushed hammer, and I'm afraid to move, afraid to engage my senses to find out the horror of what happened.

Is he alive? Is he dead?

After a while I allow myself to decide that we must be lying on our left side, me cradling Hunter's body in an embrace, his back pressed into my stomach, his head on the ground, my

left arm under his left arm, my left hand under his cheek, my face stuffed into his hair, smelling it. It's warm. His head, his back, they're warm. Does this mean, he survived, or is this residual temperature and he'll start cooling down soon?

Deafened, I can't quite pick up the echo of his burning soul, nor his breathing, nor the beating of his heart, and I don't know if I'm grateful for it or mad. My fingers are sticky and wet, some kind of liquid is spilled on them. His blood? I'm afraid to open my eyes to look, afraid to untangle.

I try to lie on my back and wince. There seems to be rock, rock, and more rock. Stones crunch under mw. Cold whiff of a rapidly moving mountain river fills my nostrils. Nature itself seems to be unperturbed by our fall, hurrying on its way. Despite my pain, I smile and take a deep inhale, noting the aroma of moss, passing fish, and pine or fir or some other evergreen tree. Its overwhelming, this bouquet, a hint of which I loved to sniff on Hunter's skin, never having the courage to ask him if he used some kind of a special cologne or it's his natural scent.

Unable to wait any longer, I open my eyes.

A huge Douglas fir towers over us in a protective giant gesture. It's solitary, standing all alone, a long way apart from the cluster of firs yards away on either side. Which tells me that if we moved another ten feet, we would have crashed into

its trunk, and that would not have looked pretty. A silver line of a 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 be able to move at all. My senses are strung out and the only thing I pick up is faint warmth blowing on my left hand. Is it the wind? Is it Hunter's breathing? His chest is not rising, nor is it falling. I'm afraid to feel his face, to confirm this fact one way or another.

This is bad, very bad. This is the moment of truth.

Guilt crashes me. I'm alive. How could I be alive if Hunter is dead? Before I descend into the dark tunnel of self-loathing, I think I hear something through the diminishing ringing in my ears. I stop breathing and tense. There it is again. Or is it? Did I imagine it? Can it be? A flood of elation pulls into instant happiness, into a state of profound joy, unlike anything I felt before.

I can hear the echo of Hunter's soul! Then 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. It's hysterical, my laughter. All fear gets released into a series of guttural jerky sounds. They punch their boisterous roll in my head, around my head. I drown in it, happy.

"We didn't die." I say. "We're alive, Hunter. Did you hear me? We're alive."

He breathes in short wheeze gasps and doesn't answer me.

"Are you all right?" I ask again.

Silence is my answer.

I can't move my arms, nor wiggle my fingers. I'm frozen in the position we landed, my left hand splayed close Hunter's face, right on his knees. Nothing works. I can't pinpoint the exact moment when my body stopped melting from internal fire of pain and succumbed to the opposite of freezing numbness. I try to wiggle my toes or move my legs. No luck, I don't feel them at all. They rather appear to be made of ice. Everything is cold and vacant. Thinking back to Hunter's attempt to cut out my vocal cords on my father's trawler, I understand that it will take my body a while to repair itself, hoping that it will actually do it. That my skin and my muscles will knit together. Amazing how I didn't think about this *before* our fall. But then, of course, there was no need. I planned to die.

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 to burst. Amazingly, before that the plan

was to make him stop loving me so he could stop turning into a fully fledged siren hunter, so his soul would stop burning and he would return to being a normal teenager. He would forget me and find himself a normal girl, and I would convince Canosa and the girls to leave him alone, both of them. Him and my father. Because I was planning to fully revive my father's soul, but not kill him. Splendid. I think I just screwed up in all of these departments.

My thoughts get rudely interrupted.

Loud thunder cracks in the near distance, sounding precisely like an explosion, and 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? How do you feel? I can hear you breathing. Can you say something, anything, please? Just make some noise to let me know you hear me? Or nod, or move, to let me know that you heard me?" My voice catches, throat sore from screaming, my nose tickles with his hair yet I can't tilt my head away. My neck muscles refuse to listen. More blood seeps into my left sleeve.

"Hunter, please, answer me? Can you talk?" I want to shake him, but I can't. Instead, he shakes in a violent fit and is still.

I give up the attempt to try and make him talk. "Hey, it's okay. We're alive, and that's all that matters. It was an idiotic thing to do. To jump. I'm here, I'm with you. It'll be okay." I whisper.

No response, only shallow wheezing.

I don't know if I want to know in what shape he is, clinging to hope, waiting, afraid to faint from anticipation and exhaustion.

Hunter takes a deep breath and produces a barely audible "Fuck."

"What did you say? You can talk! Oh, God. Oh God, you can talk. You're alive you're alive you're alive. You didn't die. 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. EVER. Forget it, it's not our turn to die yet, 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 say.

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, ate their way in towards the bones, softened cartilage and glued broken all pieces together, hardening them with their saliva into one rigid mass. I form what must be called a dense connective tissue a la femme fatale. *Stand aside, creeps, I'll be reborn here any second*, pops into my head. This sounds like something Hunter would say.

I wish. I wish he would talk more. I want to hear his voice again. Anything at all.

I rest, happy to feel his warmth in my embrace, feeling 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 do 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.

Oh no. No. No-no-no. Don't panic, don't panic, I think. *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 now I can move my arms, if I decided to try. Carefully, afraid to hurt Hunter, and in what takes an eternity, inch by inch, I pull my left arm from under him,

letting him lie on the rocks. After that is done, I try to prop myself up on my left elbow and promptly collapse back onto the crushed rock, hitting my head on the same stone I hit it before, forgetting it's there and seeing stars.

I close my eyes. Too soon, need to rest more.

I lose sense of time completely and fluctuate between the agony of everything itching inside of me and suppressing the mad urge to scratch it.

I hear souls and snap my eyes open. A hundred feet away or so, a couple 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 back and forth, 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 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. How many deer souls would that equal, I wonder?

As if reading my thoughts, they sprint and are gone. Darn.

The sun is as bright as it was during our fall, and appears to be in the same position, at around 3 in the afternoon. Well, maybe closer to 4. I don't believe we were unconscious for more than 24 hours, so not much time must have passed. I wonder if

the ranger decided to pursue us or didn't bother? If anyone saw us sail off? If 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, as far as I can see, and we're both in plain view. Although the gigantic Douglas fir might be a convenient cover-up, shielding us from people looking 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 present themselves in one mile radius. I can't seem to be able to reach beyond that point, still weak.

I try lifting myself again. My arm shakes like crazy, rocks painfully dig into my elbow. Beads of cold perspiration break out on my forehead and my gills puff up, inflated. Until now, I have forgotten about their existence and reaching river water to get moisture into my system dominates my every other 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 a 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 looks so 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'm caked in mud as well. It dried 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, feet in socks with sneakers gone, torn off by our crash. His right arm is limp, 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! Oww..." He wails and gradually falls 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 due to another shock of pain, his bright blue irises the only two things of clean color, as lovely as the sky. Then he closes them, whimpering. I decide if I look at his face any longer, I will start sobbing myself, so I get myself 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 being 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, though. 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.

"No-no-no-no-no. Don't you die on me now!"

I pry open his eyelids, to reveal whites. His eyes 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. I can't help myself and begin humming. My tears transform into sound. Soft, velvety, it drips into a song, creates a stream of calming water, drop by drop, puddle by puddle.

"Look up

"The sky is grey

"Can you see me

"Tell me..."

I take his cold hands into mine, lower 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, eyelids fall into 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 this. What else is there to do except to try and bring him back? He's not fully gone yet. I hear faint breathing, slow beating of his heart like a flickering light. Now it's on, now it's off. Each flicker a hope of repetition.

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 trees, to grass.
It seems like they sway in sorrow together with me, it seems the
ground itself is moving, wailing.

"Memories

"Have left me now

"I want to know..."

My voice rises and soon it turns into a powerful shriek
that bounces off ravine cliffs, for all to hear. Something
shifts in the air, far away, moves closer, with lightning speed,
as if all it was waiting for was to detect my location, tuning
in to my vocal exertions.

Instantly, I know who it is. Canosa. She's not alone. And
she's on her way to find me.

Chapter 16. Nisqually River

My song dies, kicked out of me by Canosa's soon to be 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. Produce with my pain. For what? I don't remember. I blink, tear myself out of choral daze and glance down. Hunter. He's injured. He died! Did he? An otherworldly melody, piercing in its beauty, touches my every nerve and sends me into a bliss of recognition. I have revived him, after all. Revived his soul. It's back to its splendor of homey sounds, the comfort of shuffling slippers on the parquet floor, the banging of the pots in the kitchen, late summer wind filled with bird whistles, and laughter. Hearty laughter. I want to give in to it, to bask in it like you would bask in the sun, soaking up its warmth. But I know I can't. I won't. I shouldn'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 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, so ridiculous that at times I'm having a hard time believing it's actually happening. Then I promptly remember my goal and suppress normal questions, 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 fucking hate you. You asshole. 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 am I always trying to lash out and bite like I'm five? Did I get stuck at some early developmental level and then failed to develop from there? Why do I always resort to this kind of talking and thinking, like I'm a little girl who is

upset and stomps her foot, like a spoiled brat, demanding her candy?

I shake my head to deliver myself back.

"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 have time to do it. If I don't say it now, I won't have the courage to try and 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'm leaving. And... I don't want you to love me anymore." I say quietly, swallowing hard, deciding to stop hiding behind double-meanings and childish mood swings, deciding to just tell him as it is and see what happens, refusing to resort to the same old tirade I gave him before. Which was stupid, pathetic, retarded. I hold myself in place and keep my mouth shut, afraid to come unglued.

He props himself up on his right elbow, 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 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, blank.

"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 five hundred fucking feet off this cliff, almost smashed to pieces, am probably crippled now. Thanks to my siren girlfriend who decided to save me. Did I ask you to? Nope. Then why the fuck are you the one crying? I'm supposed to be crying! I have every fucking right to come apart." He's glaring at me, his bloodied face on angry 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 in parting with life, you interrupted, and they are overwhelmed with tremendous devastation. Most internalize this new pain, never showing it. But a few are capable to throw 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 promised to help him and then broken my promise. I know how this feels, I've been there, and I hate myself once again.

"...one minute I'm flying through the air, another I'm waking 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 this angry face of a dog that protects a bone, complete with snarling and bared teeth.

I recoil, tearing my hand away and wanting to slap myself for slipping guard. On some 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 minutes left, 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. Shit, 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, grinds 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 on dying together, no? Then why 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, covering his eyes as if to ward off an oncoming headache.

"I... I only wanted to... But, Hunter! I couldn't not to. 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 sobs openly, screwing 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 it goes down the drain."

Then, after a pause,

"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 and then his, listening for any sign of life. Hunter falls silent, his eyes widen.

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, the road above us, listening to the forest life, to the faint gurgle of the river. I detect a distant motor of a car. A couple cars. A mouse here, a bird there, and deer. Three of them, grazing on the grass a couple hundred feet away. Their souls rustle softly in the wind. Pine needles crunch under their hooves.

Pine needles fall.

Pine needles fall on my head. I brush them out of my hair, look up and meet two eyes. Two eyes of Canosa who descends down gigantic Douglas fir boughs, using them as ladder steps, climbing head down with a hiss, Ligeia and Teles behind her. Their long hair hangs down in three 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 stillness in the air akin to preserved vacuumed sealed off *nothingness* itself. I know that as soon as I make a move, even attempt to take a breath, it will erupt.

World folds into a narrow tunnel and at the opposite end of it I see Canosa, about ten feet away from me, level. She glows with hunger, ageless. Perhaps a thousand souls sunk into her, perhaps a hundred thousand. I don't move, staring, immobile, glued to the ground. That white mane over an eerie face, those large milky eyes. How I get lost in them. How their chill makes me shrink. How I think it's impossible for me to get any colder, yet I do. I crust all over with a layer of frost, layer of 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 at the fact that I'm not fully healed yet, my every movement sending spasms down my spine. I ignore them, putting on the mask of indifference.

"I *told* you to stay away. Do you understand the word *away*? Do you need me to spell it for you? Cause I can." It hardly sounds threatening, but it's the best I can under the circumstances.

Without breaking the 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 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 grues on the prowl.

"Girls, you got your reward. Have fun." Canosa says.

And I'm born. Of air. This is my opening point, my move. A note rises to my throat, forces my lips open.

I scream a war cry. It's so loud that trees seem to sway in response, the mountain itself seems seem to pulse to my rhythm, ground appears to shift 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, 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 five ten feet from the ground, propels herself forward with inhuman speed and lands on my back. She attempts to stuff my gills full of fur needles. I anticipated the trick so I crane my neck as far back as it would 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 fly 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 kick 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 towards the tree, to where Hunter stirs, shaking.

Canosa stares me down, no doubt calculating her next move.

This is 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 like I've never seen before, animalistic and primitive, through and through, to the very marrow of her bones. A huntress at her best. Her nostrils flare, 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. 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 in a perfect circus move. They both look up at me, waiting. I know they're here 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'm not wanting to be part of this anymore. After this morning I think 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, only a week old? Barely? 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, stand attempt 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 evolve around you or you pitiful desires. Why would I expect any more from a motherless child."

This stings. I cringe, willing myself not to react.

"I came here to thank you." She continues. "Thank you for the job well done. Now, if you could please step aside and let us finish it, I would be delighted." She points towards Hunter and assumes a stance of a boxer, legs spread far apart for balance, arms bend 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 cause they had nothing else to do? Or to stand by in case something terribly awful should happen? Like, 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 fucking God! Everyone? Run and hide." I finish.

Ligeia and Teles hiss at me.

"Nice speech. Hold it, girls." Canosa pushes both Ligeia and Teles back who 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 towards 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

while my bones are still hardening, my muscles still knitting together, my skin still closing, and Hunter is 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, picking up on his joke. "I think we broke world-record, surviving a five hundred feet fall. 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 Crossby." 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, emanate hatred, and then it's gone, washed over by his 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.

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 a 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 a 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, and 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, and 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'd do, how I'd react. She's bound to win.

I decide that my only defense is my voice and concentrate on inhaling a lung-full 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 kick my heel into her crotch and twist my arms to try and grab a fistful of her hair, but it's so smooth and slippery that my fingers keep sliding. She keeps twisting her head left and right to avoid me. The best I can do is grope her head, hoping eventually 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, choking. Finally, Teles stuffs my face into crumbled rock and holds me hostage, sitting on top of my back, her left knee pressed against my neck, her right pinning my twisted arms to my back. 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 ground.

"Hold still!" She yells.

I can't answer and I wish myself deaf so I can't hear what's happening, but I hear every bit of it.

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, to suck on his guts, to devour him whole, bones and sinew and hair. He cries in pain then falls silent. She must

have propped open his eyes. First tendrils of fog reach my peripheral vision, air temperature drops ten degrees.

Ligeia begins to sing.

"You said we'll split him in half this time! Don't you dare eating 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 a 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 jump up, 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, in the back of it, leftover morals and a sense of right are nagging at me, wanting me to stop, but I rudely brush them aside. There is only a singular need left, to kill. I have three obstacles on 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 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 it in her mouth, in her 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, hides the Douglas fir, rolls over us and reaches the river in a giant bleached tongue. I expect Canosa to jump at me out of the haze any second, to tear me apart, but she's disappeared. There is no time to wonder where she went and why. I have minutes left, before Hunter's soul

takes a hike in Ligeia's chest. On impulse, I decide to try my idea of blowing myself up with my voice, except on Teles. Maybe it will work on her, and that 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, my body refusing to act like it's whole after a five hundred feet tumble several hours ago.

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 my range limits, approaching upper register of the highest female voice possible, a painfully shrill soprano. If a sonic gun can cause 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 reach into the very depths of my throat, force my pitch higher still, 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 measured its speed in numbers it would have to reach beyond seven hundred sixty one 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 managed to kick me off herself, 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 burst into a million droplets. I get instantly wet like from a sudden gush of rain. Water drips off my hair, runs down my cheeks, a poor imitation for true 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, reliving the episode while looking at my upturned palms, afraid to lick my lips, thinking that somehow that would be licking off a piece of Teles. A shudder of disgust overruns me and I dog-shake my head. I wipe my face with a sleeve until it's almost dry. It hits me that I really did it, willed myself to do it. Delirious, oblivious to memory or understanding of where am I and what I need to do next, 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, I feel divine. I lean over and roll onto my fours, ignoring jaggedy rock edges cutting into my palms and my knees. I lift my head and focus on the next target, like a patient predator sizing up the distance to its prey, calmly calculating best route to approach, most vulnerable stop to bite into. Knowing that victory is on my side.

The best part of believing in yourself is having others see it. I don't know how this works. Is it my facial expression? My pose? My demeanor that somehow travels across air with a certain veil of recognition that clouds the vision of those who happen to glance at me? No clue. I only know that it works, and that both parties participating in this ethereal exchange know exactly where it's coming from, what it means, and what position they're supposed to take after the event has transpired. I wonder if this is what animals feel when they meet for the first time and hold each other's gaze, mentally deciding if they pass, fight, or yield without protest.

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, she saw Teles explode. In fact, she's doused in her remains, silver drops falling off her chin down on Hunter. Their shapes

appear in two gray clumps amidst receding fog. Receding, because she stopped her 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 and lunge for her, covering fifteen feet between us in one powerful leap, astounded at my body functioning as new, expecting it to falter any second due to my sonic cry extortion.

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 in my hold, 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 familiar crescendo. The nightmare repeats. She pops. I get thrown off her by the force of explosion, drenched to bones and shivering from exhaustion, yet in a way it fuels me, drives 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.* I tell myself, standing and looking around. *Canosa, wherever you are, your squalid presence is my next target for elimination.*

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 stomach. My skin is glued to my soggy sticky sweatshirt. My legs chafe against the plastic lining of the cut-off fisherman capris. I wipe my brow as best I can and search for Hunter. A mere hop away, his body is curled up in sediment mud, his hands over his ears, 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 demur me into my usual doubt.

I refuse to waver. Nothing has the desired effect, not her white mane, nor her devilish sneer. None of those things change the fact that for once I'm not afraid, and we both feel it.

"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 a flight of a bird, her hair acts as white feathery wings of an albatross; she sails over me in an incredibly beautiful jump and lands next to Hunter, rolling him on his back and smacking her foot into his chest. He groans. His breath rises in a mushroom of a steam into cold air before she chokes him into silence.

I arrest the urge to lurch at her and take a breath to talk. My throat is ablaze from so much screaming. Tired from the game of 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 the fact that it happened, that she's stronger, older, 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. It'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 to our taking, Ailen Bright, you and me alone. Let's go fry some big fish, together. Sounds 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 immediately think that maybe this is her intention, to make me shift my focus, make me vulnerable, to 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 proved to grow up into something else, forever stubborn, not giving in to his growing violence. Nerves of steel. I liked to watch your spirit grow, from the confines of my bronze self, forever hugging the faucet, waiting. Waiting for the perfect moment."

"Why did you wait until I turned 16?" 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, she simply dies. You sing to one too old, 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 that didn't *quite* turn out. Pity. I made a lot of those mistakes when I was younger. Way too many. And then..." She pauses dramatically, pointing her finger at me. "...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! And then 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 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 "bye, and "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 emotions goes out my sanity's 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, then confusion, then anger, dismay, childish helplessness, and finally elation. I have power and I know it.

Above all, I have my voice.

I can sing.

"You heard nothing yet." I say quietly.

Her eyebrows fly up in surprise, a hint of fear flashes through her features. It's obviously not the answer she expected.

Here time stops its flow. The rest happens very fast, although to me it rolls out frame by frame, in slow motion, in a myriad of stills, each taking up a tenth of a second or less.

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. 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 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, to the core of her tempo, a siren DNA of sorts.

This is the ultimate girl fight, the one that will set your teeth on edge and send you running, I think, yowling my discord.

From the side we must be looking like two mad women screaming their heads off at each other without words. Only one of them is about to lose, and one of is about to win. That would be me, *me*, looking like a homeless runaway dipped in rain and mud and madness. Don't be deceived by my looks, see what's inside. Hear me. Witness my voice spill over my rims in a visible wave of destruction.

My earthshattering cry continues to grow in volume and ferocity. It travels outward, splatters needles from the Douglas fur above us, from the furs in the foggy yonder. It proceeds to uproot young trees from the ground. Another beat, and it lifts Canosa off her feet and throws her into the air. Her limbs flit and twist, her hair resembles a flapping sail of a disoriented boat. She's a captain lost, her navigational skills in tatters. Another octave higher and the leaden sky itself is out of place, a foreboding glaucous mass, quivering to my command. I'm a conductor. I unify all organic matter around me, set its tempo, tell it when to beat and how fast. I shape the sound of the life's ensemble, for miles and miles, thickening moisture into heavy clouds, too heavy to hang in the air, needing to fall.

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 over my head.

A deafening tearing noise enters the stage, mixes with a creaky groan. The gigantic Douglas fur in the shadow of which we ended our fall, leans dangerously and then falls a few feet in front of me to an 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 of the auditory destruction I produced.

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? Wouldn't I have been wet all over from her bursting? The rest I don't have the will to think, because a single most important thought blots out everything else.

"Hunter?" I say, but nothing comes out, my vocal cords merely produce a hiss. I close my mouth and swallow.

Beneath heavy rain patter, silence is absolute. I'm afraid of it, it's somehow wrong. I have created a wasteland in a roughly one mile radius, having lifted rocks out of place and then caused them to drop when I stopped screaming. There is nothing around me except dirt. I'm the peg in the center, proud and still, soaked in the rain, terrified of 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 in age and girth, covered in a the 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 then cuts open my torso in one swift movement. If I had a soul, it'd fall out into this barren rocky landscape, warm, writhing, pulsing, unaware of its housing being severed by the stupidity of the owner. I'm forlorn. 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. I'm torn apart, quartered, ground into a nothing. Dismembered, I rock back and forth in a daze of a drunkard who realizes there is no ground under her feet, only air, and I'm about to fall into abyss of my own folly. There will be no branch to grab, to arrest my descent, no helping hand to reach out to, only emptiness. 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. "NO-NO-NO-NO-NO!"

Chapter 18. 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, the only one I want to hear, when my auditory perception detects a shift in the pattern of constant river gurgling. I hear something. I hear an 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 a good fifty feet from the fallen fir tree. I stumble, fall, pick myself up, 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 I'm right. Stones give way to gravel, gravel gives

way to dirt, dirt moves, a hand emerges and grabs on to me for dear life.

"Hunter!" I shriek.

I clear his face from debris, cupping brown sludge and smearing handfuls of it on my pants, until his pale skin is relatively clean. Rain does the rest, making the whole thing look like one of those photo stands with cut out ovals for a face, and Hunter appears to be peeking through one, surrounded by dull greyish-brown grit. Except he's not standing but lying flat on the ground. He coughs and opens his eyes, bright blue by contrast to all this dirt. He coughs and 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, exhaling in relief and dunking in my head, drinking melted glacier water, not minding it being murky, savoring its sweetness, breathing it through my cracked gills, washing my face. Icy mountain water chills me properly. I stumble out, sliding on mossy pebbles, precious liquid caught in my palms, carried carefully over to Hunter and trickled 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 long 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 out of a grave, compete with soiled clothes and a ridge of fresh earth surrounding his curled up body. 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, bulging out his eyes. 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. His eyes rotate in their sockets to and fro, struggling to find an object to settle on.

"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, rather 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 dumb parrot. "How about now?" I yell into his ear, denying what he told me, not wanting to listen to it, not wanting to understand what it means. He doesn't cringe at my voice, which confirms the fact 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 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 the meaning of this slur.

Strength drains from me. The feeling of dread returns, brought on by the horrible mistake I made. I can't revert it no matter what I do. It's like Hunter's mother and her cancer, it must be how he felt. Hopeless, not wanting to believe what has 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 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, but slowly this time, allowing him to lip-read me.

He nods, wipes hair off his forehead leaving a dirty streak, and props himself up on his healthy arm. I help him sit up. We stare at each other, and into each other.

Rain patter turns into a gushing stream, heavy, washing our faces, washing 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, hear them make teeny plopping sounds, follow them turn into circular waves that are barely visible and momentarily gone, only to be replaced by new ones, converge one over another, disappear, appear, the dance of inanimate life.

I raise my eyes. Hunter looks at me without any expression, blank, ashen. 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 dry as bone. Rain cries for me, it drips down my face, soaks my tattered sweatshirt, seeps into the ground.

"Oh God. What did I do. What did I do." I'm 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.

"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 tall it life." He sighs, visibly exhausted by the effort.

I open my mouth. He shakes his head. I close it, biting on my tongue, hard, so that it hurts. Hunter continues.

"We were supposed to exit life, *spectacularly*, once and for all. I thought falling down 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, take his hand and study his palm, bend his fingers and inspect 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 Crosby, nice to meet you." He shifts from taking to nearly yelling, which sounds scarier still, simply due to the fact that he fails to pronounce the words clearly, and they sound like a broken string of vowels and consonants glued together.

"A siren hunter that 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, pop, pop, pop! 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 angry agony 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 ancient 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 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. Air turns dark and impatient.

Hunter starts to shiver. I keep forgetting that he has to be warm. 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 the water, but no words come out. I wait. He averts his eyes, looks into darkening distance, not seeming to see anything at all, his gaze empty.

"It hurts, you know, not being able to hear you." He finally says in such a small voice, as if his whole body shrunk. "I love listening to your voice. Loved." 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. I don't dare.

"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 maybe it will make him feel better, and 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. Now is time to let go, yet I can't make myself 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 and 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, his breathing ragged.

"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 by my incessant misery, liquid seeps out of the ground, pools into puddles, puddles overflow, form 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, watch with horror surrounding mud turn 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 onto 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. With Canosa's pain, with the pain of the sirens. It soaks it up, the brown mess of life that stinks, that's hard to face, shoved in the backs of our minds in hopes that it will vanish.

Not a chance to forget me, it seems to say, bubbling around obnoxiously, spitting in my face, tugging at my clothes. Smell me, it continues, I'm nice and rotten now, would you like a taste? Here. BAM! How about a panic attack. Don't like it? Fine. How about a disorder, let's say, an eating binge. Or would you prefer alcoholism? That will work. Drug addiction. Drugs are my favorite. Still no good? Okay, try domestic violence, women abuse, child abuse, passive-aggressive behavior in public. For the topping we serve serial killing, spawned in the early years of childhood, requiring years and years of maturation in the farthest corners of your soul. No preservatives, please, so as not to spoil the process. Uncork at your own risk. Don't pull with your teeth, the bottle might break. Don't brandish it around, it might explode.

I shake my head, feeling like I'm going mad.

"SHUT UP!" My voice echoes across the entire valley in a volley of repetitions.

Hunter shouts at me something, pointing into the distance, then back at me.

I can't hear him, floating, absorbed in my delirious state that I fail to categorize, giving in to whatever it is, tired of fighting.

Clouds give way to clear lavender sky. Mount Rainier looms its white splendor over everything. I watch rapid fluid dart down its slope at maybe fifty miles per hour. Loud rumble fills the air, announcing melted snow mixed with soil and other forest debris. It sounds almost like a musical mudflow, if you can call it that, with me directing its performance. Except at this point I'm not doing anything anymore, I shifted something and set it in motion with my wailing, the glorious vocalist of erosion, the lead singer of an avalanche, the soloist of destruction and devastation. 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, like that of a storm in middle of the ocean with added creaking and cracking of tree limbs, 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 lap at each other. Several yards away dunking in and out of water, Hunter clutches to the 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 him, when a distinct rhythmical plopping enters the field of my 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, lithe, abandoned. It's empty, at least I hope it is, I can't discern a human soul in it. It must be someone's boat from a campground or something, because where else would an empty boat come from? Perfect. The least I can do it guide it here and let it be Hunter's ride, in case he decides he still wants to live. It's better than having him hang off the 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 in view of this prospect, I float, close my eyes and concentrate on humming, my artistic daze of sorts, if you will, composing music out of water, mud, and moisture.

Five minutes go by.

I open my eyes. A boat appears in the distance. The *distance* at this point is really two dark mountain ridges on either side of the dark horizon sketching about a thousand feet across the siren-made muddy lake that used to be a valley not too long ago. Night is approaching fast. The boat is 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 more.

Hunter doesn't even look at me. I don't blame him. There is nothing to look at, a cold undead girl submerged to her neck in thick brown soup.

You're a monster, I think, remember that. Won't you ever forget your place. Admit it and move on.

Another minute goes by. The boat is now about fifty feet away, and I see Hunter noticed it too. It looks empty. Two oars trail on each sides, their handles sticking out of the rusty oarlocks, screeching. Its hull was painted bright blue, one day, because now it faded into an unidentifiable shade of ultramarine, bordering on indigo in rolling darkness. I close my eyes once more, willing it to move, tugging at it with my voice,

wanting it to come close. It bobs on the waves, its weight disproportionate with the shape and size of its wooden body, submerged too deep 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, so 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.

"You never cease to surprise me with your... methods, Ailen. Nonetheless, excellent job. Very good. Two sirens gone. Canosa damaged. I'm pleased with you, very pleased, indeed."

My mouth hangs open and I can't utter a sound.

Chapter 19. Cascade Range

This is my nightmare. I gape at it coming alive from dreamland to reality, as sharp as a doctor's pinch, a needle inserted carelessly into my vein, to administer the anesthetic. It works, I feel numb all over. More than numb, I feel like I'm chiseled from a mountain rock that miraculously doesn't sink. Because somehow I'm still floating, taking in every detail of our encounter in a series of snapshots. My father's open forehead, his grey hair carefully combed back. His stern round eyes peeling me apart. His ever-present classy boating outfit, complete with a fancy maroon waterproof jacket and brand-new khaki pants. I can tell by the smell. I want to stifle my ability to detect finest aromas, because the second I sense a whiff of his signature cologne, I want to gag.

"Out of all boats, I had to pick the one with you. Seems like there is no escape." I whisper, every word lost on my tongue and 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 *that* far from 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? Aren't you happy to hear it? Where is that smile, show your Papa. Please." He looks at me with a new expression in his face, the one that I don't recognize. Half awe, half fascination, and perhaps a hint of jealousy mixed with fear. All hiding under the mask of fake parental love. Forget gagging, I want to outright vomit.

He leans out of the boat and I have a 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 siren's hands. It's just stupid.

"Will you accept my apology for abandoning you two?" My father says, and 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 grey hair moves in the evening breeze, lips form 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, takes out two resin gloves, the kind that fisherman use for fetching their catch out of the water. Thick and orange, smelling of new rubber, 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. I bite my tongue before I say, *He's just tired, is all*. It will make father suspicious and I better keep quiet.

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, he talked 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 and then staring through me, into nothing.

"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 is going, and I'm eternally grateful, planning to up the game to keep him in this blissful state. That means I have to go with them. Do I need to, really?

"Ailen? You coming?" My father stretches out his gloved hand, speaking in a jovial tone of some summer picnic departure.

I wait for a second, still uncertain. Did I finally earn his approval? Can people change? It takes a while, but it happens. Does it? Is it possible that he feels remorse, or guilt, or dare I think what I thought before, dare I imagine there is love left for me? There is truly something good inside him, crouching, hiding, waiting for me to pull it out? I wanted to revive his soul fully, is this perhaps another chance? Years of childish yearning are hard to erase, close to impossible, as I happen to know now.

I fasten my eyes onto his bleached gaze. His pupils widen, two dark pools into 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, two

orbs full of protein liquid, anatomically speaking. 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 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 think, and 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, between two benches, on the boat's floor. My greasy feet splatter mud in all directions and I watch with horror how 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 lifting 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 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, how shall we call it, forceful flooding."

"Sure, I'll do it." I nod, overtaken by his attention. An alarm shouts its thousand bells in my mind, but my heart covers it with a blanket of hope, hushing it. All I wish for is for him to hold my hand, to give me a hug, to somehow express warmth towards me.

It's my trap and my curse, this elusive happiness. I'm buried alive in my desire. I'm inside a coffin of imagined joy, six feet under my father's scrutiny. Doesn't matter how loud I scream, not a single living soul will hear me. Despite it, I clutch to the silky rope of this promise, the promise of his love, elusive as it is. With an indescribable accuracy, I can feel it pulsing. Distant, 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 giving a care in the world, for if there is even a one percent chance that I'm right, the reward will thwart my pain and polish me with its new shiny lacquer.

So I hum and hum and pass hours along the way to the campground that resembles a ghostly peninsula in the night, completely empty, devoid of any campers, sitting smack in the middle of the mudslide, swollen with tree trunks, silt, dirt, and even snowmelt.

"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 has malfunctioned somewhere along my efforts to fill the valley with water. My uber-organized father, nonplussed, turns on his super bright flashlight. I help Hunter limp along, eager to enter comfortable confines of Maserati Quattroporte, caked in dirt, flashing its muddy tail lights at the insistent button pushing of my father, answering him in a punctured beep-beep fashion. Surprised that we're not asked to get cleaned up, we both file into the back of the car and sink into 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, 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, looks to me less about driving along a road and more about wading through a dark tunnel towards some unattainable light at the end. Light and life and normalcy, the typical hustle and bustle of traffic, human souls concerto, the bright neon lights, the honks, the cigarette smell at gas stations, the bitter acrid taste of gasoline in the air. It doesn't feel like reality, more like a dream that burst its colorful audacity into my head, dazzling me with life. Does this stuff even exist? Do people really live it? Do they do through life until suddenly they are no more, keeping themselves busy to the very end so they don't have to think about the misery of their existence and then, not knowing what hit them, pass on, forever unaware?

My journey home is paved with anguish. Four - or is it 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 glaucous ghost from the past. It turns my skin into a flock of marching goosepimples. Instantly, I can't breathe, knowing that I'll die right here, in this place

where I grew up, where I was born. Why? I can't tell. Just a premonition.

We arrive dead in the 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, because apparently my glowing skin can freak people out, neighbors especially.

I take the blanket and nod, moving on autopilot. I open the door, throw the blanket over my head, shuffle around the car, help Hunter out, ignore father's hushed urging to be fast and quiet and discreet lest we might 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. Drowned, in other words, or died of broken ribs and punctured lungs. 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 unexplained death of Missis Elliott and her poodle Lamb-chop, and you've got a morbid gossip party.

I make my legs move, drag them up the steps to my house that, with its lights turned off, resembles a huge funerary casket, shut doors its nails, expected lack of oxygen inside my own choice. This feels strange, weird, like a movie about me, playing in reverse, making me return to the very beginning full circle.

*No more running for you, Ailen Bright. I think. And where?
Where would you go?*

Hunter breathes rapidly in front of me, taking each step with great care, moving slowly, moaning, his damp hoodie brushing my face as I nearly stumble into it. My father is behind me. I'm caught in the middle. Having endured Hunter's soul melody throughout the three hour long ride, I don't know where else 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 Fremont Troll, and that was an eternity ago.

I glance to the side, to Mr. Thompson's dark garden. I could dash into bushes, could wrench open his door, crash into his bedroom and suck out his soul, but I don't. A certain softness has destroyed my resolve, my hope for father's love. One more attempt to verify it's true, to try. One girl's needy yearning, however crazy or hopeless it might sound. It can never be destroyed. Never.

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, clutch the edges of the blanket tighter around my head, creating a hood of sorts, and look around.

Velvety black at this hour, with only two street lights dotting the night on either side, there lies Roy street, the street I grew up on, wet from recent rain, puddles glistening with reflected light, expensive cars parked by its right curb, recycling and compost cans rolled out neatly in between, so Seattle, screaming with their appearance, *We're upscale, we're green, we care for the environment.*

Fucking hypocrites, I think. You like to flash your perfect façades to everyone, but you don't dare to 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 towards my mother, covered up in the mornings by proper social stance of a respected businessman with a wife that's gone a little cocoo. 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 his private man cave a few days ago.

"Welcome home." My father says and slowly opens the door into darkness, with a barely audible squeak, so nostalgic and

yet so foreign. Hunter steps in, I follow, father shuts 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 his silence 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, then proceeds to carefully take off his dirty boating shoes, methodically sheds his rain jacket, flattens the collar of his shirt and smooths 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 on the floor and without wiping my bare feet on the rug walk over to sit next to Hunter, feeling like I'll never get out of this house again. Ever. Like it's a bad déjà vu and I'm a crazy person that decided to trust it.

I can't help but recognize the outlines of familiar furniture in the gloom of the 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 whole set looking like it's carved of agate, black and shiny in the absence of

light. Lucid tulip-shades of a chandelier hang over it from the ceiling. Swarovski crystal, limpid, twinkling like drops of water suspended in the air.

I remember climbing on top of the table and pushing the chandelier to swing, watching shadows dance on the walls and pretending like I was underwater. Papa hit me hard for that, from behind, 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 the plates and the jug of juice and the candles, ignoring the scene out of fear of interrupting father's discipline routine, averting her eyes as if nothing happened. I can almost smell the bubbling hot cheese and the burnt matches, hear the wax melt, hear her soft voice calling us to dinner. 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 street lights on Aurora Bridge, three thousand feet of its steel stretched from my house to Hunter's, where his mom is probably thinking him dead at the moment. If she's capable of thinking anything at all. If she's even there and not transported to the hospital by now.

I turn my head and intercept Hunter's gaze in the same direction. He quickly lowers his eyes. I wonder what he's

thinking but dare not ask. Not like I can, he won't hear me anyway. I suppress the urge to grab his hand and press it towards my chest. I shift a little to the right, just so I'm farther away from his maddeningly sweet soul.

"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, bump into walls, into each other. Locked in their glass casket until they die. This is one of his sealed aquariums scattered around the house.

"Yeah..." I trail off, looking at it with 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.

"Um... 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 and arrest it mid-sentence, biting my tongue. "I think I shook him up pretty bad. We fell off a five hundred feet high cliff. So--"

"Don't you find it fascinating?" Father continues, obviously deciding not to hear what I said. His usual treatment, 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 of a five hundred tall cliff? No big deal.

Still, it grinds me into torpor. I feel like I'll never talk again. I can't move my tongue, formulate thoughts into words, words into sentences, sentences into stories, staring at him, watching his lips move.

"It's not very polite to ignore me, Ailen, you now 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 towards the window. I freeze at his touch, warm yet not comforting, rather warm like a dead animal that decided it's not dead yet after all. He peers into my face, as if it's my turn to be his orb. As if I'm back to being five again and he's inspecting my split chin with the precision of a professional surgeon. *I'm not transparent, Papa, I'm empty. I have no soul. No use looking.*

"You really need to take Hunter to ER." I repeat, feeling the urge to kill rise 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 would help stifle my fever. "He's in pain." I turn my head to see him slump into the corner of the couch, soundly sleeping, and by some unknown miracle 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 sitting across me on the other couch, a low glass coffee table separating ten feet between us, glass orb of the sealed aquarium balancing dully in the very middle of it like an enormous transparent egg.

"You're that fond of him, are you?"

I swallow rapidly forming saliva and 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, 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 somewhere from under his feet and places in front of him on the table top with a cautious smile. I recoil. I thought he trusted me, but he's still afraid of me, after all. At least he brings me a much coveted reprieve from focusing on Hunter. 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?"

"No. 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."

Bingo, I want to say, but press my lips harder together instead.

"Most pearls you see 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, waits for reaction.

I nod, momentarily 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 faint light diffusing through the window, pinches it between his manicured fingers. "Very pretty. The closer it is to an ideal spherical shape, the more expensive. Up until 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."

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 an explanation as the one on how natural pearls are made. It doesn't make any sense, yet I feel something important is lurking behind it. A hidden meaning.

"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 corners of his mouth into what's supposed to resemble a smile, then shifts back into groaning couch cushions, apparently satisfied with my reaction. My understanding.

My mouth goes dry.

I get it.

Chapter 20. Bright's 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, or away from 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. Me. He means me. I'm the parasite. Enclosed in a beautiful shell. His most precious pearl. A work of art and science combined. Extracted from a broken mollusk, discarded after delivery. My mother. I shrink into soft leather, feeling out of place, wanting to run, battling the wish to stay and discover if my yearning can be answered. If it's true or fake, no matter the cost. Then revolting disappointment overwhelms me. A sudden temptation takes over, and I throw next words at my father like I don't care.

"You forgot something." I say, fuming.

He raises his eyebrows, taps fingers on the sonic gun in a steady rhythm, lifts his feet on tiptoe, his silk socks pressing lightly into freshly vacuumed carpet. I don't need to see it, I

hear it, automatically reading his body language for any sign of danger, a lifelong habit I can't erase.

"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. 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 a while ago 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 with incomprehension. 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 another city. What do you say? Sounds good? Is there a particular place you'd like to go?" He says.

His knuckles grow white, 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. A fake funeral, because there was no body to bury and her casket was empty. He excused his happiness on the 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.

I open and close my mouth like a beached fish.

"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 lie in his eyes, not a hint of 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 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, neither did he hug me. Not once, not counting him delivering me in the bathtub. He probably had to hold me simply because I would drop on the floor if he didn't.

Confusion swirls its nasty doubts in my head, twisting my guts. Pulling them, thrashing them, threatening to break my sanity. 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 out of the depth of my memory, by now distant as if it happened in another life.

"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 his grimace.

I gasp. "What do you mean by that? Are you implying mom cheated on you? How can you even phantom 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--"

"Did you really think that m--" I can't stop.

"SILENCE!" His scream is so sudden and so 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.

"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, peaceful and serene, eyes closed, hair bunched up over his fist, lips puckered and cracked open, his chest slowly rising and falling. *I need to stay away from him*, I think.

"And where will you be?" I ask.

"Funeral business, of course. I have to leave in a few minutes. Have to pick up the casket--" He drops eyes to his Pengerai 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, dig 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 the throat in a mass of screaming prodding kicking wonderment.

Father walks over to Hunter and shakes him awake, prods his arm with his delicate fingers, announcing, "Your arm is broken, it's sprained. You'll live. Now, listen to me. Your job is to see to it that Ailen preps for her funeral, son. She needs to take a shower and put on a clean change of clothes. I don't care what, as long as it's looking decent. Can you do this for me?"

Hunter's eyes open wider in a struggle to understand, "Wha...?" He winces.

I can't tell it's because he's realizing once again that he's deaf or because something hurts or because he was able to make out the word *funeral* from 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 after, and I only half-listen. My other half imagines things that I didn't dare to imagine before, life with my father. In another city. Starting 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 special 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 assert father and to get him 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 say.

"Good." My father excuses himself and disappears upstairs to change, then comes down donned in one of his finest Italian wool suits, black, with black tie contrasting against crispy white shirt. A waft of his signature #10 Aqua Pour Homme Marine Cologne for men by Bulgari tickles my nostrils. It takes him less than 10 minutes to transform from a recreational fisherman to a gallant businessman. During this time 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 5am now. Be ready by 6, 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, jingles the keys and drops them into his pocket. A chatter of heels against parquet floor, a click of the door latch, and he's gone.

I'm stunned and remain sitting 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 fact that this door is brand new and it smells of new paint. 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, he's allowing me fume, or so I hope, because I'm unable to bring myself to face him right now. I just can't, and I let it all out here, alone. I bang on the floor with my fists, drive pain out of me, into the open, turning it into words, spelling it out aloud and not caring if the neighbors or somebody else will 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 shouldn't! I want to die. I can't. I want to bring my mother back. I can't. I want to kill Canosa so she'd [I hit both fists on the floor] stop [hit again] fucking [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 turn the time around, I want to go back to how it was before my birthday. I can't! I CAN'T! I CAN'T!"

I hit the floor until my knuckles bleed clear liquid that is my blood. Dust flies up into 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 reuniting with my father.

I yank at my Siren Suicides hoodie. It's clammy and sticks to my skin and wouldn'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, considering 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 bad, that I decide to hack it into a pile of rocks after.

I vigorously twist cold-water handle and nearly break it off. A froth of a 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 fluid twirling.

It rapidly fills the tub, making me think for a second like it's the day of my birthday and 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 this soothing flow, into this rush of submersion. I tilt my head to the ceiling and slide all the way in, letting my face sink. I breathe through my gills.

This is bliss. Nothing bad happened, no time has passed, it's September 7th 2009, around 5:30 in the morning, 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, trace their ragged edges, torn a few days ago but now smooth and healed into two coarse openings. Jets of fluid syphon in and out of them, in and out, 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 the fact that he won't hear me because he's deaf, 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 wishful thinking of 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 new 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 nearest towel, roll myself in it, tucking in one end and checking that it's secure. It occurs to me that indeed it is Hunter, who else? 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, than realized I'm still 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, 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 chocking cough.

"Favorite number?" I say, thinking, *three*. Why did he have to ask me that? I frown, turn the lock lever into open position, and grab the door handle. My wet palm slides against its polished bronze. Brand new and stuck, it wouldn'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 all 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 attempt to rotate the handle again. 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 average person to drown. Three to both of us is like a code for death.

My eyes widen in understanding.

"CANOSA!" I shriek and hear her mad cackle. Her rotten stink poisons the air, bursts through every gap and envelops me in its ruin, burns my nostrils, laughs at my stupidity, my naivete.

"NOOO!" I yell. I rip the handle off, drop it on the floor, raise my right leg and kick the door with great force. One, two, three times. Hinges take pockets of plaster out of the wall and the newly painted wooden thing finally collapses with a groan, rousing a puff of dust.

My heart sinks at the sight behind it.

Chapter 21. Marble Bathtub

Time has a peculiar way of turning on its own 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, in a way she stood back then, except, she's not a gorgeous femme fatale anymore. Her face and body are distorted in a way a heart attack would wreck havoc on its victim, leaving 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. About half of her tissues appear dead. Her mouth is open in a distorted grimace. Her hair is reduced to a sorry matted mess on one side, on another side she holds Hunter by the neck-bind. The only thing that didn't change is her penetrating gaze, her big green eyes that ooze 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 and moist breasts jiggling unpleasantly. My guts spasm 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, chocking.

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 and twisting in my loathing, hiking up my amplitude to the maximum. I head-spear into her slimy stomach and we tumble down the stairs in a tangle of limbs, rolling all the way into foyer and stopping only inches away from the front door. The racket we produce must have roused the entire neighborhood.

I grab at everything I can grab, digging my fingernails into her flesh, biting her with my teeth, even reaching up with my feet in an attempt to kick her ass. Hunter is half-sandwiched between us, thrashing and moaning. 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 and kicking arms.

We cartwheel around the floor, ripping coats off the hooks from the open wardrobe, spilling about my father's shoes,

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 and 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, and I gurgle blood. 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 not 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. Not to mention his sprained or potentially broken arm.

I want to scream at Canosa to leave him alone, and attempt to get myself up. My feet slide on slick floor. My leg muscles are torn by her nails, 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, watch 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 to a sickening smack.

Canosa appears out of nowhere and props my head on one of father's shoes. "So you can see better, silly girl." She whispers.

See what? I want to ask, and don't need to.

Next minute proves to be the answer, the horror of my life, 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, temporarily disabled.

Canosa sits opposite me, about twenty feet away, by the front door. She pulls on Hunter's limp body, puts his head into her lap and, pinching his lashes between her long delicate fingers, forces his eyelids open.

Everything in me screams NO, yet I can't look away, mesmerized, feeling life draining out of 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 her 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 opalescent soul, 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 and shakes every single wall in the house. And just like that, without a warning, without so much as a glorious battle, Hunter is gone. His magnificent melody disappears into her void forever.

I can't breathe, unable to believe it.

Hunter, Hunter, Hunter. His name flashes in my mind.

Seconds seems to 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. I fade. 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 steps, one by one. I don't care. I have no strength to stop her, no strength to look around. No will. No will to do anything anymore. She unceremoniously drops me into 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 of no concern to me.

Her face swims into view. It's ugly in an eternal sort of way, forever menacing, distorted by the explosive force of my voice, darkened by age, a face that you dream about for soothing your pain, but when it comes at last, you want to run from, screaming, screaming.

"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 way from my mouth, and I can't see beyond the halo of her hair.

She hops into the tub, pins my arms under my body with one knee, with another she crawls on top of my chest, slides it on 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?"

I stare back in a delirious daze, numb. *Hunter. You killed Hunter.*

"Ailen Bright. You thought you could kill me. You silly *silly* girl." She leans closer, her hair parts 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 tried before you."

I don't move, oblivious to what will happen. The more time passes, the less will to exist I have left. *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 you asked me to turn me into. This is what a siren is, Ailen Bright. A piece of dead meat that can sing."

I shake my head a *no*, on autopilot, trained to respond to adults under any circumstances and slipping into my old way of behaving out of nothing else to grab on to.

"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 mind. *Because of you*. I watch this thought pass, like it's a gust of wind and nothing more, then my mind returns back 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 it in a voice of authority not to be questioned, standing above me, her skin glowing softly in the hazy darkness of 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, like I fed your mother." She squats and stretches out her hand to me.

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, I can 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, in what appears to be a mass of dead souls, a colorless chaos of shadowy figures, composed of fog. I fall inside, become part of this mass. It breathes as one gigantic body, all-consuming, rhythmic. I can't breathe. There is no air, no water. I seem to be surrounded with sort of liquid that has no oxygen. It presses on me and sweeps me off my feet.

A current of this liquid propels me on, towards 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? Flashes in my mind. 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 darkness like an ultimate black dot, all consuming, beyond emotion, plain in its vastness. A black hole. A definite end. A certain nothing that is absolute. I don't see its eyes, but I feel like it's looking at me, staring me up and down, and then it frowns, as if I interrupted it and I'll be punished for it. Severely.

"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. Getting *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 black sky. Water writhes with bodies, they brush 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 one hundred tons and can't lift my own body. Dunk smell of abandonment packs its mold around me.

I wiggle my fingers, move my legs, my arms. Everything seems to be working. My throat seems to have closed off. My body has healed itself.

Muted stillness clings in shards to my face, floor gives way under my palms and knees as I drop down and lay on cool tiles, head turned to the side, breathing. 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 lonely place. My misery. I push past coldness so deep, it touches my frozen bones. I want to warm up, to hear Hunter's soul, but it's gone. Gone. GONE.

Hunter is gone. This is worse than death.

"Hunter." I say, testing my voice. It works. "Hunter. Hunter. Hunter." I keep repeating his name, as if it will bring him back.

I try to imagine his 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 wooden floor, the laughter, the anticipation of a meal, the chirping of birds behind an open window, the buzzing of insects basking in rays of a morning sun. Vivaldi's summer, its violins.

Nothing comes to mind.

I don't remember how it sounds. I tighten my grip and keep rocking. For hours. Or days. Or entire eternities. Time as I know it has lost its essence. I create my own time, my own

rhythm. I try to soothe myself to something, maybe some semblance of sleep. But sirens don't sleep, so I brood in a sort of self-induced slumber.

"I want to die." I say. "Please, I want to die."

I rock some more. Morning light turns from lilac to soft grey of typical 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. Papa. Papa is all I have left. My Papa. Immediately, I'm afraid he'll be mad and will change his mind, when he sees the destruction I've caused to the house. My head pounds with horror.

Keys jingle and the front door slams. Foot steps.

"What a 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 seem to be still weak. A weird sense of déjà vu makes me dizzy. It feels like five days have

never passed, like it's the morning of my birthday, all over again.

"I know you're here, sweetie. Answer me." Curses and steps on the stairs. I want to make a dent in the floor, to disappear.

"I hope you're ready. We're leaving in fifteen minutes."

More steps.

I clutch to the doorframe, to prevent myself from falling. My father slowly emerges from the shadow, first his head topped with shiny styled grey hair, then his black suit, then his shoes. Fine Italian shoes is all I see, because I dare not look him into the eyes. Both shoes stop abruptly stop in front of the broken door, their shiny noses glistening with contempt. I have a wild idea. I want to blow on them and see if they'll sail away, like two boats, into the ocean, far far away.

"I thought I'd find you here." Breathing from above. "What the hell happened here?"

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. Leather soles of his shoes squeak on 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, his eyes are mad, his finger points. 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, 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 it smell like?"

I don't answer, confused, scared that perhaps he refers to my wounds inflicted by Canosa, maybe I didn't fully heal after all and they stink to him. I remain still, not daring to glance, to make sure I'm not oozing blood anywhere.

"Answer me. Your father is asking you a question. What's it 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 that's left.

"You. I'm talking about you." Another jab, yet a 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? I want to ask.

"Let's just get through this together. Tomorrow, we'll start a new life. Sun every day, new school, new friends... Hmm? How about it?" His eyes narrow and I search them, wanting it to be true.

"She killed him." I say and swallow tears.

"Who. What?" He feigns interest.

"Canosa. She killed Hunter." I say.

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 this 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, 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 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 dawn on me and I grope for the tub behind me, slowly sliding on the floor, dropping my head into my hands.

I want to die, I want to die, I want to die. Pulses in my head on repeat.

"You're a siren. A siren can't have human friends." Comes 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 natural. I make an effort and pretend to care for our conversation.

"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, hangs his face, smiling, illuminated with the bluish electric light, resplendent with a fresh haircut and shave, yet grey and sunken from a sleepless night. And 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 a family, being together.

"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 oblige and to do something with myself to pass the time, 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 ocean.

The goodbyes. All I hear is white noise, all I see is his eyes directed at me, for full five minutes. I have Papa for five minutes, all to myself. It's a miracle paid for by 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 suppress my words before they escape.

"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 scatted ashes at sea? You're not planning on burning me, are you?"

"Of course not!" He retorts. "How could you even think such a thing!"

"Okay. One more thing. Our extended family, it 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, lay my cheek against brushed wool of his black suit, inhale his signature perfume.

Close. Close enough to a hug. This will do.

Chapter 22. Bleitz Funeral Home

Death. Birth. Two ends of one 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, adjustable bed and mattress. It has a clean new smell. It's weight without body is two hundred pounds, it says so on the flyer next to it. Its weight with my body will be three hundred and seven 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 cold as ice. Attending my own funeral. Washed, shampooed, 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 moving my feet, both snug in two white canvas slip-ons. I touch the edge of the casket, caressing

its smooth lining with my fingers. What a change from marble bathtub, all this cushioning, designed to soften my journey into afterlife. With a sigh, I lift my right leg, claps the edges, hop and slide in, scooting all the way to the middle and laying down. My strength is back, but it doesn't give me desired comfort. The last thing I see is our Swarovski chandelier swinging above my head. It's turned on, 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 in iridescence.

"Ready?" He asks.

"Yes." I say, exhilarated in some perverted sense.

"Remember, not a peep. See you on the other side." He says.

I don't smile at his joke, it sounds morbid.

The lid drops shut with a soft whoosh. The last ray of light disappears into darkness. I smell synthetic glue and hear Papa open 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, then they come near me. Four souls, an instrumental quartet, if you will, one bass, one violin, one trumpet, one accordion. Not anyone I recognize. I don't know exactly how I

know this, without having seen them, without having a notion of the sound of their soul, if I ever happened to meet them before turning into a siren, but I just do. I feel it in their vibration, in their frequency. It's foreign. Papa must have hired them because he has no friends. Their souls trickle in to me as petrified and broken, yet delicious in terms of food. 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. Then I suppress the urge.

Play dead, Ailen, remember, play dead.

Papa leaves. I hear a staccato of his heels. First stab of doubt pricks my skin. I wave it off.

He promised, didn't he? He promised.

The four men grab handles, two on each side, grunt, shift the casket off the table and lift me up to their waist level. Silent prior to my father's departure, they launch into comments on how light I am, and how there is no foul odor, and what was on TV last night, what beer they had the night before, whether or not there will be free food at the service, and how, of course, there will be, what, with that rich prick throwing such an expensive funeral for his stupid daughter that decided to drown. Young people these days.

They carefully trot and share their displeasure with our generation at the same time. They wonder how my body was found,

by whom, when, where, 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 are strangers, and they could care less.

I half-listen, half-swim, pretending I'm in the womb of my mother, enclosed in softness, swinging in fluid movements, carried down the cascade of stairs, outside, into the back of a hearse. Its old rear doors creak as they flap open to receive me, and slam shut.

Doors slam. Bodies shuffle in and make the chassis shake a little. Engine roars to life, and the hearse moves.

My heart quickly surges and sinks. No sign of Papa. I can't hear his soul. He's definitely not inside the hearse. Did he leave before, in his beloved Maserati? Why? Why didn't he stay with me? Isn't he supposed to stay with the body, wouldn't it look strange if he doesn't? I have no answer to these questions.

Maybe he's driving after the hearse, 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 Mustang 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, can he?

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 the empty coffin without my mother's body was on display for whatever family decided to gather to bid their goodbyes, this drab beige Tudor-style house conveniently located by Seattle's own suicide bridge, will be the place of my final departure as well. Bleitz funeral home, sensible cremation and burial options. I should've guessed it. Naturally, my father would be likely to arrange the service for me here. He's a creature of habit.

I think back to that day. It was raining, and I don't remember much, except the murmurs of distant relatives above my head, people I have met for the first time in my life, and the building itself. I was struck by how inappropriate it looked for its purpose. The way it's 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 has written Happy Birthday in diamond water on its greenish sugary glaze. I blink several times, to bring myself out my 10 year old mind, back to present. But I can't help it, victim to my own wishful thinking. I always dreamt of a perfect birthday. With a perfect cake.

Hearse doors slam, bodies exit, 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, to comment on, to swallow, and to forget.

And what am I? I'm the confection on top of this macerated mass, saved for one special guest, for Papa. In a couple hours time, 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. Only they're wearing black. I'll be the only one donning color on this occasion.

Casket shifts direction. I feel every turn, hear every soul around me, every engine of the passing cars. It promises to be a busy morning. Same four men carry me, conversing in hushed chatter. They pause in front of what must be a sidewalk stoop or a stair, lift me up a bit 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 playing 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 I know.

I spend the next hour or two in agony of anticipation and increasing lack of 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, wanting to leap at him, ignite his soul and suck it out, this mix of bad 80's music and a continuous hiss of soda cans opened in rapid succession, with an undertone of battle cries from video games. Sugary, in one word, 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 and traces the contour of my lips with the very tips of his fingers. I stifle an urge to bite him, my diaphragm convulses 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 towards 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 rich as velvet. It seems I've been gone for a century or more and forgot 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. Faint smell of lilies travels on the breeze from the air conditioner, and my tongue tastes like talc, my throat goes

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, left side faces open space of an ugly beige interior. An interior of a chapel, about thirty feet wide and eighty feet long. Everything is beige about it, the diffused lighting, the ceiling, the walls, the fake silk of 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 month.

Movement prompts me to close my eyes. I've seen enough.

More spectator's cars arrive. Tires of all sizes slosh through shallow puddles on 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 get 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 wet marble floor, lips smack at 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 to. The one whom everyone wants to kiss, and maybe even to 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 to part my eyelids a fraction of a hairline. Doors open and the crowd quietly fills the chapel, its air empty one second, rapidly breathing and shuffling the next.

I feel his presence. I hear his footsteps.

Papa, you're here. You made it.

I know him by his breath, by barely detectable limp in his right leg, but distinct smell of his signature perfume that 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 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 that 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 whisper spills 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 to break the etiquette, indulging in social niceties instead. And gossip.

My head swims in the cacophony of their souls and snippets of 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 grey-haired woman who must be the funeral director or part of the funeral home staff walks briskly through the center isle, between filled rows of chairs, towards the end of the hall. Towards me, that is. She takes a quick look around and nods, probably doing the 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 the rich prick Roger Bright in his grief, to savor his pain, that rare delicacy rationed only second time throughout 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 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 rudely cold, they're warm, full of breakfast eaten at home and coffee sipped on the way, strapped into new black dress or hat or shoes. Not here out of love, but because they feel obliged. Death 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 out loud.

"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, no sound of him, not anywhere near.

The sea of people stirs with unrest, swallows me up in the noise of their souls, exchanged glances, wiped tears, sniffing noses, gloved hands, craned necks to be the first to see. Air

moves. There are light steps, 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, black dress, black gloves, black hat and a black smile behind a veil. I catch my shriek before it forms itself fully and escapes my lips. Surprise gives way to shock, then to hate, then to wonder. What's she up to? Why is she here? What should I do? And then... 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 human ear, but I hear every word.

I correct my face, play dead, try to ignore.

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 up into fists under the white cloth, curl and uncurl, curl and uncurl.

He's late for a reason, I want to say.

"Ailen Bright, the girl who likes to forget. To be on the safe side, I want to remind you. Don't meddle into my business, and I won't meddle into yours. Oh, and I was *dying* to see you in a casket, of course."

I fume. My innards boil. 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." A dare to part my eyes to see.

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 backs of three other women beside her, they open up their notes which I don't see but 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 out and 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, volume turns to zero as if dipped underwater. He enters the building. Quiet calls trace his path. Well wishes of the sympathetic light afire and fizzle out in his wake.

Mr. Bright, over here. Good to see you, Roger. My condolences, Mr. Bright. Here, through these doors.

He steps into the chapel, passes rows of chairs, accepting, nodding, shaking hands, 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, claps his hands in front, rolls back and forth slightly. Feet shuffle, chairs move, last polite coughs and sneezes die and it's silent. This is the moment I've been waiting for.

He begins to speak.

"My name is Roger Bright." Pause. "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's one of the singers 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 to 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 want to scream. *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,* I want to say. *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. Him. 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 lies, 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. Not true. He loves me. He does. I know. He must. I'm his daughter. My whole being squirms and thrashes and refuses to accept the idea that my father lied. I fall victim to the child in me again, the one who is reluctant to give up what she almost glimpsed. An internal battle sweeps me into the land of doubt. One side of me clings to hope, the other screams that it's stupid to hope. They place a bet, and I listen to my father finish his speech, catching every word, my nerves atremble, my mind aswirl. 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. Nothing at all. It never materializes. Not a 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 that are related to me in some distant way and have either seen me once at my mother's funeral, or in pictures, which I don't know how they could obtain, because father never sent any pictures to anyone. For some of them it will be the first time seeing me. What a treat. In my family, we seem to notice each other only twice, when we're born or dead.

The choir drones on. Something about afterlife.

I strain to detect souls of anyone I know, anyone at all, from school, perhaps a neighbor. Maybe Mr. Thomson decided to come? Hunter's mother? No such luck. 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 but perhaps means to them they did their good deed of the day. They move on. I count 32 of them.

Song is over with. Finally. Three women silently trail after the crowd. Canosa lingers. She is number 33. She kisses me

with a kiss that doesn't burn because it's cold like ice, then 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 properly rehearsed and carried out.

On top of it, I constantly fight the urge to sink into my memories about Hunter. Not right now. I can't. It will disable me. It will render me useless.

Lost in thought, I notice familiar noise of the same quartet. Four pallbearers who took 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 taking me across the street. I hear the strum of moving cars. We must have crossed the Fremont bridge. They trot along a path, gravel crunching under their feet. They zigzag down to the water, to the marina where my father moors his boat. Used to moor his boat, his lovely Pershing yacht, on the bottom of the lake now.

I sway to the rhythm of waves. They must have made it on the boat. They proceed with me another twenty steps or so and

then place me on a table, or another elevated platform. I hear them saunter off and hear 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 silky casket innards in frustration. Last person steps on the boat. Captain shouts his signal, ropes rumble off, engine starts. I hear my father's voice directing people around, chatting with caterers, in general 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 childish curiosity at the fantastic and the grand and the morbid, deep ocean swallowing poor Ailen Bright who's only sixteen years old. What tragedy, what farce, what pity.

The boat grumbles its slow way through canal. Gradually, city noises fade and we're on our way to sea. It will take another couple 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 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 waves, and break out then, to meet Papa at the lighthouse like we agreed to?

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, deliver his question.

Ever met 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 water, turn the boat around, 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 air condenses into heavy clouds that roll in at an abnormal rate, spraying boat's windows with 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 that are there, men swear. At the same time, the yacht speeds towards the sea with a terrible speed, manned by, what appears to be, Canosa's song and her insatiable hunger.

I hear it now. We both started to sing at the same time. Except, I only had an intention to start, but she actually did it.

I have to tell Papa! Is he blind? Does he not see what is going on? The first possibility of him knowing this, of this being the plan all along rears its ugly head for the first time in my consciousness. I chase it away. It can't be true. It simply can't be.

Lighting strikes. More thunder rumbles. My casket shifts, in danger of sliding on the floor. Yacht careens dangerously up and down, one second tilting its nose, another plunging into liquid madness at a 45 degree angle. People gasp, the imminent explosion of terror in their gaping mouths, their frantic movements, quickened heartbeats, ready to flee. There is nowhere to flee, 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. Dread of the unknown. Dread of death.

They shout. They yelp. 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 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. That's death magnified thirty two times. An intimate, ultimate 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. A lover of a good show. I wanted to do it for the spectacle, to make my father run to me, make him say he's sorry, see pain on his face, have my last laugh, be right. And hurt him. I wanted to hurt him the only way I can.

Tears well up and spill from under my eyelids into coffin of 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 dare, always one foot on the ground, never tipping so as not to 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. 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 it.

She starts her deadly song. It rings clear, soars in one voice, then ten, then two dozen, amplified by her rage and hunger, reaching a tremulous crescendo. Five seconds is all it takes. Glass shatters, and with its brilliant tinkling relieves the pressure of anticipation into shouts and cries, first disjointed, then pulsing to a mortal rhythm. Souls whisk into oblivion amidst forming fog. I can hear them leave the bodies, one by one. Hear bodies drop. Canosa is on a rampage. She grabs a victim, a man, I think, shouts in his ear. He faints. She gobbles up his soul, moves on to the next. People cower, scream, ribbons of their souls escape 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. That confirms it. This merciless butchery was part of his plan all along.

I'm done playing dead.

I hit the casket's lid with terrible force and make a deep dent in it. The entire thing, all of its hundred something pounds of steel, jumps up perhaps a half 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 make a move, terrified of Canosa killing Papa, yet unable to lay 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 beats a million times a minute. Canosa jumps at her. That does it. I can't control myself anymore and let go.

"NOOOOOO!!!"

I holler, tense, kick my head, elbows and knees outward, and break 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 in 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 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 people's faces, those that are still alive and not splayed on the aft deck in front of me, motionless. Shock on Canosa's face, her body rigid in black dress, her hands using the edge of my platform for support, her head turned back towards 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 chaos unfolding in front of him, as if it's nothing more than a Bosch painting, one of those that I had to study in art, a slimy grim depiction of hell, hanging in some museum in Italy, and 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 deep inside his eyes and there I see a 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 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, 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.

"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. Weather agrees, turning from foul to astoundingly still. All attention is on me.

I wipe my face from the dust and speed into my past, into the time when I wanted to sing so bad, 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 okay. Tell him that no matter what he suffered and 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 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 a warming embrace of the one 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.

Greeks were right in their mythology. This is how it 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 my singing to my father was a newborn siren's attempt 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 the place of love.

"Papa? I forgive you." I say quietly, and by 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. Like 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, his hands in front of his face in a protective gesture, he takes a step back and hits the door. Canosa hisses, scrambles to her fours and runs at me with

a shrill screech. I meet her head on, grab her shoulders, 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 into my business!" Canosa's screech mixes in with the screaming of 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 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, like you liked to lecture me about, at every opportunity. You never noticed me for who I truly was, unrelated to 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, clenches her fists and jumps high over the deck, with the clear intent to flee 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 to into the corner again.

My father doesn't move, frozen as statue. It must be a horrible sight, watching two remaining women in his life possess more power than 10 of him 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 of love, penetrating and overpowering, full of tenderness and adoration and longing. It rises steadily into the sky, past laden clouds, its melody thick with urge, 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..."

Those remaining on the boat turn their faces to me and gasp in obvious admiration. Their faces clear, oblivious to thickening clouds and the eye of a storm hanging directly over the boat, gathering in the quiet 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. What I have to do is give.

And I do. I look him in the eyes. He doesn't move. I don't move. I keep pouring love into my a capella. 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 a song. I see a mist of recognition in Papa's. I push my voice an octave higher, then another and another, overpowering the noise around me, 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," I place a hand on my heart,

"Don't forego..."

People stumble towards me, mesmerized, their black attire adding to this bizarre scene that is unfolding quickly. The little girl grabs my arm from behind, someone else pulls on my legs. They surround me, a mere dozen of them left, a few women, more men, and one child, 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 like to call happiness, the very thing sirens have the talent to induce. Fake happiness, to lure them to death. As food.

Hunter's words ring in my head once more. Other words.

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 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, pushes people aside. A streak of saliva trails from her open mouth, and then 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 a growl of a satisfied animal, eating at last.

Others join into a tangle of disarrayed hair and shriveling bodies. Limbs reach to me in unison, like dozens of frog tongues

flicking at their catch, missing, wanting more. I spread my arms to the sides, reach for the air to keep singing. There is still a lot of love left inside me, and they eat it all up.

Ailen Bright, the center of the feast.

The desert after the main dish, the exquisite confection.

I fall on the deck under the weight of their greediness. Hands work its way up to my face. My torso is covered with them like with shriveling 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. Thunder strikes again, boat shakes, the crowd collapses on me in a wave, biting, tearing, wet with feeding frenzy. No blood seeps out of my torn veins, only sea water, clear, bitter and salty. Like tears.

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 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, used to oscillate at five hundred times per second, controlled by my vagus nerve, 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, black wool suit perfect, 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. Yet 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, I think. He cares. He loves me after all. This is his way of expressing it. But I'm dying.

"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 ruined everything." I hear a trace of tears in his voice. He drops on his knees, careless, oblivious to his fine wool suit getting dirty in the filth, cradles 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 kisses my forehead. It's a quick awkward peck. His lips are warm against my skin, and I like it. There is none of that creepy feeling I used to get whenever he touched me. This is different. This is 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 important to you. If I only would've known..." It's like he heard me, he really heard me.

I tried to tell you, I want to say. I tried, many times.

"What do I do with you now? Don't you dare dying 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 face, 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, hear his heart beating.

"I love you." He says. "I 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, and I can't answer. Now that he wants to listen to me, my voice is gone. The irony. I can only stare, no tears left inside of me to spill.

He really did mean it, Italy and everything. He really did. It was not a lie. I weep inside, happy.

The murmur of the crowd dies. Souls scatter towards the abyss of death, one by one. Until all sound fizzles out. Did Canosa eat them all? The cacophony of shrieks stops. Thunder vanishes. Boat levels and swings slightly side to side. Papa's clumsy affection is the only thing I feel, his concerned face the only thing 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, if that's what it took.*

And he'd just nod, he'd understand, I wouldn't have to explain it to him. We'd sit like this, silent, for hours. Smoking joint after joint, floating in an enchanted cannabis daze, on a cloud of euphoria. Weightless.

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? Death taking over me? My last conscious thought is, *Will I wake up to see you next to me, Papa?*

I dream. I dream about Hunter. We're ten. We stand by the lake, grab handfuls of flat stones, and send them scattering against 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 and freshly washed hair and 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, in Italy. 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. For hours, days, years? 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 white hum of shifting water. 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 be humming in the middle of doing something enjoyable, adding rhythm to the flow of action. I attempt to lift my head again, struggle to move my arms, but 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, manage to roll over on 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 purplish mist, two sonic guns in each hand, legs apart in a warrior stance. He looks like a true siren hunter, ready for battle.

Papa! I want to scream.

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? Or--

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, to go to opera every single day. Just you and me. I want to say.

Then all noise stops.

Fog hangs motionless in an ominous premonition, 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. Air turns moist and chilly. Wind dies down to nothing. Calm stands foul and still, like swamp vapor. I hear drops of condensation drip to the floor off the railing.

I don't like this dotted silence.

What is going on? I want to ask.

He 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, sears my throat over 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 ear as best I can.

BLAAAAM!

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 depth any second but decides to hold still for a moment, to keep you guessing, 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 gone, her skin brittle and taut, pulsing. Papa directs both guns at her face and fires double.

A thousand thunders explode in my skull. Closing eyes doesn't help, pressing hands over ears doesn't shield me from this double detonation. It's so powerful, that I think I will explode. The blast travels at supersonic velocity, causing my innards to spasm, release, spasm again.

It's 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 in this moment, despite her wreck of a face, she's strangely beautiful. Her hair hangs in thick clumps, kissing the boat's floor like magnificent wooly blanket. Her eyes open wide, irises shrunk to 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.

"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, 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 non-stop, until her body disintegrates into a foggy impression of a siren. Before she bursts completely, her misty face opens up into an "O", like she's telling me, *GO*.

Then he blasts her into nothing. I get doused by fine mist. And the boat dips backwards.

Chapter 25. Burial Yacht

We begin sinking. Things happen very fast. The body of the yacht tilts ten degrees, twenty, thirty. I slide down the deck, towards the tail. Papa grabs the railing to get himself away from 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 advancing ocean, and 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, I slither after him on my belly, then on my fours, my left hand firmly in his hold, my right clasping 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. Too late now.

I want to ignore this like a bad dream, like it's not really happening. I want to pinch myself and wake up, simple as that. Because 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 an ultimate punishment, to watch him sink into unforgiving waves

while I breathe water through my gills, floating, unable to help him. Anemic. With no will left to live.

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. Floor tilts another ten degrees and the nose of the boat rises up a few feet at once. Fog thickens. Evening dims the light. It will be dark soon.

"Hold on!" Papa shouts and let's go of my hand. "Lifesaver. 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 do swim.

I clutch to metal bars in fear and listen to his laborious breathing, to the squeaking of his fine Italian shoe soles on 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 a felling of a tree, slow, deliberate, and imminent. Debris spills from the deck, pieces of cloth, black hats, shoes, several plastic containers and other miscellaneous junk. They dance on top of the foam and then sail off into the mist.

Papa, where are you? Panic pounds in my head.

The yacht is not as heavy and 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 fifty feet of its length, ten tons of its weight, its teak paneling, custom upholstered seating, and diesel engine. I dive after it.

Lifesaver. I need to get you a lifesaver.

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 lifesaver'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, hold on to the orange ring and kick with legs, moving at a pathetically low speed. It takes me a few minutes, and 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 grey 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 did. First mom, then Hunter, and now him. It's my fault, of course. Canosa told me not to meddle into her business, but I didn't listen. I would've been happily waiting for him in Ocean Shores by now.

Our faces are three feet apart. Brilliant circle of the flaming lifesaver bobs between us, its four white perpendicular stripes mimicking 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. I want to say. 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 growing weakness.*

My eyes involuntarily widen.

Papa leans forward and reaches out with one hand. I cower, pressing my head into 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 and hangs his head, clearly unable to say something important. Or so I hope. I want to stop

the clock, right then, freeze the 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 stretched grimaces he typically produces to make people believe he's polite, but a true smile. I don't know if it's addressed to me or to a 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 lifesaver, my father potentially at risk of hypothermia, I'm at risk of chronic weakness due to lack of food. I blot it out of my head. I want to be here and now, to allow myself to feel this overwhelming thirst for closeness and pain that inevitably comes with it, to try to accept the fact that one is inseparable from another, like life is inseparable from death. Two ends of one stick, two ends of a casket.

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 escaped him. The ocean waits, so does the night, so do I. Breeze quiets down to an occasional gush of air, waves calm into ripples. Fog thickens into 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 to the right.

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 let's 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 detested sirens ever since. You could say, she turned me into a perfect siren hunter." He steals another quick glance at me.

I stare with my mouth open, afraid to move, afraid to interrupt. 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, not sure 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." His 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, you can float next to me until then. Can't you?*

He stops shaking. His eyes sink deep 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 null. Why prolong the inevitable?"

He lets go of the lifesaver.

"Have a good life." These are his last words, and he sinks. The burial at sea is now complete.

NOOOOOOO! I yell inside my head. I hear my voice ring as if a ribbon of thought passes through water, through space, through entire world. My scream uncoils and I feel every syllable tinkle. I let go of the lifesaver and dive after him.

Water is murky and it's hard for me to see. I gulp water, syphoning in oxygen. It tastes like tears, salty. Several feet below me I see Papa's white 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! And, Don't go! And, I'm coming! And, Don't breathe! And, 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. All weariness of

my predicament is forgotten. I'm a little girl again, at the moment of an amazing discovery, and I want to share it.

Papa, I got it! It was not 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 a song! I want to explode into a myriad of bells, all at once! I want to feel alive!

A surge of strength comes out of nowhere and throws me into action. I kick and 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 claps 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 mutter some nonsense, just to cheer myself up, but 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 his body slip out of my grip and plunge deeper. I attempt to get a hold of him again and kick, but my legs hardly listen. Oblivious to my mute pleading, ocean sucks him into a freezing liquid depth. I can't hum to 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 say into darkness. 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 lifesaver, then I'll think about what to do next. Which way is up?

I realize I lost all sense of direction in 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. Water gets slightly warmer. Very dim light seeps in. It's probably night by now, and the fog must have receded to let in moonlight, because 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, letting 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 lifesaver and curl my fingers around it, relieved. 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, 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 towels hanging on the hooks by the door. What I thought was a lifesaver is actually the edge of the tub. Papa's beloved antique carved-marble tub, the ridiculous Bright's 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 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 and blink. She's back to cold stone. I look at her hands. They are right underneath the tub's rim, turned up in worship of the Siren of Canosa.

I sit up so fast, that 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 as I remember her, a bronze faucet figurine, barely a foot tall. Her left hand holds the faucet, like a zither, her right arm is raised over her head in a mourning gesture. 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, white letters spelling Siren Suicides on it, my jeans.

"This is fucked up. 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, as if it flips me a 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!" Comes through the door.

"Sorry! Dressing!" I shout, full of glee.

He's alive! That means, that means...

I crawl out of the tub. Water cascades down from me. I strip with unbending fingers, pulling hard at sticky jeans as they cling to my skin, not letting me out. 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.

"Don't make me count to three." Papa's voice comes through the gap.

"Almost done!" I grab the nearest towel, blot my face, my shoulders, and roll myself around in it. 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 stop myself. I stand tall and walk up to the bathroom mirror on the wall.

A startled face looks back at me, wet dark hair sticking out to all sides in a crazy halo, deep purple circles under the eyes, 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 climb out of bed minutes ago, a dab of perfume from yesterday's grooming still wafting off of him in a delicate smell of his signature #10 Aqua Pour Homme Marine Cologne for men by Bulgari. 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 sockets, his hands fly 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, you don't you worry."

"What... What did you say?" He doesn't grasp it, his face ashen, fingers on his hands 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.

"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 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 mid-air, grabbing it with both my hands, arresting the blow before it happens. We

perform somewhat of 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 to 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! 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, kicked off his feet, and shocked at my transformation.

"I'm not interested in spending my morning, listening--"

"SHUT UP!" I yell, my hands curled into fists.

I think 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 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, and 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 push 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 this idea?" He asks.

There is a knock on front door. My heart expands at once into all corners of everywhere, 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. *Fucking* awesome. 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 over three stairs 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 snuffle, pulls out his other hand from

the 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 from glee, wanting 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 Happy Birthday. I hope that's okay with you?"

I turn my head. Papa stands at the top of the stairs, gravely looking down, then turns without a word and slams the bathroom door shut behind him.

"What the fuck?" 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 another. 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 I smoke this morning." I stop jumping and start rolling from my toes to the balls of my feet.

"You *what?*" Hunters face contorts in a puzzlement akin to a puppy that's been chasing its own tail and can't understand why it's so hard to reach, pausing for breath, his tongue lolling.

There are so many things I want to tell him, I'm 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 to 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 feel 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, no tomorrow, but 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, takes 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..."

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 weep. I grab his shoulders, 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, melting into his contours, letting myself being carried away, letting myself be loved, all the while staring 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 letting it go.

Letting it all go.

Closing my eyes.

Saying in my head.

I will never ever try drowning myself again or attempt any kind of suicide, I swear, I won't. I will live, because life is beautiful and it's full of love, no matter what anyone says.

It's all right here, in my heart.

One day I will die. We all will.

But until then, I will live.

I promise.