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I Chose to Die (Siren Suicides, Book 1)

a novel by Ksenia Anske

79,570 words

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

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

Chapter 1. Bright's Bathroom

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

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

life in the very place he delivered me, sixteen years ago, on a rainy September morning of 1993.

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

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

These are my four marble sisters, all of them about two feet tall, their bare bodies protruding from four corners of the

tub, their knees on the floor, their arms spread wide as if wings of birds getting ready to fly.

The tub stands smack in the middle of our large bathroom, as its central feature, all plumbing hidden in the floor and no shower curtain, for added authenticity. At the head of the tub, long hair covering her body, legs dangling from the rim, sits Siren of Canosa, or Canosa for short. My big bronze sister, the boss, although she's only 1 foot tall. Her left hand holds the faucet, her right arm is raised over her head in a mourning gesture. She's the main funerary siren who's supposed to act as a psychopomp, a fancy word for mythological creature whose job is to lead souls of dead people into afterlife, heaven, or hell. Three very nice destinations. Pick your favorite while you hold her hand. Right. But I'm forgetting to count.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

Ten seconds since I took the plunge, stepping into bathtub full of water, wearing faded jeans and my favorite blue hoodie with big white letters spelling Siren Suicides on it, because their music kicks ass. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an average person to drown. Only two minutes and fifty seconds left. I hold my breath.

My clothes balloon in a funny way before getting soaked completely and feel oddly warm and clingy. I close my eyes

because the chlorine in the water burns them. Now my nose starts burning too, water making its way up my nostrils as if wanting to drive a nail through my head. I press hands into the sides of the tub to keep myself from floating up. *I can't do this, I can't. I'm scared.* I sit up and gasp, grab my head with both hands to prevent it from spinning. No, to prevent the bathroom around me from spinning. Ok, I can't tell what's spinning against what anymore. Water rushes down my face. Wet cotton sticks to my skin in thick soggy layers. *Smoking a joint wasn't enough. Did I absolutely have to drop a tab of acid on top of it? Stupid coward.*

The doorknob turns once to the right, then, after a puzzled pause, turns to the right several times again.

Click-click-click.

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

Who else? I want to answer, merely as an automatic response. Because another thought pushes it out. *Shit, he*

shouldn't be up so early. Damn it. And another thought. I should've jumped off the bridge like mom. Why the fuck am I so afraid of heights? Is it genetic? What do I do now? The whole bathroom stinks like weed.

He knocks on the door once. I hold on to my knees, watch early morning light stream through the window, hear footsteps. He's probably checking my room to make sure it's not some thief who decided to take a bath in the middle of the night because he got tired of robbing our house.

A few minutes, and he'll be back.

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

I hear Papa opening the door to my room and shouting my name. I can ignore him. I can do it. I'll have to think of something to distract myself. Yet everywhere I look, my mother's face floats up, hanging in the air like an ephemeral vision, a

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're stoned." I said.

"No, no, listen." He sucked in on his joint, his slender fingers dancing across it. "The real sirens are among us. They're the girls that come out at night, in the fog, to sing about their pain. Their voice makes you do things. They command you to come close to them, and then they sing your soul out."

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

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

"My joint!" I gasp, yet my thoughts are with sirens, reeling with his idea, trying to grasp the meaning of what he said.

"Chill. I'll roll you a new one," He said, unfazed.

"You say it like you met one."

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

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

"You're such a liar." I said.

He laughed. Every cackling sound of his voice caused my whole body to vibrate, as it vibrates now. In sync with Papa's steps from my room back to the bathroom.

I grip the sides of the tub.

Three short knocks on the door.

"Ailen? I know you're there, sweetie. What are you doing in there so early? Open the door, please."

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

I dive in, this time face first, pinching my nose with my right hand to avoid chlorine burning, floating in the tub with my back to the ceiling, thinking of all things about how our bathroom ceiling reminds me of a giant face, its long intricate ornaments sort of looking like wrinkles, it's décor a bad copy of Roman baths for the gods themselves. That white plaster type,

a dirty shade of a cleaning lady's absence. For whatever reason, I think I must clean it, then remember that I need to count. That's right, I forgot.

One. Two. Three.

No need to press hands into the sides of the tub, I can float all I want, my face submerged in the water, my legs free-floating, the tips of my naked toes barely touching the back wall of the tub. Who in their right mind has a marble bathtub at home that's eight feet long and belongs to a museum? That's Bright's family values for you. No love, but plenty of beautiful things to admire. I hold my breath until it feels like I can't hold it anymore.

Twenty seconds go by. Papa shakes the door.

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

Pop. Pop. Pop.

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

Perfect, I think. It's been thirty seconds. Plus one minute of waiting and surely more than one minute to break down this

solid oak ornamented door. Thank you, Papa, I don't need to count anymore.

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

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

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

He choked on spit and coughed. "What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And then?"

"Then I'd crash!" He grinned and slowly turned his head to look at me, his eyes full of mischief. I imagined Hunter mounting a bike, gunning a throttle, whizzing past cars onto some mountain road, higher, higher, coming up towards the rail on some cliff, beyond which there is nothing, only empty air and jagged mountain rocks all the way to the bottom.

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

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

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

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

I've been underwater for one minute and twenty seconds now, miraculously continuing to count.

I let go of my nose and spread my arms wide, press with my hands into marble walls forming a perfect bridge from one side of the tub to another, in an attempt to do anything except lifting my head and inhaling air. *I have to stay down, I have to, I have to.* Circles begin swimming in front of my eyes, and my throat tightens further. Another few seconds, and I'll be inhaling water.

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

One minute thirty one. One minute thirty two. One minute thirty three.

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

The door rattles under father's fists. He shouts "open the door" on repeat, slamming it. Each hit echoes in my airless chest, making me think it's my ribs he's hitting. My whole body trembles. Every muscle convulses, shaking like crazy, seeming to get ready to explode when a strange calm spreads over me. I let

out one last air bubble, stare into marble underneath me. Notice long delicate silver lines forming a pattern, something akin to an otherworldly landscape with its own slopes, hills, forests, and mountains. All cold and distant, as if covered with a layer of snow, which is really just white marble with grey lines on it.

I reach out and touch it. It's cool, like the cooling water around me. I hope to feel something for myself, some sort of pity or agony before dying, anything at all. But there is nothing left. It's as if all feeling died within me, leaving only distant suppressed pain.

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

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

Chapter 2. Marble Bathtub

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

This is what I see.

A bright flash blinds me, like one of those photographic flashes lasting only one thousandth of a second, to help illuminate a scene. It stands out in sharp clarity, burning into my retina, making me squint. What is it? It's my hand floating in the water, yet at the same time it's a wide expanse of

freshly freckled soil. No, it's not soil, it's skin, simply magnified because it's right under my nose. Iridescent circles start forming in my peripheral vision, then another flash makes me want to shield my eyes, but my arms won't move. I see my wrist up close, a forest of hairs on it, shaking lightly, as if scared into dizziness by goose bumps. I bend my neck to look down my body. The brilliant blue of the hoodie is too intense, making two feet dangling at the far end of each leg look white. Then it all turns fuzzy.

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

I want to know what happens next. Despite overly saturated colors and distorted sense of size, I want to keep looking around, to notice otherworldly things with this new visual

perception I've acquired, but my body thinks otherwise. My body shuns my mind aside and says, *Stop this nonsense*. My body says, *Get the hell out of the bathtub!* I want to tell it to stop shouting, but my tongue won't move, caught between rows of teeth clamped shut. My body says, *This is it. I've had enough of your stupidity. I'm getting you out.*

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

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

I turn my head left and right, twist around, flap my arms and legs madly. The bathtub is gone! Did it expand? Did I shrink? I kick and kick and thrash around, watching the greenish tint of the liquid turn ultramarine. A beautiful shade of blue. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. Why did I think of this now? I don't know, but it gives me some sense of

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

The water is no longer green, but clear and blue, reflecting cloudless sky. What's green is a blanket of leaves. I shake my head, to make sure I see this right. I'm in a lake, in its shallow end overgrown with lilies, about ten feet away from the shore. I kick my feet once more and touch solid ground, stand up to my neck in the water, lily stems touching my legs, sweet and fruity smell overpowering my nostrils that still burn from passing chlorinated water. *What the...* I begin to think, when all thoughts vanish from my brain, all feelings desert my body. I can only stare.

On the very edge of the lake, on its dirty sandy beach full of washed up colorless logs stuck out this way and that like gigantic bones, sits the Siren of Canosa, or Canosa for short. My big bronze sister, the boss. Only she's not bronze anymore, and not her typical two feet in height. She's real and as tall as me. With real skin, real hair, real body. She pins me with her practiced innocent gaze that I've seen so many times in the bathtub. Without realizing what I do, I emit a long sigh of awe.

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

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

"We live in the meadow

"But you don't know it

"Our grass is your sorrow

"But you won't show it."

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

You're not real, I want to say. You're just a bronze bathroom figurine. Your song is fake, it's a tool. You don't care for me, it's your job to transport me to the other side,

right? And you probably hate your job. When was the last time that you got a raise? But the sound of her voice silences my mind and I keep listening, mesmerized.

"Give us your pain

"Dip in our song

"Notes afloat

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love."

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

"We wade in the lake

"Why do you frown?

"Our wish is your wake

"Why do you drown?"

They stop singing and watch me stumble forward. I drop to my knees a couple feet away from Canosa, my mouth open in admiration, my eyes teary, my troubles forgotten. All I can feel

is a sense of calm emitted by their eyes, their voices, their bodies. It's not the comfortable calm of a clear happy mind, but rather chilling calm of violently suppressed pain, as if it got blast frozen with liquid nitrogen so it won't bother me anymore. I don't care how it works, as long as my pain is gone, I'm cool with any method.

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

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

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

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

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

"Go away, silly girl." Her lips press into one hard line, her hands propped on her hips, elbows stuck out like wings of an angry bird. "I kinda don't like you." At this, other sirens begin to protest, but Canosa shushes them with a low hiss. They fall silent and peer at me. I feel uneasy, as if I'm food being studied for ripeness.

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

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

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

"Am I dead already? What is this place, anyway?" I croak, suffocating in the overpowering stench of rotten fish that emanates from the siren's open mouths. I realize their skin, so

clear and white from the distance, has a greenish tint to it when looked at up close. It reminds of a molding orange.

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

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

"What's that?" I say.

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

"But--"

"Are you deaf?"

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

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

I blink and feel my face turn red, hating my blood flow that always betrays me when a lie would be my preferred answer.

I swallow and say nothing, hoping that somehow that if I pretend I didn't hear her, the topic of the conversation will evaporate and we will start talking about the weather.

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

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

"Are you saying, you want to kill me?" I manage, confused and not knowing what else to say. As soon as it comes out of my mouth, I feel like I said something stupid.

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

"Why?" Is all I can say. "Why would you want me to become one of you?" A childish hope to belong grips me and suppresses all logical thoughts with a simple yearning. I don't care if

they are dead or alive or real or not real. I never belonged anywhere, always an outcast. At home, at school, even when I rode the bus people wouldn't sit next to me, as if my aura itself was stained or something. Hours of my dreams to have five sisters tumble one over another in an attempt to form words and throw them at Canosa, explain how badly I wanted this to happen my entire life, how I can't believe it's really happening, overriding the doubt that someone, at last, wants me. Someone else except Hunter. My real friend, my only friend.

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

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

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

comes to your house on holidays? Why do you think you never go to visit anyone?"

I sit quietly, puzzled by her questions.

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

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

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

"Yes! My answer is yes!"

Canosa shakes my hand, greedy.

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

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

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

I gasp for air.

Green water turns clear, rolls off me. I sit.

I'm back in the tub, waist-deep in warm water yet chilled to the bone as if covered with snow, shaking and hyperventilating, coughing and convulsing from pain in my lungs. They burn with each breath, and I know I must still have water

inside from inhaling it. As I cough, I look at the faucet. There she is, the Siren of Canosa, back to her faucety self.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3. Bathroom Door

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

Smack!

His hand strikes my left cheek and my head comes alive with livid fire. I convulse in a bout of coughing, sputtering water out of my lungs. My throat and mouth burn with a scorching sensation of chlorinated liquid rushing out. Every breath brings pain and a low whizzing noise. I try to swallow, it hurts. I try to stand up and promptly recede into dizziness. The bathroom doesn't just double-spin against me and itself, it seems to turn

inside out and fold onto itself in consecutive waves. A pulsing rhythm matching my heartbeat.

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

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

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

All I see is his mouth opening and closing, his thin lips stretching over his teeth in a dance of forceful monologue that's supposed to teach me, to do me good, to help raise me in such a way that I manage to survive in this world, as a woman. Because, in Papa's eyes, women are second sort. Women are weak creatures that need to be controlled lest they decide to charm

off men's pants and make them do stupid shit. They corrupt men's very spirit. They... I don't just stop listening to him drone on and on, I even stop listening to my own thoughts repeating to me automatically what I have heard so many times.

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

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

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

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

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

with every blink. For a second I wonder if my head will crack open now or later.

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

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

Another slap on my cheek makes me grab onto the tub's rims so as not to slide under the water. This is slap number two, one more to go. The world goes into spinning and I think I taste blood and smell my own fear.

Papa hovers over me, the collar of his silken pajamas hanging open and revealing his chest hair, his lips quivering. After an initial surge of anger, this is his typical remorse. "Don't you ever lie to me, Ailen. How dare you. Would you look at yourself, look who you're turning into. It's in your DNA. Your mother was a liar too. It pains me to strike you, sweetie,

but there is no other way for me teach you. I care for you, I want you to have a better life than her. Do you understand?"

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

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

"Papa, let go, it hurts."

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

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

Slap!

The back of his left hand greets me hard, but to me he caresses my cheek. I ignore the salt in my tears, pretending

it's a taste of sea. My ears ring from impact, but I imagine it's him telling me how to throw pebbles into a lake so they skittle along like frogs. That's what the slapping noises were, really.

I'm all ears, Papa. Show me your master throw so I can learn how to do it. I promise, I won't avert my eyes so as not to miss some important detail.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I attempt to look at the window, anywhere but him.

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

This is it, his favorite question to quiz me on. His way of making sure I remember it for the rest of my life. In some sense I wish he was a religious freak who asked me to repeat a daily prayer. This is worse, a hundred times worse. His face fills the crack between my insanity and my freedom. His eyes bulge, neck

veins push against his skin. I open and close my mouth, twice, like a beached fish.

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

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

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

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

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

"She made fun of me, Ailen. That weak woman dared to mock me publicly, imagine how that felt. She was crazy, crazy! I don't know what I found in her. She twisted me around her finger, got pregnant, made me marry her. And then she had her

last laugh. You know what she did? She left me, to raise you all alone. You know how hard it is to be a single father?"

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

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

He finally lets go of me and wipes his hands on the towel. There is a gap of three feet between us. I look to my left. The gap where the door stood is wide open, like a passage into another world. I don't care where it leads, as long as it takes me out, out of this horrible place. Once and for all. This is how my mother must have felt on the morning she left, to never return. I think I understand her now, and I'm not as mad at her anymore. I see her face floating against the gap in the wall, smiling, beckoning me to follow.

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

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

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

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

Get out. Get out. Get out.

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

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

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

He's never worn his pajamas to the second floor. He only comes down after having meticulously dressed himself in a freshly ironed shirt, silk tie, silk socks, fine Italian wool suit and fine Italian leather shoes, twenty pairs of which he keeps neatly organized in his bedroom closet.

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

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

She let out my mother on the morning of September 9th. She didn't stop her. For that I want to melt her in our fireplace and watch her face come off in a grimace of utter surprise. I hear Papa stepping down and force myself to grab the she-knob, my palm pressed against her bronze round face, my fingers feeling every groove of her bronze hair. Maybe she is Death

herself and it's my turn to step through her door. As if I'm right, the knob feels freezing cold under my fingers as I turn it, gripping it hard so it won't slide in my sweaty hand.

Click.

The heavy front door opens slowly and rainy morning air gushes inside. I breathe it in and stop trembling for a second, forgetting I'm wet, forgetting I'm scared, feeling my nose soak in the smell of wet asphalt, fallen leaves, fresh sorrows. Something wet traces my face. It takes me a second to realize what it is. We weep together, sky and me.

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

It drips silence full of grey clouds.

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

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

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

"Why didn't you stop her, answer me, you stupid thing!" I curl my hands into fists and feel hot tears roll down my cheeks. The sky doesn't answer. I want to mash it with my fists beyond

recognition, when I feel Papa grab me by the arm. I turn and twist out of his grip. He opens his mouth in shock, perhaps not expecting me to resist, his maroon silk pajamas soaking up the rain. Before he composes himself, I run down eleven painted porch steps and turn around, yelling at both the sky and my father.

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

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

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

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

"One..."

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

"Two..."

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

"Three."

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

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

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

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

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

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

I fumble with the latch, jerk the gate open, and run down twenty mossy steps, my bare feet sliding against them, gaps between my toes filing with dirt. At the very bottom I finally lose balance and grab the fence post so as not to fall. My hands slide on slick painted wood. Stable, I let go of the fence and run out into the street. An oncoming car veers around me and

honks, I flip it a finger and turn to look, my heart pounding hard and fast. Papa is a few feet behind me, dashing down the steps two at a time, not holding on to anything, staring at me, when one of his slippers flies off his foot and he falls on his bony ass, cursing loudly.

For a second we watch each other. I have a premonition of an impending hunt, me being the one hunted, my father being the one after me.

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

He pulls himself up and I bolt.

Chapter 4. Aurora Bridge

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

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

I'll just go and look, to make sure, there is nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with simply looking. My legs carry me

along familiar route. My heels hurt from pounding on the ground barefoot. I try to ignore the pain, ignore the heaviness of wet clothes against my body and the numbness and skin burning from being cold, the runny nose and the sharp earache. I make it to where Raye street dead-ends into Missis Elliott's cookie cutter house and stop to sneeze three times, shaking all over.

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

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

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

This stairway connects two Raye streets, one on the top and one on the bottom of the hill. There are actually four Raye streets according to the map of Seattle's Queen Anne neighborhood. One of them looks like an appendix to third avenue north, one flows into fourth avenue north, and two fork out to the east after it. The high one is the street I grew up on. It turns to the right to become fifth avenue north. The low one merges into Aurora avenue towards downtown. This is to my advantage because my father has no way of driving onto Aurora bridge unless he goes south first then finds a spot to turn around. There aren't many. By the time he's done, I'll get on the bridge by foot. And maybe even make it all the way across to Hunter's house.

Why the hell am I going there? I'm going there to look for my mother. But my mother is dead, she's been dead for six years now. This is a ridiculous idea. What, is she going to appear out of thin air or something? Maybe she will. I have this feeling, I want to go and see. See what? I don't know, something. And then go where? Thoughts fly through my head as I pound down forty

concrete steps, clutching to the railing on my right, inhaling woody smell from the abundance of cypresses growing here.

I pause at the bottom of the stairs, look left and right. The low Raye street is deserted at this hour. I jog across it, towards Aurora bridge rumbling under early morning traffic, a mix of commuter cars and huge delivery trucks rushing supplies to stores before they open.

I turn left onto pedestrian walkway and sprint to the point where the bridge begins crossing water, about one third of the way from its south end. Another bout of sneezing makes me bend and place palms on my knees so as not to lose balance. I watch water splatter against the red skin of my hands, the bluish skin of my feet covered with road dirt. My throat burns with irritation, it's hard to swallow. I wipe my nose, stand and glance around. Except for traffic racing to and fro, there are no people on the bridge but me. All three thousand feet of its length, deserted. Somewhere here, on this side of the bridge, along its middle section that soars one hundred sixty seven feet above the water, my mother climbed over the railing and jumped. I imagined it a thousand times, staring down, clutching painted metal barrier until my hands hurt from squeezing.

"Mom? I wish you were here." I say. "Come back, why won't you come back? What did I do wrong? Why did you do it? Why did you leave me?" Questions fly out of my mouth on autopilot, same

questions I've been asking since ten, stuck in my mind the way I first said them, flooding me with usual helplessness and rage.

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

I can almost picture a colorful leaflet for tourists with printed advertising message, still smelling of fresh ink.

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

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

The word FREE flashes in front of my eyes in bright red. I'm like a bull, tormented and provoked into charging. I begin repeatedly slamming my hands into railing, pouring my anger into

every hit, harder, to the point where my hands feel like two swollen bruises. I stop and shake them, curls fingers into fists, shake them at the bridge. Magnificent, it spans over the lake in one concrete stroke, solid and high, oblivious to my outbursts.

“You stupid thing, I wish you were never built!”

I slam both fists against it one more time and yelp in pain, crying. Tears stream freely down my cheeks, mixing with rain. Steam rises out of my mouth with every breath. Fury seems to have warmed me up a bit and I don't shake as much. Propelled forward by the need to do anything but stand in one place and freeze, I run towards the middle, hoping for something, looking for something close to a miracle. I want to see a white nightgown and my mother's long hair brushing its collar frills, its wavy pattern. I hope for a glimpse of some kind of answer, anything at all. And I get it. It comes in the form of three honks from the opposite lane also going north. I stifle a cry.

My father's Maserati Quattroporte, which really means nothing more than “four-door” in Italian, slows down enough for me to see him gesticulate from behind the wheel and then speed up again, clearly with the intent of crossing the bridge, turning around and picking me up from where I stand even if he has to stop traffic. Which he will, if it comes to it. I calculate. Three minutes left to either run all the way across

the bridge and hide behind the Fremont troll or even make it to Hunter's house on Linden avenue. His mother should be at the hospital this week for chemo. He'll let me in for sure, maybe even let me stay for a while. I totally lost track of time, I would've been on the other side by now, stupid!

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

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

"Hunter," I exhale, watching him cover the remaining thousand feet between us, wondering why he's walking and not

driving his truck, and why he's up so early. He's not a morning person, always making it to school at the last minute.

"Ailen, hey!" He yells, waving.

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

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

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

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

Water from his jacket drips on my face. He sniffs and swipes a hand over his forehead, like he always does when confused and before making a decision. He peers at me for a

moment, his eyes like two round pools of indigo paint, pulsing in their blue splendor. And I remember that blue is my favorite color. It gives me an anchor to pull myself out of this state, a concrete fact to lean on, to shake off all emotions and turn to logic. Yet I can't move. I want to get lost in those pools of blue, all of me, skin and flesh and bones. I want to dive so deep inside his eyes that I'll never be found.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That does it, that count-to-three phrase that my father has used on me as long as I can remember. I flash cold then warm, feeling sweat break out from every single pore. I heave,

suffocating. There is not enough oxygen in the air. It's as if I've forgotten how to inhale and have to think about it.

"Listen to me! Breathe!" Hunter shakes me. My head rolls around like that of a rag doll, mouth open, eyes closed.

"Come on, talk to me, Ailen, talk to me. Please?"

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

"Yes?"

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

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

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

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

I nod, feeling my face turn red.

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

Hunter turns around.

Papa steps out of the car, clad in his favorite Gucci waterproof leather half-booties, black wool suit, black Armani trench coat on top of it. He leans deep into the car, takes out the stick of his umbrella and opens it, holding it by the curved wooden handle, hand-crafted, of course. Normal people in Seattle wear rain jackets, not my father. Everywhere he goes, he has to arrive in style. He slams the driver's door and walks around the back of the car towards the sidewalk barrier.

"Hey, Hunter. Good to see you, son. How are you doing?" My father is always full of pleasantries when it comes to people outside of our family, so you'd never guess at his true nature. He comes across as composed, sophisticated and well read. Did I forget to say, well dressed? He stops at the barrier that comes up to his waist and sizes it up and down, probably deciding how to climb it over.

I note the fact that he didn't ask me how I was, if I was ok. But then, again, those are mere details.

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

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

"Sure." Hunter glances briefly at me.

"No, don't go, don't leave me!" I hear my teeth chatter as I talk, begin shivering violently. Both are symptoms of hypothermia. I don't care about getting sick, I only want Hunter to never leave me alone with my father.

Hunter spreads his hands wide, as if to say, *Dude, there is nothing I can do, he's your father. What do you want me do, fight him or something? I couldn't do that.*

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

"Strange to find you here, Hunter, so early in the morning, without your truck. Going anywhere special?" My father walks up to me, switches his umbrella into his left hand. I shrink instinctively to avoid a blow, but he simply places his right hand on my shoulder. It seems to weigh a ton. I'm lucky we're not home, he's never struck me in public.

"Oh, I was just... talking a walk, you know. Actually, I wanted to surprise Ailen with something on her birthday. I can't say what it is, though. It was supposed to be a surprise, you

know. I guess I'll do it at school then." He shrugs his shoulders.

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

"Sure, sure. See ya, Ailen."

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

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

"Get in the car." He says, barely opening his mouth. His eyes open wide, two terrible spheres of deathly threat that's been haunting me my entire life. I forget I'm wet and cold and hurting, on single thought repeating in my mind. It's now or never, Ailen, now or never.

I nod as if in agreement, bend my legs and begin straightening to stand, carefully judging Papa's strength. After a few seconds, convinced I'm going to obey him, he loosens his grip and I duck from under his hand, and, without thinking what I'm doing or why, fueled by the last of my energy, dash about ten feet away from him, fling my left leg over the barrier, then

my right, holding on to the fence and facing the water. On the other side of the bridge. Like two hundred and thirty suicide jumpers did before me, one of them my mother. I always wanted to feel what it was like for her to stand here, to think about taking her life, to let go.

Merely a few seconds go by.

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

Papa rushes to me. I let go of one hand and lean over a little, my left hand getting sweaty from fear. A strange sense of emotional high floods me.

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

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

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

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

I glance into distance and see Hunter turn around and jog back. I look behind me and see passing cars slowing down to a crawl. Not just to drive around my father's Maserati, but to gawk at me, perhaps out of curiosity or perhaps merely for entertainment. One car stops directly in front of father's Maserati. It's a deep green Subaru, a typical northwestern hiker

car, with a typical hiker sitting behind the wheel. A woman in her forties or fifties, her greying hair pulled up into a bun, her neck buried deep in the collar of her REI rain jacket. She looks at me, looks at Papa, takes out her phone and begins to dial. Great, police will be here soon and then I will have to go home, whether I want to or not. I have no other legal guardians.

"Ailen, sweetie, please get over on the other side. Let's talk about this. You don't really want to do this, do you?" Papa makes another step towards me, his hand outstretched.

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

Hunter comes up behind my father.

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

Papa turns to Hunter, his rage about to burst.

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

"But she's my friend."

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

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

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

My breath gets stuck in my throat and my fingers slide off the rail from sudden sweat. Canosa waves her tiny hand from one hundred sixty seven feet below. The tangle of hair bobs in and out of the water. Her voice reaches me from below in a melodic purr, amplified by the open air.

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

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

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

Nothing exists in my mind except the wish to join her. My clammy hands begin to slide. I imagine myself as one of the sirens, beautiful and fierce, my limbs strong, my body womanly,

my voice enthralling. I curl my toes, gripping concrete, and then relax them, ready to fly.

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

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

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

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

I turn to take one last look. Police officers, people who stepped out of their cars, all blur into a wave of collective worry for me, one big canvas of open mouths and wild unbelieving eyes. I keep searching for Hunter but he's gone. My heart sinks, shred to pieces. Then I see my father. He's moving towards me,

his mouth open, his eyes bulging out, his fists balled up. He looks as if he's about to punch me. There are five feet between us and I'm done looking at him, done trying to anticipate his every mood, shaping my life to his wishes, suppressing everything I feel. I want to burst free of his control, to be weightless, to experience flying. I glance across the road and see several yellow phone booths that are supposed to help suicide jumpers change their mind. I know the instructions inside by heart, having imagined this moment a thousand times.

LIFT THE PHONE.

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

PRESS RED BUTTON ONCE.

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

SPEAK CLEARLY TO OPERATOR.

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

REPLACE PHONE WHEN FINISHED.

I jump.

Chapter 5. Lake Union

Over the last six years of contemplating why my mother jumped off the Aurora Bridge and how it must have felt, I buried my pain and kept myself busy by researching every possible detail about suicide jumping. I read that objects tend to fall at the same rate regardless of their weight, as long as there is no major air resistance. The formula is distance equals sixteen times the amount of seconds squared. That means no matter how much you weigh, it would take you about three seconds to fall down one hundred and sixty seven feet. On this rainy September morning it feels to me more like ten, maybe because I don't eat all that much due to a bad habit picked up in my mother's womb, or maybe because close to dying my sense of timing became distorted. Strangely enough, the things that float through my head are facts. I hold on to them for dear life.

My name is Ailen Bright. I was born at 6:30am on September 7th, 1993, two weeks early, weighing only five and a half pounds, sixteen inches long, head first, delivered by my father in our marble bathtub full of water, my mother giving birth naturally, without pain medication or any professional help. Exactly sixteen years later, I'm leaping to death, at about six in the

morning, on September 7th, 2009, weighing only one hundred and seven pounds, five feet six inches tall, feet first, escaping my father into a huge tub of water called Lake Union, to meet my mother's fate, on a whim, having used acid and weed as pain medication and having rejected professional help.

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

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

Suddenly I know that I just made the biggest mistake of my life. One minute of fantasy is better than nothing? Whatever gave me this stupid idea? Forget it, I changed my mind. I want

to turn back time, I want someone to save me at the last second, like in the movies. But this is real life, and in real life the surface of the lake propels at me with inhuman speed.

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

FUCK THIS SHIT, I DON'T WANNA DIE!

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

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

my intention, she says, "There is no time left to change direction, you know that. Girls, scatter."

I manage to lower my head against rushing air and look down, unable to blink tears away. At three seconds of total elapsed time, my falling is about to end. It's as if one moment I fall, and another I don't fall anymore. All I see is five giggling sirens swimming away in a five-point star formation and dark liquid underneath me, nearly touching my toes.

Then I hit water.

SPLASH!

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

My leg bones break. The impact rips off my hoodie and t-shirt, turns out my jean pockets. Smell, sound, taste, sight, touch, all collapse underwater into a tight fist of abrasion that scrapes my skin, shatters my vertebrae, and collapses my

lungs. Another line I read flashes through my mind. Most suicide jumpers don't die from drowning, they die from the impact trauma on contact with water. Only then those that survive drown or die of hypothermia. Two very lovely alternatives, make your pick. The fact that I'm thinking this tells me that miraculously, I'm still alive, but not for long.

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

Enveloped in white noise and excruciating pain, I understand what true end means. This knowledge pricks my gut and robs me of remaining strength. I feel hollow. My mind is blank, an empty box that can't be filled because it stopped being real. Nothing seems real, as if time and space ceased to exist and got replaced by a strange void, a land of no yesterday, no tomorrow. I try pulling myself out this nothingness, try focusing on the present, on the now. This is as *now* as it will ever get. I want to fill myself with stubborn endurance, a kind of force that breaks every fence, every barrier, determined to reach its goal. On the brink of death, I want to live like never before. Everything that needed to be fixed in my life doesn't need to be fixed anymore, it's perfect, it's absolutely fantastic. All of

it. My books, my house, my father, Hunter, even school. Why did I ever think to escape it? I want to keep living, no matter how awful it seems at times. But freezing lake water doesn't think so. Freezing lake water presses on my eardrums, burns my sinuses, shoots terrible pain through my broken bones.

"Somebody get me the fuck out of here!" Escapes my mouth. Words make no noise, only bubbles trail into murk. I involuntarily bend wanting to cry out from sharp pain in my chest. My body forms a perfect ninety degree angle. Trajectory of my gaze hits the bottom of the lake. I'm suspended about ten feet above, balancing in that place of not moving down anymore and not moving up yet, a momentary pause. It's dark. I'm cold. No, I'm not just cold, my skin is on fire, my muscles are mashed into one gigantic bruise. My head appears to have become a heavy bronze bell that tolls loudly, it's walls shudder to the rhythm of my still beating heart.

I attempt to kick up and move my arms when darkness parts and a white figure swims towards me. It looms closer, now about twenty feet away, now about ten. Soon I find myself face-to-face with Canosa. Her hair resembles a white floating blanket, her wide-set eyes dominate her face, her skin glows softly as if rubbed with a phosphorescent cream. Her gaze plucks the newfound strength out of me. I can't move, paralyzed. She smiles, showing two rows of perfect teeth, too white for this darkness. It's not

a happy smile, it's a type of a final smile that's full of knowledge I'm lacking, and I choke on premonition. She licks her lips, cups my frozen face in her hands, equally cold, and pulls me closer.

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

She turns my face left and right, examining it.

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

If I thought I was paralyzed before, I'm petrified into a piece of wood now, partly because this is the least thing I expected her to say, partly because she told me everything I hate about myself as if it's me talking. And partly because this is the first time I hear anyone speak underwater. Momentary curiosity pushes my panic aside. I watch her lips and tongue move freely, with no air bubbles coming out. Every word rings amplified as if spoken into a microphone yet garbled and

slightly distorted. Sound travels four times faster through fluid medium than air. Right. My mind escapes into facts again, but only for a fraction of a second. Lack of air and an urge to inhale yanks it back to reality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know how to make you feel better, let's talk about your jump. That was one big leap, wouldn't you agree? You're a brave girl, I'm so proud of you. How did it make you feel? Was it

fun?" She cocks her head to the side. I wiggle in her grip, feeling an oncoming dizziness, not giving a shit anymore about my looks or her looks or anything else. *I wish I never jumped, I want to tell her. If you take me to the surface right now, I'll never do it again, I swear. Just give me another chance. Please. Pretty please. I don't want to die.*

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

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

I watch with a mix of horror and awe as other sirens emerge from the depths of the lake and swim closer, form a circle around me. At this point the need to breathe makes me convulse, I feel like my brain will explode from pressure and my lungs will burst into a million pieces. Canosa shifts her hand and holds me up by the neck. I'm a freshly caught fish to her, struggling to get off the hook. Oblivious to my thrashing, sirens join hands and float in a circle akin to a pack of mocking kids at a school, about to call me names and make fun of me until I shed first tear. That's what girls always did, that's what these will do. Sisters? Newfound sisters, really? What was I thinking, how more hopeful, naïve, and needy could I get? They're devious femme fatales that are about to kill me. Panic takes over and I let go of my bladder, feeling urine warm my

thighs, thanking myself for not eating anything in the last twenty four hours. That would've been a disaster.

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

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

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

"I always wanted one."

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

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

"No, she doesn't!"

"She does too!"

"You guys are freaking me out, stop shouting or I'm gonna puke!"

This is the first time I hear them talk and it comes as a shock, after years of imagining them speaking in verses right out of epic Greek poems. My thoughts are interrupted. Sirens

blur into what's about to become a girl fight, a tangle of limbs, swirling hair, piercing eyes. I'm trying to remember their names, fading quickly.

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

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

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

Tastes like what? I want to ask.

"But never mind." Each syllable echoes into my skin, sends tremors deep into my torso. Circles swim in front of my eyes, distorting sirens into what looks like fizzing pain killer tablets, the kind that never fully dissolves. And I don't know anymore who fizzes where in what and how, because the world goes to black.

I close my eyes. Canosa lets go of my nose and mouth, I gulp water involuntarily while someone grabs my feet and pulls

me down. My feet touch sand. At the same time, stinky water rushes into my lungs scorching everything in its flow yet I keep gulping it, hoping for a thread of oxygen, for a bubble of air, anything, to survive.

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

"We live in the meadow

"But you don't know it

"Our grass is your sorrow

"But you won't show it."

It's the same song, but it feels like this time she sings with more force, directly to some being trapped in my chest, because its gentle movement tickles my ribs, like it did last time. My soul. I want to turn myself inside out and scratch, to get rid of this impossible itch. I notice that I don't feel much of anything anymore, no pain from broken bones, no freezing water, no urge to breathe, no headache. I'm simply numb.

Other sirens float around me, glowing, grotesquely twisted in motion, their arms and legs stretched out, eyes directed at me, greedy. I'm fresh meat to them, and they're starving, yet

Canosa is the one who's having the meal. I wonder if they hate her for that. Their skin is devoid of color as if someone dumped an entire supermarket's supply of bleach over their heads and forgot to stir. In this darkness, I notice how everything about them is white, not the brilliant white of a new t-shirt, but a white of an old stinky wash rug in the school cafeteria.

I shudder.

"Give us your pain

"Dip in our song

"Notes afloat

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love."

They huddle close to me, reach out, until one who I think is Pisinoe, the youngest, touches my arm and tears her hand away, as if in fear. I frown, not feeling anything, my nerve endings must have atrophied from hypothermia. Pisinoe smiles widely and touches me again. As if that was a signal, other sirens begin poking me, their hair floating, eyes glistening, fingers trembling in lust. Canosa keeps singing.

Perhaps emboldened by her indifference, the sirens pinch me, stroke me, squeeze me, muss up my hair, like I'm the most adorable baby doll they've ever seen. I gulp in horror because I don't feel their touch, it's like they're touching a piece of

wood that used to be my body. All this time Canosa floats directly in front of me, her gaze unbroken.

Water jingles with her song.

"We wade in the lake

"Why do you frown?

"Our wish is your wake

"Why do you drown?"

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

"Give us your soul

"Breathe in our song

"Words apart

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love."

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

"We stir up your hope

"Calm down and let go

"Our love is your slope

"Slide here, don't forego."

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

"Give us your life

"End in our song

"Because you

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love."

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

Canosa lets go of me, spreads her arms over her head and hollers a cry, guttural, painful, piercing. It leaves her mouth and enters mine, turning water to milk once again. It's terrible taste makes me want to throw up, yet it forces itself in, frosting my trachea, turning my chest to ice, making my body feel heavy and swollen. This must be a part of her soul, given to me to transform me, to mutate me, to almost kill me and then turn me into a siren. Before I can think anything else, her voice fills me to a bursting point, as if someone turned the volume up, louder, louder. I can't stand the vibration, it's about to pop my ribcage, pulsing to the rhythm of my heart.

"Aaaaaah!" I cry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Give her space. Shoo." Canosa says.

The sirens float away, unhappy yet obedient.

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

I lift my arms. They're white. I wiggle fingers, one by one, try flexing my feet. Everything seems to be working as before, even better. I appear to be a faded self, just a notch, a few grades of saturation lost. Water feels lukewarm, which means I'm as cold as a fish from a freezer. I reach again behind my ears, unable to believe that actual water is sprouting through my gills.

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

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

There is Pisinoe, the youngest, giggling. Next to her Teles, the perfect one, snickering into her chubby fist. Behind them Raidne, the one whose long curly hair I envy, and, to the side, as if she's special somehow, Ligeia, the only one not smiling or making any sound, the shrill one, with perfect breasts. Looking at them, I quickly avert my eyes and look down, hopeful. A surge of joy pierces me at the sight of two beautiful

perfectly round breasts. I quickly cup them with both hands, both thrilled and ashamed of my nakedness at the same time.

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

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

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

"Good. I thought you'd approve."

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

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

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

I concentrate. There are car honks, rain patter, pumping hearts, breathing and, above all, a multitude of noises full of things people do. Music they listen to, things they like to say, sounds from what must be their hobbies, mechanical whirr of tools, clinking of household items, occasional hush of a paintbrush or clicks of camera shutters, swishing of skis on snow, baby cries, the smacking of a football, dog barks, and a million more. They mix into one breathing organism, fluctuating in its pitch, overlapping with itself and creating a cacophony of impossible beauty, a pattern of human existence itself.

Wishes, hopes, dreams orchestrated into a gentle concert that is both overwhelming and mouthwatering. I begin detecting flavors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think I'm hungry." I say, lick my lips and look up.

Chapter 6. Lake's Bottom

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

Sirens clap, giggling, talking to me all at once.

"One at a time, guys, please, you're too loud! I can't stand it, it hurts my brain!" I shriek and momentarily flinch at the sound of my voice, afraid to raise it again. Talking seems

fine, but yelling promises to shatter my skull. Yet deep inside me something sinister is grinning. That something tells me, *Try it out.* That something nags at me, *This is so cool. I bet you can do all kinds of shit now. I bet you can crush bones between fingers, scream at a level of one hundred thirty decibels and watch windows burst, swim anywhere you want, chase submarines, syphon entire oceans through your gills, charm people with your song, and kill, kill, kill. Just think what you can do to your father.*

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

Two divers leap over the boat's side and plunge into the lake. They begin descending, trailing two streams of bubbles. Their souls make a racket of noises, amplified by water and my heightened hearing. One is a mix of baseball hits, beer bottle clinks, and what sounds like crackling crab shells, with a touch of ukulele on top. All together it sounds... acidic. The other one emits something close to breaking plant pots, gun shots and a

whizzing electric shaver. On a base of bad shower singing. Rubbery. No, oily. Just like Canosa said. Sensing a soul's taste based on its sound is indescribably cool. Forgetting everything, I crouch to push off towards the surface.

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

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

Sirens laugh, Canosa hushes them.

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

"But you said..." I begin.

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

"Sorry. Thank you! I thought... Well, if I wanted to be accepted into your family, how would I earn it then?" I say, sensing divers come closer without looking. Acidic and oily. I

don't care that he's oily, sounds pretty good to me. My chest grumbles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, you did." I manage.

"Good." As if someone flipped a switch, she's suddenly smiling. "I'm still not telling you my secret, until you prove

worthy of it." She turns on her heels rousing a little cloud of dust.

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

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

"Perhaps I know what happened to your mother."

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

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

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

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

A helicopter flips its blades above us. The rickety noise is bearable this time, I seem to be adjusting. Yet it unnerves me, I don't want to be discovered by police divers. Thankfully, they're searching in the wrong direction, perhaps thinking that the current carried my body from under the bridge deeper south into Lake Union. That's right, one out of eight suicide jumper's bodies is never found. I suppress an urge to float to them and tell them they should stop looking, shake my head and snap myself back.

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

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

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

"Why?" I say.

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

"Kill him."

"Kill him."

Their calls become a chant.

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

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

"A siren hunter has no soul, stupid."

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

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

"He scares me."

"I think he's a pervert!"

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

Abruptly, sirens stop spinning.

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

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

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

"But, my father. It's impossible. Why the hell would he do that? He has a job. He owns his own business and it's making good money. I mean..." I try to find an argument, but somehow all of this makes sense. His hate for women, his favorite way to drill me on the question of what women were really made for, and

his favorite answer to that about them being only good enough for hauling water. His hate of noises, of all things wet, his constant yelling at mom to shut up whenever she was singing.

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

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

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

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

I nod.

"See? I like it when we're all in agreement. Well, then, is your answer yes or no?" Canosa let's me go. I sit, staring up at them all. I'm torn. Here is my chance to do what I dreamed of doing, never admitting to anyone to my darkest secrets, to my most gruesome ideas on what I would do to my father, if I only could, especially right after his assaults.

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

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

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

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

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

I look at Canosa's face, forever young.

"I've read every single book about sirens, and none of them mention anything about siren hunters. It can't be true." Yet I know she's right. And I know why me killing myself would've never hurt him like I wanted. It was a wrong idea. He doesn't love me. Never did, never will. He never loved my mother either.

He's probably incapable of loving anyone. Of course he can't love, he doesn't have a soul! Another thought strikes me.

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

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

"So you know?"

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

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

"Good."

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

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

She huddles in between sirens and they float away.

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

I flap my arms and legs lightly, alone in the murk, unsure what to do next. And I'm starving. My chest grumbles with rolling emptiness, as if it's a vacuum asking for music, for

divine vibration called human soul. It's tugging at my core, and I turn my attention upward. There, above the water, hangs the Aurora Bridge, with cars chasing across it north and south, with plenty of souls to feast on. Or I could surprise a couple bikes on the Burke-Gilman trail, or I could...

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

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

I kick with my legs and swiftly propel myself upward in a couple of butterfly strokes, then pause about five feet from the surface. Where do I go now? I suppose Papa is still on the bridge, but no matter how hard I'll listen, I won't hear him because he has no soul, if what Canosa says is true. Great. I could try going home, but he's probably at the police station right now giving a report on my disappearance. That means I'll

have to wait till he gets home, which he probably won't do as he'll have to go check on his store like he does every morning, tell his employees he won't be there today and all that crap. After that he'll get home. No, I know what he will do. He will get on his boat, to hunt. He'll probably figure out by then that because they didn't find my body, there is a high chance that I got turned.

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

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

My thoughts get interrupted by a sound of a human soul, about twenty yards north, on the Fremont side of the shore. There are other sounds around it, but this one stands out and rings special. On impulse, I swim toward it. It comes from Lake Washington Rowing Club marina. Papa is a member of this club, he parks his boats and kayaks there. The soul seems to be moving towards me, it detaches from the dock area and glides south across the canal. I hear the drizzle of the rain and the splashing of paddles. Someone is rowing out on the boat. In this

weather? Must be a rescuer looking for me, or maybe another diver. But why would he row on a wooden boat and not use a motor one?

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

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

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

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

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

It's familiar and warm, like home, like hands, like breakfast. Even a bit like Vivaldi's four seasons, which Hunter made me listen to whenever we got stoned, under the pretext of cultural enrichment and a divine experience, because somehow classical music was supposed to make us feel more high or something like that. I admit, after a couple joints, it did sound good. As it does now. Everything I hear coming from this soul feels sweet and warm like a freshly baked homemade apple pie, like comfort food. And I decide I don't care who it is, I have to try it.

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

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

The boat inches closer.

I hug my pain and float like driftwood. How will I do it, then? Crawl into the boat? What if it's a woman, what if she

freaks and starts screaming? There is plenty of police around.

Fuck! I can't decide what to do.

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

I want to feed.

I tense and close my eyes, to concentrate.

One. Two. Three.

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

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

Chapter 7. Bright's Boat

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

There is metallic odor of anxiety mixed with fresh sweat and a touch of cigarette smoke trailing from his skin. It's a he, I don't know how I know, I simply do. As if done waiting for an opportune moment, melody of his soul hits me full force, a

beautiful harmony broken up by a hinge of pain. It emits emotional vibrations, I can almost taste them. Surprise. Fear. Awe? Why would he feel awe. Is this how it's supposed to be, some kind of killer admiration? Before I can think anymore, a fight erupts inside me, the new versus the old. The new demands I open my eyes and feed right this second, the old squints even harder till I feel like my whole face will collapse in on itself. The new opens my mouth, the old clamps my mouth shut with an audible click and makes me shudder all over. The new is the siren, the old is the human, and the siren wins. Syrupy substance of my victim's soul pours over me and I break into a song on instinct.

Perched like a bird, holding onto the sides of the boat for balance, without realizing what I'm singing or how I decided to sing exactly this, I spell out the first few verses of "We can't be apart" by Siren Suicides, my favorite UK band, from their latest album called Fatal. I always listen to it when I miss Hunter, it makes me ache and makes me feel comfortable at the same time.

"There you are

"Without me you cry

"I surround you

"Love me or I die..."

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

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

"I adore you

"See me or I fly

"I dream of you

"Dream with me, don't lie..."

His soul reverberates to my rhythm, tunes in and morphs into a submissive harmony. I imagine it happening. I imagine bending it, telling it to shed its host, pulse to my beat, slink inside me. I imagine the warmth filling my chest, unclenching

agony of hunger, replacing my void with a fresh soul. I imagine gulping it up. What's really happening is, nothing. Nothing happens. Something is wrong, I'm doing something wrong. Still, perhaps out of sheer stubbornness, the siren in me urges me to keep trying.

"Can you hold my hand

"Can you hold my heart

"Can you hold my soul

"I can't be apart..."

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

Number one, I can't believe my eyes.

"Hunter?"

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

pop my eardrums, pounding hard. I'm both horrified and ecstatic to see him.

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

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

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

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

"Say something! I hate it when you're quiet like this. How did you know - What the *fuck* are you doing here, in..." I notice

the finally polished paddles, the maroon paint of the bench Hunter is sitting on, "...my father's boat?"

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

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

"Oh my god, I forgot. Stop staring!" I cup both boobs with palms of my hands. Hunter's expression doesn't change, it's as if he's now looking *through* my hands, his gaze steady, drooling.

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

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

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

"I'll be fine."

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't peek!"

"Put the damn jacket on!"

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

"I'm done." I say and only now look around. We're sitting in the boat way south from the Aurora Bridge, having drifted off past the marina where my father parks his boats and out of earshot of the commotion. Red and blue lights flash on top of

the bridge, and a couple officers peer down the bridge from the side where I jumped. If they looked to the other side, they would've undoubtedly seen us. Further north Harbor Patrol boat floats idle. I seem to be taking in noises better, as well as colors and smells. Out of the depth of my sluggish memory a question surfaces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I open my mouth, swarmed with a sudden urge to ask a million questions, not knowing where to begin, shaking from the sinking understanding that I am, indeed, alive, and a siren at

that, and it's totally like in the movies. I'm tempted to jump into water and test how fast I can swim, and at the same time feel hunger raise its ugly head again and try to push it down, because Hunter's soul sounds very tempting. I take a deep breath. So my lungs work on land, and gills work underwater. Nice.

"First, where exactly are we going?"

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

"Fine, that works."

"Do you have any shoes?"

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

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

"Borrowed it?" I repeat.

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

"Where is he, anyway?"

"At the police department, last I know."

We pass a few morning commuter yachts. A woman my mother's age leans over the side of one and waves hello to us, her practiced polite smile making me want to be mean and punch her in the face, maybe because I would never have a mother like that, the proper type, the one that makes lunches for you to eat at school and ferries you around to various activities. Disgust with myself for thinking this poisons my mood and turns it to anger.

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

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

"Nice try, Hunter. Flattery will get you places, I'm sure you know that and are using it to your advantage." As much as I try, I'm not mad anymore. Hunter has this tricky way of

dissolving my anger with words. I don't know how he does it.

"Regardless of that, you're still full of shit."

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

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

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

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

"Well, let's see here." He lets go of the paddles for a minute and scratches his head. With my new senses I can almost see steam rising from his worked up muscles, warm under grey

cotton hoodie, now an unidentifiable shade of a wet rug. "For one, you don't strike me as a Fremont troll's wife..."

"Stop it. It's not funny, ok? I'm being serious. I could've killed you." Talking is easier now, I'm adjusting, my ears stopped hurting and objects stopped looking as if traced with a neon marker.

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

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

"Owww!" He yelps.

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

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

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The punch."

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

"Hey, I got something for you."

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

Hunter pushes the envelope under my nose with one hand, with another wipes the snot from under his nose, now pink from being outside in the wet and cold for so long. I watch raindrops paint dots on the paper, first dark blue, then turning indigo, then deep royal.

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

"Go away." I press my lips together, still trying to be mad but unable to, my heart racing, one thought pounding in my head, *He didn't forget, he didn't forget like last year, he got me a Birthday present! Does it mean that we're more than friends now? Is he trying to tell me something? What could it be though, some*

gift card or maybe cash? If it's cash, I hope it's fifty bucks. I could buy some weed and a new Siren Suicides hoodie, because mine is gone now, torn off by the stupid water. Fuck, I loved it. I hear my fingers touch the envelope, hear the slightest movement of skin against paper fiber. Over this gentle rustle, I hear Hunter's soul, the impossible sound of happiness wrapped in that homey comfortable feeling. And in the background, the rolling waves, the drizzle of the rain, the boat and car traffic, and above it all the buzz of human souls, amplified by the open sky over the lake. I realize I've gotten used to the constant noise by now and have even tuned it out while focused on my conversation with Hunter.

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

"Stop, it's annoying."

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

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

"...so sweet and delicious?"

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

We look at each other.

"Shit." I say. "That's my father's motor boat, hear it?"

"Yeah, and the harbor patrol." Hunter grabs the paddles.

"We're fucked."

Chapter 8. Seward Park

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

"They'll be here in a couple of minutes. Three minutes, tops." Hunter says, breathing heavily from rowing. I look at

him, not remembering who he is or where we are or what's happening.

"Huh?" I say, blinking. Reality rushes at me and I realize I'm clutching the blue envelope Hunter gave me, still unopened, as if it's a rope thrown to me overboard a ship and I'll die if I let go. I quickly stuff it into the rain jacket pocket and try to act normal. "Three minutes, you said?" While I say it, I try to remember who *they* are and why should I be worried. Then I hear the engines and the world rights itself. My wonder gets replaced with panic, but before it has time to flourish, a sense of strange tranquility calms me. I remember that I'm not a weak girl anymore, I'm a siren and I can do wicked things. *You just wait, Papa, I'll show you what women were really made for.*

"More like two, now." Hunter says.

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

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

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

"You just tried successfully taking on a kid sitting alone in a rowboat, so I'm sure this will be easy." He waves

dismissively towards the approaching boats. "Take your time, go ahead." He continues rowing, shaking from adrenaline, his heart pounding like crazy. His grin fades, his eyes focus on me, arms move in one fluid motion. We're advancing at a turtle's pace compared to motorized boats.

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

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

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

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

What a coward, always running, never daring to face my fears. And I promise myself, that one day I will. One day I'll work up the courage to do it. For now I'll simply focus on

getting away and lying low, until I can figure out what I can and can't do and have some practice.

Harbor patrol is advancing on us, my father's boat behind it. Both diesel water-jet engines going at the speed of seven knots, or eight miles per hour, both painted an indiscreet shade of grey, yet they couldn't be more different. Patrol's boat is a standard motor launch, about twenty feet long, clunky and squarish, with black letters spelling SEATTLE POLICE on its hull and blue stripes with Seattle Police logo. My father's boat is three times bigger, a sleek Pershing 64 made by Ferretti, Italian, of course, more a stylish bullet than a boat, pleasure for the eye, with a maroon inscription on it. Talia. My mother's name. He bought the boat in 1992, when they met, and named it after her. Then they got married, went on honeymoon in Italy for Christmas, where my mom got pregnant. I always wondered what went wrong after that, what happened, but nobody ever told me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, you okay? Listen, we've got to get in the water and swim to the shore, do you hear me? You're a siren, for Chris's sake, stop acting like you're fucking stupefied!" My head lolls back and forth in rhythm to Hunter's attempt to revive me. The warmth from his hands makes me want to retch from hunger. In

attempt to suppress it, I scan the horizon until I see downtown in the distance and Space Needle to the right of it. A floatplane takes off and the rumble of its engine suddenly makes the world come alive with sounds, colors, and smells, as if a muted veil has been torn off.

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

"Shit!" Beads of sweat roll off Hunter's forehead, as he leans over me. I don't remember how I slid to the bottom. "Don't you pass out on me now, breathe! In and out, in, out." I breathe, hear boat engines, and then someone is shouting into a loudspeaker off the patrol boat to our left, announcing themselves and asking us if we're okay. To our right my father's boat levels with us. I can't see him, but I can hear him take

quick steps out of the cockpit, through saloon and onto the deck. He leans over the rail and I see his face, set in a strange mix of pain and anger, dark against milky sky. Our eyes lock. I gasp for air, trembling, shaking my head 'no'.

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

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

Then I see father raise his hand, and, like a signal, instead of the usual paralysis, it throws me into action. I no longer know how to think, my body seems to have taken over. The siren in me, it drives me. I sit up, push Hunter to the side and lean forward, lay flat on my stomach at the nose of the boat, like a carved figurehead at the bow of a ship. I touch lake's surface, ignoring Hunter's swearing, Papa's shouting of my name on repeat, police officer's talking into loudspeaker. All noise vanishes into a long tunnel far away, except the lulling sound of water.

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

I begin with a low drone, deep from within my chest, through closed lips, blending with gentle rush of the wind and chirping of morning birds. It grows stronger, fueled by my moan of pain, flapping its wings like a swan and landing into lake's fluid sorrow. It understands me, we speak the same language. I feel like it nods, I nod in return. And then it hums back. Together with the lake, we create motion.

Perhaps mesmerized by this, rain stops.

The rowboat begins to slide forward, in between harbor patrol and my father's yacht. I take a breath through my nose and hum more, producing a tune without opening lips. No words needed. It sounds like a long and drawn out *mmmmmm*, beginning of the word mother. Lake hums with me, and I feel a stream of energy pass through both of us. Water's surface appears to become a corridor of speed and the rowboat happily glides down it. Foam sprays my face in a shower of droplets. If this was a floatplane, I think we'd take off by now. From the speed of three knots to twenty in a few seconds, it really feels like flying.

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

His question interrupts my flow and I abruptly stop humming. Still, it takes me a moment to get back to reality to

focus on what he said. Rowboat instantly slows down and we pass through a shadow from Interstate five bridge that's blocking the sky above us. I lift my upper body, twist and sit up facing Hunter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Awesome. Can you talk to it right now? Like, tell it to get us out of here? NOW?" Hunter hugs himself, shuddering, his cotton hoodie wet and stuck to his chest, his jeans soaked from spray.

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

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

"Where?"

"I don't care where, let's just go already!"

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

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

"Then why didn't you simply hand me over to police or to my father?" I say the first thing that comes to my mind, to continue on watching my hunger.

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

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

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

"Fuck you!" I throw at him, but more out of habit than anger. He only grins back.

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

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

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

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

I veer to the right and we glide along Lake Washington boulevard to surprised shrieks of usual joggers and dog walkers. I realize that I'm aiming at Seward park, and I know why I turned here. The park is positioned on top of a peninsula and is covered with almost virgin woods where we can quickly get lost and hide from our searching party. Even though it took me three

buses and almost two hours to get here, it's where I'd go when skipping school. I'd wander along hiking trails, eat wild berries, and then sit alone on the benches of its outdoor amphitheater, smoking the afternoon away, pretending like I'm watching a live performance of *The Odyssey* or listening to my favorite songs by Siren Suicides.

I hum the tune of one right now.

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

The boats bottom scrapes against gravel and we stop.

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

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

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

"Yeah, like you would've listened."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

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

I give him an evil stare.

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

I purse my lips and climb out of the boat, probing the pebbles with my bare feet, feeling the roundness or the sharpness of each stone, yet not registering the familiar pain you'd expect from standing on them, having them dig into your soles. I make a few steps, pretending to feel for pebbles, but really watching my sensations, realizing with horror that my very skin, my whole body perceives Hunter's warm breathing and longs for it, hungry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I hear the wet slosh-slosh of Hunter's sneakers behind me, and take off, intending to put in a greater distance between us. And sure enough, my hunger diminishes as I run across the trail and to the blackberry bushes that grow at the beginning of the forest line. I catch my breath. Everything tree and bush and

every blade of grass looks magnificent. I try to take in as much of this beauty as I can, the colors, the smells, the feel when touched. It's like my senses have been dialed up a whole turn of a volume knob, to the max. Water is brilliant blue, trees are brilliant green. I hear movement whisper to me from across the entire park, muskrats, beavers, river otters, turtles, owls, eagles, woodpeckers. Their souls form a cacophony of life, punctured by souls of rare hikers. It all adds up to a divine concert that makes my empty chest rumble with hunger and I feel like I'm ready to hunt. An idea crosses my mind. I gently pull a blackberry off the nearby bush and place it in my mouth, bite on it, expecting a familiar taste.

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

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

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

"What did you do, eat a blackberry?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah." Hunter says, not impressed.

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

So this is how a hungry siren feels.

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

And in this moment I hear the racket of a motorboat. One very specific motorboat, Pershing 64, Italian made, named Talia, for my mother.

Chapter 9. North Shore

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

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

His mind is elsewhere, because he turns to look at me and, without saying anything, turns back to gaze into nothing, hugging himself tighter and tracing lines in the dirt with the tip of his sneaker.

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

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

No answer.

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

"Can you open it already?" He says into the sky with the passion of an erupting volcano.

"Open what?" I'm momentarily stumped.

"I thought so. You forgot." He says in a fallen voice.

"I forgot what?" I feel like my shittiness assessment gets flushed down the drain very rapidly, leaving only a mild residue of having my shit together, but in reality making me feel completely and utterly helpless. "What did I forget?" I say, rubbing hands on my jeans, as if it will help somehow.

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

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

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

"Hunter, stop it! Stop acting like a baby, all right? I just had a lot of crazy stuff happen to me, and you know that my memory is fucked up. Of course I remember about your present, but it's kinda like the wrong time to open it right now. My father is going to be here any minute, there are people jogging

this way, and whatever else is happening in the woods behind us, and..." I want to say I'm hungry and I want to eat him, but I bite my tongue.

"Of course." He says. "I should've expected that."

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

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

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

And I see the beginnings of familiar grin play on Hunter's lips. He rarely gets upset about things like this, but when he does, he starts acting like a total baby, because whatever it is that upset him is very important to him. For the life of me, I could never phantom the transformation but I knew that if I didn't act and didn't do what he wanted, he'd erupt into a burst of anger later, and it usually doesn't look pretty. Or he'd

smoke weed and drink cheap beer till he puked his guts out, claiming that it cleared his psyche and was for the better of humanity, so that he wouldn't unleash himself upon the world. He's sweep his arms open at that and then fall asleep, snoring.

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

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

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

"Oh my God! Two tickets to Siren Suicides! Wait, what -- Tonight?"

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

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

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

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

"What?"

"A siren."

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

"There she is, right under your nose." He points to my chest. "Listen to this. Twenty minutes ago, I'm taking a stroll on a boat, and then BAM! she jumps out of the water. Scared the shit out of me."

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

Before I can say anything else, Hunter cups my face, his palms on fire. His breath is like summer filled with bird whistles, laughter, and all things home, and I give in to it, to this feeling, unable to care about anything anymore. "Forget

about your dad for a second. Look at me. I'm not your enemy. I'm just trying to make you feel better, okay? Why did you jump off that bridge? Give me the real reason."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

I blink and try to look away, making my arms hang limp so as not to bruise Hunter with my grip.

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

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

"No, you're not."

His eyes lock with mine.

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

"You're not rotten."

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

"No, you don't."

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

"Happy Birthday, Ailen."

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

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

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

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

Hunter pulls away. "What is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you love me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" I gasp.

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

"You knew? Then why the fuck did you drag your feet?" I turn back, thinking that we have another ten minutes, easy,

considering my father's distaste of getting wet and the amount of time it will take him to open up the tender garage and lift out his small inflatable boat, not mentioning paddling all the way to the shore and then risking getting wet. I badly want to see him do it.

"I hope he wrecks it." I say. As if to answer, Papa gets out from the back of the cockpit and carefully steps forward, towards the nose of the boat, to the very end, then kneels, a large grey plastic loud speaker in his hands, dressed in one of his boating outfits, as always. I wonder what he's about to shout at me, and, seeing the distance between us, I decide to get bold.

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

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

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

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

Instead of putting his mouth to the loud speaker, my father sort of looks though it, and before I understand what is

happening, a wave of a concentrated sonic boom hits me in the face.

BAM!

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

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

It needs to be a clean blow, Papa used to tell me, when his hand began to hurt after hitting my face several times. The most effective way to teach a woman a lesson is to slap her, it humiliates her and makes her remember better. Here is how you do it. You keep your palm open, like this, then strike with the back of your hand as if you crack a whip, deliberate and fast. Blast her. It hurts but leaves no mark, how about it? Genius, I'd say. That makes her shut her mouth, makes her stop all this incessant whining. Have you read Walter Perry? No? You should. Wise man. "Their song," he said, "though irresistibly sweet, was no less sad than sweet, and lapped both body and soul in a fatal

lethargy, the forerunner of death and corruption." Listen to his words. You, women, corrupt us, men. That's what you do. And because I happen to have a daughter, I have to work hard on rooting this out of you, do you understand? It pains me to do it, but it has to be done, for your future. He'd slap me one last time to drive home the message and then blow on my cheeks, all without touching, in an attempt to make me feel better. I'm really, sorry, Ailen, but I believe that one day you will thank me for this. I'd stick out my tongue and lick off my tears, quickly, before he'd notice.

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

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

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

Hatred floods me. I open my mouth wide and roar. I roar for me, for my pain, and for my mother, for all those years she suffered from his hands, his maniac control, his zeal to make her into a controllable being, his mix of intense love towards her and hatred at the same time. I watch my father's posture grow slack as my roar reaches him, reaches his rotten nature hidden behind an expensive polo shirt, classic khakis, Gucci boat shoes, so proper, so stylish, you'd never guess what's inside. I holler at him, I want him dead.

The wind generated by my voice knocks him down, his knees buckle and slides into a sitting position, dropping his loud speaker to the right. And I know it's no loud speaker, it must be some kind of a sonic gun designed specifically to kill sirens, to blast us into oblivion. I inhale and holler more. As if from strong wind, waves form on the shore and roll towards the yacht, crashing against its hull, sending droplet flying into my father's face, into his closely cropped curly hair. His boat bobs and floats backwards, the name Talia teasing me with its lovely inscription.

"Ailen, watch out!" Hunter shrieks.

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

"Great. Just what I need right now."

Chapter 10. Douglas Firs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I strain to look as far to the right as I can and glimpse my father's figure aiming at sirens, glimpse him lowering his sonic gun, putting it on the deck and raising both of his arms. Does it mean he cares? Could it be, for real? Didn't he try shooting me a few minutes ago? I blink and suppress the urge to glue apart right there and then, one thought circulating in my mind. *He wanted a son, and he got a daughter. Canosa was there when I was born. Did he really get so mad that he dropped me on*

the floor? I feel tears break through my will and spill over my cheeks.

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

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

Canosa hunches next to me and circles her cold fingers around my neck but doesn't choke me this time. "Don't tell me your friend didn't let you in on his secret. You really didn't know?" She gasps. I shake my head and slowly understand who she's talking about. "Girls, did you hear that? What a gentleman, he loves her so much, he decided not to burden her with his problems."

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

"Hunter? Is that true?"

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

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

I gape, unable to comprehend how this is possible. I can hear his soul just fine, how could it be? I can't hear my father's soul, like there is nothing, only silence. Ominous silence that hangs over you in a sticky cloud of fear, even from the distance of ten yards. I can feel it on my skin.

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

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

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

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

me, smiling, knowing, tearing my love apart and stomping on it, cackling wildly. My heart drops to my stomach.

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

Sirens watch me silently, so does my father, holding on to the rail, in what appears to be deep thought.

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

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

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

"Scare me?" My laughter echoes off every single douglas fir in the fifty feet diameter around us. "You didn't want to scare me? I'm honored, oh esteemed Hunter Crossby." I lower my head as much as I can in Canosa's grip. "I need to erect you a statue or something, for me to bow to. Looks funny bowing to a guy who is plastered on the ground and surrounded by four naked girls,

don't you think?" I catch movement on the boat from the corner of my eye. Papa disappears into the cockpit.

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

We both glance in the direction of my father's yacht, but he is nowhere to be seen.

"What are you going to do to Hunter?" I say, suddenly scared. "He's my friend." I add, but the word 'friend' wavers in uncertainty.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, can we, can we?"

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

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

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

"No, I didn't. It's a load of crap! You fell down because you're clumsy and fat, which is not my problem." Ligeia sneers. Teles gasps at the insult and then grabs a handful of Ligeia's hair, Ligeia clasps Teles by her ears. They fall over each other and roll on the burned out grass. Raidne falls on top of both of them, screeching, and they proceed tumbling across the asphalt road, then break apart, stand and chase each other all the way

to the water, where Teles picks up a handful of pebbles and starts throwing them at Ligeia, who ducks and dives for Teles's feet. Raidne claps her hands, obviously excited by the fight.

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

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

"Hi. I'm Pisinoe. What's your name?"

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

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

Hunter turns to look at me, bewildered, I shrug my shoulders, at the impossibility of thinking what else to do, lost in confusion and the multitude of emotions that span from love to hate to longing for him to disgust to fear to a strange

premonition that something bad is about to happen. In one word, I feel confused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BAM!

Raidne bursts into nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If you were in my place, would you?" He says.

And I let myself think this over. Would I? If I truly loved someone, would I care who they were? Would anything else ever matter except what I felt? I remember the moment when I thought I'd be dead for sure, under the Aurora Bridge, when my past and my future ceased to exist and there was only *now*. It was as now as it could ever get. Did anything matter in that moment except what I felt right there and then? I let my eyes trace the lines

of Hunter's fingers, red from being cold, his wrists barely covered with fraying edges of his grey hoodie, then his arms, shoulders, neck, chin with traces of carefully shaved stubble; his ears, a bit too small for his head and sticking out lightly as if always in question. A chock-full of dark unruly hair that tends to bunch up any way it wants, the creases in his forehead like that of a surprised dog that doesn't know if it wants to chase its own tail or scratch its side or chew on a bone. His bushy eyebrows that he has a tendency to wiggle in an obnoxious way, to make me laugh, especially when we're smoking a joint.

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

Our eyes lock, and in that moment I know he's on my side. There is a trace of mischief in the corners of his mouth, an echo of shared understanding in the lines of his grin. I experience a kind of silent bonding without words that only true friends can have. No, there is more. A nagging thought pushes at the boundaries of my mind and I'm scared to face it. *This is not a simple friendship anymore, Ailen, this is love.* I want to tell it to shut up, but I know it's right. All these little things about him... every single one of them I love so much, it hurts. And there is nothing I can do about it, it's too powerful to resist. Whatever this means, I decide not to think about anymore. I want to be in the now, and right now I want to be together.

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

He grins.

"Care for a hike?" I say.

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

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

And we run.

Chapter 11. Magnificent Forest

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

Hunter stops under a young vine maple and spits, his chest heaving, his breath coming out in a series of wheezing noises.

"I need to rest a bit, if you don't mind." He says.

"Sure." I say.

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

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

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

"Ah." I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sour suspicion arises in me and wipes all thought from my mind, pounding with its intensity so loudly, I'm afraid Hunter will hear it. "Did you really mean what you said, over there, on the shore?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Like you would care."

Awkward silence hangs between us. Unable to find the right thing to say, I study my bare feet, dusty and dirty, covered

with soil, moss, and pine needles, yet not a single scratch on them. Their perfectly white skin contrasts with the faded blue of my skin-tight jeans.

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

He furrows his eyebrows. "We are friends."

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

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

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

Hunter looks away without saying a thing.

"And thanks for reminding me about my mother. Thank you very much." To suppress pain, I watch another spider make its

way across the maple's trunk and concentrate on the movement of his hairy legs, hearing them shuffle. It feels trippy.

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

I look him straight in the eyes.

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

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

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

weapon?" I cross my arms and stand with my back straight as a ramrod.

"FUCK YOU!" Hunter throws at me and falls silent.

"You betrayed me!" I yell.

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

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

"What's that supposed to mean? Peace for as long as we're in the woods, and then we'll figure it out later kind of deal? Let me be your friend for now because I can't make up my fucking mind as to what else I can say to get out of this?" I wait for an answer, fuming.

Hunter takes a step towards me and stumbles into a raccoon hole up to his knee right under a young maple. He brushes twigs out of his face and swears loudly.

"Fucking raccoons!"

That does it for me. I grab the maple by the trunk and uproot it in one great pull. Dozens of insect souls peep in

protest. I hold it high up, ignoring the dirt from its roots falling on face and give it a good shake.

Hunter throws up his hands. "All right, all right! I heard you the first time, no need to shout. I'm sorry, ok? How was I supposed to know you'd be the first siren I'd come across when I was accepting the job?"

"You'll have to tell me about it later. And apology accepted." I slowly put the tree down, but not before shaking it once more for a dramatic effect. A soul surfaces into my bandwidth of hearing, it's moving about a mile or so away. And some kind of a motor. Then more souls. Now that I'm no longer focused on Hunter, I can hear them all very clearly, probably hikers and dog walkers and runners.

"We're not alone here, in this park." I say.

Hunter doesn't pay attention to me, his eyes are on the tree. "This is so awesome. I wish I could do that."

I want to smack him. "Let's go!" I throw the tree to the ground and tug on his sleeve. He keeps looking back at the tree, then at me, then shakes his head.

"Okay, I heard you. I'm going."

Peace restored, hands clasped, we stagger forward like two divers, parting the feeble spider-silk instead of water, slicing into the ticket of green underbrush and bramble, under the watchful eye of the rare September sun. We wander like this,

blindly, for the next ten minutes or so until we stumble onto a trail. Hunter attempts to brush out spider webs from his hair and I listen for nearby souls, noticing that miraculously not a single spider jumped on me and not a single spider web stuck to my skin or my clothes. That confirms that I'm evil. I exhale, struggling to accept it.

"Where to now?" Hunter says.

"SHHHH!" I concentrate on listening to a few people walk around the park, one of them really close, maybe a mile away, so not close enough to be alarmed. Not yet, anyway.

"Don't shush me!"

"Sorry, I had to make sure we're not going to be seen by anyone. I'm not in the mood of facing people yet." I say.

"Why do you care?" Hunter says. "You're a siren, you can suck 'em all dead if you wanted to, no?"

The idea makes my chest convulse with the void and at the same time I feel horrified, thinking that I'm a monster, one of those they show in the movies, waiting in the woods for prey. I shudder.

"Do you know how hard it is to accept yourself for who you really are, when it's not who you want to be, but no matter what you do, you know you can't change it?" I raise my bloodless palms and look at them, covered with papery thin skin, fueled by something other than real red blood, because the usual pink tone

is gone. My hands look bluish, like those of a floater found on the beach. Dead.

Hunter raises his hand to touch mine, and I drop both hands, take a step back, horrified at the color difference in our skin, not wanting to see it.

He sighs. "I understand. On the other hand, imagine that you accept yourself for who you are, but then something happens and you have to change yourself into someone else. On top of that, you have no choice in the matter. Now that's really fucked up."

"But you *do* have a choice." I say.

"Easy for you to say." He sniffs loudly and wipes his runny nose on the sleeve, then looks at me with forced enthusiasm, and I know he's about to change the topic, like he always does to avoid discussing life matters and life meaning and such, covering it up with his usual theatrics.

I see hidden pain in his eyes and keep my mouth shut.

"Hey, I think there is a place you'd like to see." He pulls me with him, and I let him lead, still in throes of conflict with myself, trying to accept the fact that eventually I will need to eat and at the same time pushing my hunger deep down, hoping it would disappear.

Another twenty minutes, and we crash through the last of the trees into a clearing, and I know where we are. I always got

to this place from the road on the other side, walking along it after I got off the bus. I've never seen it from this side of the park before.

"This is my hiding place." I say. "How did you know?"

"Yours? It's *my* hiding place. I come here to skip school. Have been, for years." Hunter says.

"Seriously? Me too!" I exclaim. "I've never seen you here before, always thought of this as my own."

"That's weird, I always thought of it as mine." He grins.

I feel a new thread of connection form between us and at the same time a pang of disappointment pins me. He never told me about his secret place. Although I never told him either. That levels it and I let the subject go, taking in the scene.

Sky is ablaze with diffused sunlight, as if a million tiny suns are shining through a thin veil. Air gives off that sweet after-the-rain aroma. The ground tilts downhill into a grassy expanse the size of a school football field, flanked by fir trees on all sides. About two thirds into the meadow, there are three sections of circular benches, eight rows in all. I remember counting them when I was bored.

I follow Hunter, cross the asphalt road and step onto the grass, feel its burnt expanse scratch my bare soles. It slinks along the benches and stoops into a piece of concrete slab inlaid with rough stone. The stage. Beyond it are more trees,

and then the lake, not visible from where I stand but lulling with its low grumble.

"Hello again, my amphitheater, I missed you." I whisper.

"It's amphitheatron, from ancient Greek *amphi* for 'around' and *theatron* for 'place of viewing'. It is... but the siren meadow." Hunter proclaims in a stage voice.

"Oh, really? Fascinating, I didn't know that."

Hunter gives me an evil stare. "Whatever." He jogs ahead.

I raise my leg and stop. There is a nagging feeling in my stomach that this is all too easy, that we are being watched. I turn, but see nothing in the woods. Though it seems like the trees themselves have moved in and are hovering closer, as if they carry a dangerous weight on their top branches, ready to spill it on our heads. I wait a beat, terrified that it might be sirens and determined not to miss them this time, but there is nothing. No movement, no noise. And I don't like this silence, it presses down on me like it's about to erupt.

I wonder if Papa managed to shoot Canosa and the others, or if they attacked him. Or not.

"What is it?" Hunter hops from bench to bench, balancing, peering into the dark woods behind me.

"I thought I heard something, but it's nothing. Hey, let's get out of here, get on the bus and get to your place. I really don't like staying here any longer." I say, but Hunter doesn't

hear me. He is in his theatrical mood, I can feel it, stoned or not, mesmerized by the stage.

He tiptoes from bench to bench, his arms stuck out as if he's tightrope walking, freestyle, between two highrise building, making terrible faces like he's falling to his doom. I scowl but then am being swept by nostalgia myself, deciding to stick a little longer to remember the hours that I've spent in this place, imagining sirens to be real. "And now I'm a siren myself, for real." I say under my breath and shake my head, unable to believe it, wanting to pinch myself and to wake up from it like from a bad dream.

Hunter is already attempting to climb a post, hugging it with both legs and inching up, panting. It's part of a freestanding post-and-beam frame, twenty feet tall and about five feet wide. There are two of them. They flank the stage on both sides like two gigantic doorways into nothing. I have no clue what purpose they serve, having always imagined sirens sitting on top of each, in a way birds would perch. I'd think of their hair as feathered wings flapping in the wind, ready to take them to flight, while I'd be watching them from the ground, sending rings of smoke into the sky. Thinking that this is the perfect place for a marijuana induced mind to conjure up fantastic scenarios. I blink and look for Hunter.

Having not made it too far off the ground, he abandons his effort and jumps on stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let me introduce our special guest, the star of tonight's performance, the magnificent, all-powerfull, queen of seas and songs and all things magical, a newborn siren and a femme fatale, Ailen Bright." He points at me in an elegant sort of way and nearly falls from balancing on one leg.

I feel movement in the woods behind me, a very quick succession of steps, almost too careful to be noticed, and then silence again. I turn, but it's only a squirrel. Then I hear a motor rev up and die not too far away. Goose bumps wash over me.

"Hey, we really don't have time for this. Let's go." I say in a loud whisper as I come up to the stage and look up at Hunter from below, his hoodie now almost dry from running around, but looking like he crawled in dirt for hours. I wonder if the bus driver will let us on, him looking so filthy, and me having no shoes on top of it. "Do you have any cash on you? How are we gonna pay for the bus?"

"Oh, who cares about time and money, when the magnificent Ailen Bright graces us, poor mortals, with her jingling presence. Like a thousand bells on the wind—"

"Hunter, stop it! Are you listening to me? You enjoyed having naked girls around you, didn't you? Is that what it's all

about, the romantic side of being a siren hunter? Did it ever cross your mind that it's not a game? They can kill you. Weren't you the one warning me about the killer sirens, remember? I don't want to lose you. And I don't want my father showing up here and blowing me into nothing like he blew up Raidne. Bam, and she was gone. Did you see that? And I don't want Canosa to rip off my head, okay? And..."

"Okay, okay!" He sighs, and pulls me up on stage. "I'm sorry, all right. Got carried away a little."

"It's fine. Let's go catch the bus." I say.

"Right. Bus." He looks away.

"You don't have any money on you, do you?"

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out when we get there, I'll come up with something." He grins.

"As you always do." I say, but my sarcasm is lost as he pulls me by the hand off the stage towards the lake, through a thin growth of trees and to another parking lot.

By now the morning is in full swing and I can hear souls of parents and kids about a quarter of a mile to the west, crowding the playground. And one more soul nearby, but not too close, perhaps twenty feet away. I relax a little.

Thankfully, this particular parking lot is removed from the busy park entrance and there are hardly any people here and no cars parked. No, there is something there. We cross the road and

I squint to see better. It's a bike, leaning casually on its stand at the very end of the parking lot, under a huge Douglas fir tree. It's hardly noticeable, blending into the shadows, an unusual silver grey color with bright white letters on the side of its fairing. Even with my new enhanced vision, I almost missed it.

Hunter stops abruptly and drops my hand. "Holy shit, Ailen. It's a Ducati 748, just like my dad's! They must have done a custom job, look at the silver. Gorgeous. Stock only comes in yellow, red, or black."

Hunter breaks into a trot, crosses the road and squats next to the bike. I follow.

"No, it's not a custom job. This looks like original factory coloring. Man, I think I know what it is. There were only one hundred of these babies produced, Neiman Marcus limited edition. It's a 748L! Look at the metallic shading, carbon fiber fender, Christ..." He continues mumbling under his breath, stroking the bike, admiring it.

"Um, is that supposed to be cool?" I ask, not impressed.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Forget about the bus. This is what we need." He passes fingers through his hair and wipes palms of his hands on his jeans, standing up.

I slowly understand how Hunter managed to take out his father's bike for rides without his father knowing anything about it.

"No, you're not thinking that." I say, and tug on his sleeve.

"Oh, yes, I am. Got my tool on me, too." He taps several times on his jean pocket.

"You're out of your fucking mind."

"So what? We're talking life or death here, no? Weren't you the one telling me you wanted to get out of here as fast as you can? Besides, I always wanted to ride one." He pats the bike's leather seat.

I bite my lip, trying to suppress rising excitement. I know it's wrong, very very wrong, and yet I can't help myself to wonder how it would feel to ride this beast behind Hunter, hug him, press my face into his back; how we would look on this silver drop of speed glistening with that wet after-the-rain-shine.

"Who in their right mind would ride a motorcycle to Seward park on a Monday morning..." I raise my eyebrows, trying to change the subject.

"Who cares." Hunter squats next to the bike and peeks between the front wheel and the fairing.

"Whoever it is, I'm assuming it's probably a guy, anyway, I heard him ride up here and I can hear his soul now. He's about twenty feet away, east of here. What if he comes out and sees us?"

"That's what I have you for, let me know when you hear him close." Hunter stands and rummages inside his jeans pocket, taking out gum wrappers and change, dropping them on the ground, reaching in again.

"What are you planning to do?" I say.

"Watch."

He kneels into the shallow puddle next to the bike, hardly noticing that he gets himself wet again, hugs the front of the fairing with his left arm and stick his right into the bike's guts.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" I say and resent my mounting excitement, trying to not jump up and down at the prospect of doing something so utterly illegal and scary.

"Yeah, I do. Watch the road." Hunter takes out his hand, readjusts the short piece between his forefinger and his thumb, bends it with his teeth and shoves it back under the fairing, his face swallowed by its curve. A quiet click later, he is up on his feet again, mounting the bike, pushing the start button. The engine roars to life. My world explodes with brilliant noise, I cover both ears.

But even through this racket, I hear the owner of the bike coming towards us, quick.

"He's coming!" I yell.

"Shit! Get on!" Hunter yells over the noise. I lift one leg and slide on the back seat, feel the heat from the exhaust penetrate my jeans and scorch the bare skin on my feet. I manage to find passenger pegs and unfold them by grabbing them with my toes and pushing them down.

"Hey!" A man in a black all-leather suit surfaces on the road, a silver helmet swinging in his left hand, bike keys dangling from his right. His close-cropped scalp sports greying hair and sinister features of a weathered rider. I feel ashamed at the excitement of stealing something so precious to this man, and at the same time the sinister side of me, the siren, grins greedily. *You must have been on your way somewhere when you urgently needed to take a dump, I think. Tough shit, mister, bad timing!*

"What the hell are you two doing? Get off my bike! Get off, get off!" Seemingly shocked at first, the man breaks into a clumsy run, clicking heels of his riding boots on the asphalt.

"FUCK! Hold on!" Hunter holds in the clutch, waddles, rolling the bike backwards, out of the parking lot, so he can turn into the road. The man closes in on us, another ten seconds or so, and he'll grab the back of my jacket. Just then Hunter,

stops, shifts into first gear, and gives gas. The bike roars. I wrap my arms around his waist even tighter, clasp my fingers together, and turn my head.

"BACK OFF!" I shout with evil glee.

My call cascades across the parking lot in a powerful acoustic wave. The man freezes in place, his mouth open, tips of his gloved fingers a few inches away from the bike's exhaust. Hunter guns the throttle and we take off.

Chapter 12: Highway 99

Three voices join in one resounding crescendo. Hunter's victorious *Woohoo!*, my shouting *Yeah, baby!*, and the bike's roaring engine sputtering and growling as if upset that we separated it from its rightful owner. Faint cries reach us from behind, *My bike! Help! Help!* then turn into echoes and disappear entirely. We lunge forward, one solid being, a precocious hooligan on two wheels, going from zero to thirty miles per hour in a few seconds. I ignore pain from loud noise and hot exhaust, let myself be mesmerized by movement, by smells of cedars and maples and firs. I inhale, watch all this greenery fly through my field of vision as we speed down Seward park road, weave along its S-curve, ignore stop signs and honks of rare cars, finally emerging from the park into an open road. It makes me feel like there is no way back, only forward; like it's been three years and not three hours since I became a siren. And I don't know why, but suddenly my eyes brim with tears.

I clasp my arms tighter around Hunter's waist and bury my face in the damp cotton of his hoodie, hoping he won't notice my crying. He turns into Lake Washington boulevard. For a second

the back wheel skids sideways, and I think we'll crash, but then it rights itself back up.

"Just a puddle!" Hunter yells over the wind.

I nod into his back, afraid my voice will sound too shaky if I answer. Afraid to stick out my face into rushing air, feeling overwhelmed with everything that happened this morning, trying to find the end of my sanity and hook it up, pull it to where I can see it and make sure I'm okay. Make sure everything will be okay, no matter what *it* will be.

We speed by sunken eyes of the houses to our left and quiet lake to our right, waking up the sleeping neighborhood with loud rumble. Bike splashes across puddles, dowses early risers in mist, making their dogs bark like mad for a few seconds before going back to their business. I can tell Hunter is having the time of his life. His hearts beats at an alarming rate, his muscles shake from adrenaline, and his entire body sort of buzzes with excitement, adding a general overtone to the melody of his soul. I want to sit like this, clutching him in my arms, racing into who knows what future, never letting go. Slowly, I begin calming down and dare to peek out from behind his back.

Wind hits me in the face, musses my hair. I squint to see better. The view is beautiful, almost too serene for our purpose. Tall oaks spread a canopy over the boulevard, forming a sort of a shadowed tunnel. A few yellow leaves fall and wave, as

if giving us permission to gun past them in a series of great motorized coughs. Lake lulls in rhythm to the jingling boat's masts in the nearby marina. I smell water lilies and pond algae, sweet and rank at the same time. Hunter shifts gears and the bike jerks, its back wheel brushes the curb. And it hits me that we both have no helmets or gear on. In my case, if we crash, I'm not sure what will happen, but I'll probably survive. In Hunter's case, however...

"Slow down!" I yell.

He doesn't hear me, because of the noise and because the wind carries my voice backwards not forward. Reality and all the facts connected with it, my attempted drowning in the bathtub this morning, jump from the bridge, birth as a siren, our escape, the image of Raidne being blown up, my father and Canosa pursuing me, everything rushes into my mind at once. Bike lurches again and it wakes me up completely. My throat goes dry. I turn my head to the right and glance over the lake, to the beach where we docked and left my father's rowboat sitting smack in the middle of the road. There should be his Pershing 64 moored not too far from the shore.

I peer and peer and see nothing. His yacht is gone, so are the sirens. From the distance of about half a mile and while riding on the back of a bike, I can't make out any white shapes on the beach nor can I hear any of them for miles. There is

immediate dry clicking sound of the Ducati's engine and underneath it a low drone of white traffic noise punctured by souls of a few morning joggers and commuters in their cars, dipped in human chatter, be it blasting music or listening to news on radio to talking on the phone. I wonder if the poor chap whose bike we stole has called police already and when they'll be on our tail, because I remember Hunter mentioning that it's illegal to ride a bike without a helmet. Great. My gut tells me we're about to pay for our madness.

Straight at first, now the boulevard turns twisty.

There are irregular engine revolutions, and then an oncoming old clunk of a beamer appears from behind a blind turn a second too fast, driving in the opposite lane, perhaps having turned too wide. Its headlights are turned off, and I smell weed.

"FUCK!" Hunter yells and veers to the right to avoid it, skirting the pavement. The bike's back wheel skids and I yelp in fear. The driver of the beamer sees us, opens his mouth in shock and yanks his steering wheel in the wrong direction. Old tires slide on wet asphalt and his beamer passes us so close, I can almost touch it. We squeeze by. I turn and witness it roll onto the grass and smash its bumper into an oak.

Crack!

There is the snapping of the seat belt and the unfolding of an air bag, mixed with fresh burned smell of a car wreck. The driver's soul, a mix of football shouts and an old guitar and some other unidentifiable whining flares up and joins in tempo to his heart rate going berserk. He sounds... salty. A salty soul yanked out of his Monday morning's boredom. I lick my lips, hungry and mad and disgusted at the same time.

"You're crazy!" I yell at Hunter, loudly. The amount of force I put into my yell, he should hear me, but he pretends he doesn't, either focused on the road or washed in a cardiac high from reckless riding. Reluctantly, I admit to myself that I'm high on it too, and enjoy it every bit he does. He swerves into the next turnout side road in one vicious slide. The bike leans and my left knee scrapes the road.

"Watch out!" I scream.

"It's ok, I got it!" He yells back, slightly turning his head to the left and then snapping it back to look at the road.

"Yeah, right, I see as much." I whisper to myself grumpily, thinking that no matter what I say, he'll still ride any way he wants. That's Hunter, stubborn once he sets his mind to something.

We ride up the hill, to the honks of cars politely huddled by an all-way stop sign on Genesee street, lurch ahead without

waiting and merge into heavy morning traffic spilling into Rainier avenue.

"Shit!" Hunter pushes on the brakes, and we idle in between two cars, their passengers glaring at us. One is a young woman with her hair made up, in a business suit, a cup of Starbucks coffee in her hand, looking up from a green Volkswagen beetle. Another is a mother with a sleepy face and a tired frown, two kids in the back of her old Subaru openly staring at us and waving. I smile and wave back, listening to their souls, so tender and creamy, that I want to feed on them right there and then.

I curl my toes around foot pegs and stand up, using Hunter's shoulders for support. "Let's go around." I say into his ear and sit back down, wincing as my thighs connect with hot sides of the bike.

"I know, I'm trying." Hunter says back nervously, powerwalking between rows of cars. I revel in the multitude of human life, the blaring hullabaloo of their souls' melody. Some perspiring, doomed, and unhappy. Others fidgety, sticky, and full of fear. Peppery. Soupy. Moldy. Only a few children's souls awake my appetite, the rest promises to taste spoiled. A wave of dizziness hits my head and I nestle into Hunter's back again.

"Please, go faster." I mumble into cotton.

As if in answer, Hunter's words echo in my mind, about what happens to you if you're a siren's victim. *They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped, so they conclude you died from sudden cardiac arrest, you know, loss of heart function. What's creepy though is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.* And I wonder if I'd be doing a service to these folks, giving them one minute of fantasy before they died, jerking them out of their daily misery and making them happy, making them die in such a fashion that they wouldn't know what hit them. Mesmerized by my voice.

And I really want to tell Hunter this idea, to hear his opinion, right now, right this very moment, to somehow justify my desire to kill.

"How much longer to your house?" I yell over the noise.

He doesn't answer. He edges towards the intersection, guns the throttle, runs a red light, passes by a school bus way too close, and shoots up Alaska. The stink of exhaust gives way to manicured lawns dotted with an occasional kid or two, backpacked and on their way to school, milk still sweet on their after-breakfast breath. *Yummy.* I can't believe I think of them as meals and shake my head to get rid of this sensation.

We leave Beacon hill, head south, pass under the Interstate 5 highway and slow down. I can tell Hunter is lost and I can

tell a police car is speeding our way, accompanied by a faint echo of a mechanical siren.

"Cops! I hear cops!" I yell.

"I know, I heard them!" Hunter yells back.

"Are you lost? Do you know where you're going?" I realize I want him to answer this question because I have a hard time orienting myself, having never been to this part of town.

We hit a cloud of a fresh-baked bread aroma hanging in the air. It doesn't tease me like it used to, on the opposite, it makes me want to retch. To our left another large body of water opens up, with huge red cranes stretching out their necks over boxes and boxes of stuff delivered to the port on long barges. Puget Sound. Now I know where we are. We're heading north on Aurora, the ugly route 99 that blocks Seattle's waterfront view from downtown with its dark unsightly shape.

Mechanical sirens blare closer. Hunter gives gas and shifts gears again, bike lurches forward. We pass in between lanes. Tires screech, cars honk, people shriek and curse and gasp. One by one their souls come alight with panic, like flashing dots of plankton when stirred by hand in the sea in the middle of the night. Except it's morning. I gulp, remembering again who I am, or who I was, or who I'm about to become and feeling utterly confused, wanting to drop everything and run away, attempting to calm myself down with facts.

What's my name? My name is Ailen Bright.

What's today? Today is September 7th, 2009. It's my birthday. I'm sixteen now.

What else happened today? Well, I died and then I was born again, as a siren, about three hours ago or so. Does that mean I'll stay sixteen forever? Maybe yes, maybe no. Or maybe I'll die, exploded by my father into a puff, a cloud of mist, a...

I press my head into Hunter's back, cement my arms around his waist, trying to get rid of these thoughts, to empty my mind, wanting to scream.

Hunter speeds up, jolts the bike to sixty miles per hour, seventy, eighty. Cars honk at us as we near downtown. And I can't help but think about how much longer I'll live in this new shape, who'll get me first, Papa or Canosa, wondering if they killed each other on that beach or are after us, somehow knowing where we're headed, waiting for us there. Perhaps I will die today after all. Well then, if I die today, I'll die having fun.

Perhaps the sky agrees with me, because at once it opens up into heavy rain, just like that. One minute there is almost a hope of afternoon sun, another huge drops fall on my head, quickly turning into a gush of water. Within a minute, we're drenched. Jagged skyscrapers ahead of us get buried in an ominous cloud.

Hunter verves. "I can't see shit!" He yells. "Fucking rain, I'm blind! Hold on!"

"I am!" I yell back and lift my head to the sky. "Darn you! Why did you have to start right *now*, stupid, just when we almost made it?"

I see red and blue reflected in wet windows of other cars and turn to look. About five cars back, a cop is making his way towards us. Just then, we pass another cop on our left and spray his windows with muddy water, skidding and narrowly avoiding a collision. The cop whips up the mechanical siren and turns on the lights, red-blue, red-blue, red-blue.

Wheeeee-wee. Wheeeee-wee.

The shrill is so authoritative and penetrating, it pisses me off and I gawk back at him, forcing as much power into my voice as I can.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

The blast of my scream hits every car in an almost visible wave, echoing and multiplying, threatening to shatter all glass. Windows shimmer under pressure. But the police siren continues blaring at me, now only one car away.

"Shit." I curse and inhale to try one more time.

"Getting off highway!" Hunter yells.

"Got you!"

Rain whips at my hair. I open my mouth wide and scream one more time, this time it's a simple comment on everything crazy that happened, all poured into one phrase.

"I hate you! I hate you! I HATE YOU!"

No glass shatters, but a multitude of rain drops fall on my head at once, as if I caused a wave, as if water listens to me like it listened to me when I hummed to the lake. I'm caught in a momentary pause of this realization.

Hunter swings into Seneca exit, two police cars scream on our tail. There is no time to think. I decide to try and go with my gut.

I hum to the water, hum one of my favorite Siren Suicides songs, Did You Love Me, because the lyrics start with the rain and perhaps that's why I choose it.

"I'm lonely

"Watching the rain

"Drop by drop

"Falling

"Into my heart

"Because you're gone."

Except I don't speak any words, I simply hum the tune, my lips closed, my mind focused on the song. Noises die away and I only hear the rushing sound of the water, the steady rhythm of

falling drops as they start out about a mile into the sky and make their way down, merging with the rhythm of my humming.

I close my eyes, lift my face up and let it get wet, feel water drip. It calms me, mellows out my angst, soothes the abrasion from terrible thoughts that have circled my mind since morning. The world attains an even tone of bliss. I keep humming, merging with nature's vibration, becoming one with white noise, droning on to the sky together with it.

There is a shift in the air and I open my eyes to see.

Water moves. It hears me, it listens.

I experience a high that doesn't compare to any weed or acid or any drug. This is better. This is me doing magic, at will. This is so cool, it's beyond cool. I watch water drop by drop as it collects into puddles, licks the street clean all the way to the curb as if pulled by a gigantic magnet. The blanket of the rain parts in the middle in a way a crystal beaded curtain would part, directly above us, forming a tunnel of dry air. A passage through.

Hunter cheers and dog shakes his head to get water out of his hair and face. Droplets splatter me. I keep humming, playing a conductor. The tunnel widens, a sheet of grey veil on each side. We're lucky, light turns green as we hit the intersection and Hunters veer the bike to the left, onto 1st Ave. Astounded drivers roll down their windows and stick out their heads to see

why half of their windshields are getting pummeled and the other half are dry. Wipers squelch across dry glass with that annoying resinny sound.

I grin, unable to contain myself, enjoying this perhaps too much, because on the next intersection a motorcycle cop enters traffic and edges towards us.

Hunter swings to the left too abruptly. My right foot swings off the peg and I instinctively grab onto his hoodie so as not to slide off the bike. I gasp and lose my tempo. For the next few seconds rain continues falling in separate shafts and then detaches from the rhythm of my humming completely. I've lost it. Water gushes on our heads with renewed force.

Hunter curses and continues veering in and out of car lanes to escalating honks, until we hit red brick pavement. Bike's tires resin-squeak over every single stone to my teeth chatter and we turn again.

"Are you out of your mind? Where the hell are you going?" I scream on top of my voice. Hunter simply shakes his head from side to side as if to tell me, *Hey, I'm busy right now, can't answer, sorry*. In a few seconds we cut into a pedestrian crowd, barely avoiding hitting people, and roll towards Pike Place fish market, its grand entrance by the famous fish stand. Here is the perfect place to get lost, a labyrinth of one-door stores five layers deep into the ground, selling everything from meat to

produce to homemade jewelry and tie-dye shirts. At the same time this is the worst place ever to approach on a stolen motorcycle in the middle of its busy opening hour under heavy Seattle rain.

The next events all happen in a matter of seconds, but it feels like they take forever to play out, as if in slow motion.

I register a small brick plaza about a hundred feet long and forty feet wide, with several trucks parked on its left side when a farmer emerges from behind one of them, a box of peaches in his raised arms. He hears the racket of the motor, turns and stops smack in the middle of the road, gaping at us. His baseball cap visor drips water, rainboots glisten in the wetness. Hunter leans to avoid him, meaning probably to continue into Post alley and turn to the right. Except he misses the turn and pushes on both brakes. The bike stutters, its back wheel locks. A split second and we're about to tap dance on the cobbles with our teeth. I stick out both legs. My naked feet scrape pavement, shooting fire of pain up my legs.

At the same time as I try to stop the bike, Hunter manages to lift his left leg mid-fall, hop on top of the fairing, and maneuver the whole machine like a gigantic warbled skateboard, sashaying on its side. My leg is trapped underneath it. I hear jeans rip and feel excruciating agony shoot up from my knee into my stomach, threatening to eat my guts and make me puke. My right elbow hits pavement with full force of the fall and gets

dragged along. I stick out my hand to stop the movement but it's useless. Somehow I know that both my leg and my arm are intact, that they only got scraped a little yet every bone is solid, perhaps even skin too, despite the fact that this silver Ducati probably weighs close a bathtub full of water. I hold my head above ground by sheer will, watching cobbles zoom past me only a few inches away, my hair leaving wet trails on top of them.

The noise all of this produces reminds me of a train wreck where a head train car hits something standing on the road and long after that the rest of the train cars continue piling up and screeching as they come off the rails and bend into a sorry metallic mess. Add to that human screaming, blaring of police sirens, and you almost have the complete picture. Almost, because we're not done sliding until we hit a pig that is bolted to the ground right under the Public Market Sign.

THUD!

We finally stop moving.

Pieces of silver plastic scatter in all direction, a rear view mirror breaks off and skips on the stones. Front wheel stops from impact, but back wheel continues spinning with a sickening whizzing, and the motor continues running, producing bluish smoke and stinking of gasoline and burnt plastic.

The whole thing now looks like a sorry mess wrapped around pig's feet, Hunter on top of it, hunched, his arms spread in an

eagle stance of being ready to fly, his face not just pale but a true shade of grey, his eyes open wide, staring at me below. I'm trapped underneath this pile of scrape metal that used to be a beautiful silver Ducati 748L, one of the hundred made, limited Neiman Marcus edition. Actually, only my right side is trapped underneath, my left side is fine and wet from the rain, my face inches away from pig's belly, her bronze tits so sharp and positioned in a such a way, that another half an inch and they would've poked out my eyes for good. I watch its very tips, polished and golden in color and breathe out a sigh of relief.

At this moment a woman who stood right by the pig begins to scream in a high pitched voice.

Chapter 13. Pike Place Market

I try to ignore the shrill and prop myself up on my right elbow, wiggling from under broken bike, crawling on all fours till I'm face to face with the pig, closing my eyes to stifle a wave of nausea. When I open them, instead of a bronze pig I see a bronze face of Canosa, smiling at me her cold metal smile, hissing at me something that sounds like, *You left me, Ailen Bright, you owe me big time now, silly girl.* A shudder goes through me, I blink rapidly and look again. The pig stares at me with its blank eyes, unperturbed. I shake my head. The woman's cry rises a pitch and becomes an unbearable annoyance that threatens to pop not only my eardrums, but also my shaky sanity. It's worse than scratching a knife on glass, it's like everything I ever hated about myself gets magnified in her scream, because it's directed at me, at my weird normal appearance despite the crash, at my lack of blood or broken bones. I'm the monster here.

"SHUT UP!" I yell at the woman who promptly closes her mouth as if on command and proceeds staring at me with eyes on the edge of falling out of her sockets, standing a few feet away. She's stocky and tall, with a fish-face and this wounded

dignity about her, perhaps to show me that I disrupted something important and will pay for it dearly. She utters something similar to a sob and leans on the steel column. It's painted minty green and sports NO PARKING 2AM - 7AM and 3 MINUTE PASSENGER LOAD ONLY 6PM - 2AM signs. It must be just after 9am right now. *No problem, I think, we can make it out of here in three minutes.*

Whatever remained from my gleeful high about being able to move water disappears in a flash. This parking restriction was what I needed for my anger to fully flourish. Add to that the screaming woman, police on our tail, Hunter doing his stupid turn, the cacophony of a couple dozen human souls, my growing hunger, and you've got a pretty pissed off siren on your hands. Not a good sight, in fact, not a good idea to be close to her at all. I'm surprised at involuntarily uttering a low hiss, very similar to the one Canosa produced not too long ago.

"Well, fuck me running." Hunter says into silence, shaken but unscathed, his jean-leg ripped but no blood drawn. "Are you okay? Oh my god, your leg..."

He's not my enemy, but it's always easy to direct your strongest emotions at the ones we know and feel safe around, right? So he gets the first blow.

"You crashed this fucking bike on top of me and you're asking me if I'm okay?" I say, incredulously.

"Dude, I'm sorry. I didn't see him, okay? I swear we would've made it if that guy didn't just show up in the middle of the road. What was I supposed to do?" He briskly brushes his hands through his hair and reaches out to pull me up. I stand, and a pang of regret stabs me.

"Are you okay?" I ask Hunter, mentally retreating, hoping he will discount it later to me being shaken by the crash.

"Always. I'm one lucky bastard." He grins, his eyes dark dilated pupils of an adrenaline junkie, trembling all over, yet I know he's fine. "Your leg... wow, awesome... it looks like it barely got a scratch? And your elbow..." He hops off the bike's remnants, squats next to me and pokes at my leg in places where the jeans ripped. I lean to look. A foot long gash in the skin on my outer thigh reveals bluish tissue that oozes gooey transparent liquid. I dip my finger into it and quickly lick it off. It tastes like seawater, salty.

This is when I notice the silence. There is only the lapping of the rain on the roof and the road and the drone of human souls that only I can hear. The usual market buzz hangs in the air, on pause. Even police blaring ceased to exist. I glance up.

Early shoppers who dared to come out here in this weather stare at us, especially one older lady directly by the fish display, barely ten feet away. Her mouth opens, her index finger

swings from pointing at a salmon to pointing at me. Behind her stands a fishmonger, clad in a bright yellow apron, khaki shorts and black resin boots. His mouth is also open, probably mid-shout, the typical "Wild king salmon, ten pounds..." cry, wrapped fish in his raised hands. Two more fishermen behind the counter gape. I see slow comprehension descend on them, clearing their faces from initial shock.

"WHAT?" I ask, and it unfreezes everyone, as if I've given them permission to move and talk. And maybe I have, maybe that SHUT UP shout made them all pause? My thought process gets interrupted.

The fishmonger drops the fish to the floor with a smack.

"What the fuck? Oh God. Oh my God, are you two all right? Jesus, you crashed your bike into that stupid pig. Look. Guys, call 911. Guys?" He says and bends to pick up the fish.

There are gasps and swears and cries and moving bodies and flashes of the camera, yet they're all a good few feet away from me. I sense their fear.

"No need for 911." I say, because mechanical sirens come alive behind us.

Amidst this confusion, the old lady stabs her finger at me, her knee-long nylon raincoat shakes, her crumpled face ablaze with terror. She keeps silently stabbing the air, pointing at me like I'm some horrible movie monster, an ugly Godzilla the size

of a building that's about to eat all of Seattle, destroying entire city in the process.

"Christ almighty, it's a she-devil. White she-devil, mark my words." The lady finally manages to say under her breath. She continues mumbling a prayer, crossing herself. Her words get lost in the general crowd murmur, but I hear them, as I hear her soul reeking of mothballs, old cat meows and fried mackerel, sharp in taste, almost toxic.

And I can't help myself. The lid I so carefully put on my new anger flies open. Everything that's happened since this morning spirals out of my guts, up, up, forming a bile of fear, regret, disappointment, shame, guilt, hatred, helplessness, and anguish. They all demand revenge, some sort of action to express themselves.

Remembering how easy it was to pull out that young maple tree from the ground in the park, I bend, scoop up the bike on both sides of its cracked fairing, lift it with a grunt, twist and throw it into the street with a loud yelp of pain. The bike utters a sickening crunch, slides to the middle of the road devoid of cars, revolves once and lays still. Both wheel quietly turn several times before stopping amidst broken pieces of plastic. Silence descends on the market. Great, just what I needed. I turn back, hobble on my good leg towards the old lady and retch into her face and into the crowd.

"Good morning, shoppers. May I offer you our special of the day? Siren," I point at myself, "hundred bucks a pound. Would you like it whole or filleted?" If I'm in a freak show, I think, might as well act my part.

Hunter yanks at the good sleeve of my rain jacket. "What the hell are you doing?"

I turn to him, unable to contain my anger anymore.

"Oh, you think I'm selling myself too cheap? Good point."

Hunter's face flashes an unhealthy red, lips quiver, eyes water. He looks like a drag addict displaying symptoms of withdrawal. And fear, I see fear.

"Ailen, don't, please."

"Why not? Give me one reason why not?"

I don't wait for him to answer. I turn back to face people in front of the fish stand, ignoring Hunter, ignoring two cop cars and two motorcycles that finally arrive at the scene behind me, parking before the bike wreck and busting through the crowd. I can't stop now, I've crossed the line.

The crowd gawks, so do fishermen, the flower lady, the butcher two stands down, a couple fruit merchants, a few tourists with their cameras at the ready. I realize that they're all mesmerized by my voice.

I wipe my nose and take the stage.

"Excuse me, dear shoppers, but I have to apologize. I was just informed that our prices went up due to limited supply. Current tag reads at a thousand dollars a pound. However, we guarantee unprecedented freshness." I glance at Hunter. "How do I put this?" Back to the crowd. "From a girl to a siren in three hours flat. Caught, oh, about thirty minutes ago. Wild, fresh, hundred percent organic. You can't find a better deal anywhere else."

I spread my arms and bow. Nothing shakes the silence. Even the cops join the crowd silently, watching me.

"Applaud!" I bark.

A few claps follow.

"Stop it!" Hunter yells. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"And out of my body, too." I say, on a roll. "What, you're not happy with my performance? I'll make it better. I'll sing a song, how is that? Would you enjoy a song? Too bad Papa is not here, to keep you company. I think you both would've enjoyed it very much. Isn't that what siren hunters do to spot a siren, spy on her singing? Is it? IS IT?" My every word is a piece of ice, spit out carelessly, propelling directly into his face, with an aim to bite. Crushed and bitter. To finish off my tirade, I flash him a smile, triple bright. Then I get an even sicker idea.

I turn back to the crowd, point at Hunter with my hands palms up, like models do in fancy car shows.

"I'm sorry. I seem to have forgotten to introduce you all to my friend here. My apologies. Please welcome, the siren hunter with his catch of the day!" I curtsy, then decide to spice it up and strike a pirouette, turning once on tippy toes, noticing that my leg has healed itself while I was talking, and so did my elbow, clean new whitish skin spread tight and peeking through torn sleeve.

I curtsy once more and stand still.

Maybe it's because my talking ceased that the crowd sighs in relief in one strong exhale. My siren spell must have evaporated. I wonder how long it lasts, I wonder if I can give commands to people and if they will obey. A flash blinds me, then another. People are taking pictures.

I mouth to Hunter, "Smile, you idiot." But my charm doesn't seem to have an effect on him, or maybe it does, because he begins to grin and then quickly loses it.

"Jeez, what's wrong with you? Did you hit your head or something?" Hunter backs away from me and bumps into a cop with glazed over eyes. The cop wakes up from slumber, reaches for his gun and shouts at us like we're armed.

"FREEZE!"

Two more cops join him out of the crowd, also reaching for their weapons. I shrug my shoulders. Do I have such lethal appearance that I need to be shot? I decide to test my siren voice theory and bark, "Shut up and sit. All three of you."

They flop down on command, their asses connecting with wet ground with a loud slap, their dark-blue uniforms in sharp contrast with red shiny cobblestones. They turn their heads up and look at me expectantly. Afraid that my spell will wear off quickly and still not knowing how long it lasts, I add, "Sit until I tell you to stand up." They nod.

There are cheers from the crowd at this, but my attention is elsewhere already. My anger has fully formed and flowing, quiet yet poisonous at the same time. I look Hunter in the eyes, the beauty of their blue forgotten.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to answer your question." I say. "You asked me what's wrong. What's wrong with me? Well, nothing, really. Except that I'm a living breathing walking dead fish out of the water, with both lungs and gills for breathing and a voice that can control people, oh, and I can suck out their souls, you know, for breakfast. Watch me."

Hunters face drains color. His lips form a NO.

I pick a target, one of Japanese tourists, a teenage girl with a huge camera standing to the right from me, mesmerized. Her camera is bright pink. And I immediately hate her. I hate

her perfectly long hair, her designer outfit, her manicured nails, her over-protective mom and dad standing behind her, smiling politely, no doubt on some touristy Seattle tour, so complete a family, my muscles spasm. I want to hit them.

"Lie down!" I say to the girl.

With a squeal, she tumbles on the pavement, designer skirt and all, stretching out her legs in front of her, her white knee socks now wet and muddy, her no doubt specially bought designer short rain boots smelling of new resin. I listen to her soul. It's a jumble of animated manga voices, karaoke, and sounds of a sewing machine. She must be obsessed with creating her own outfits. I have a hard time pinpointing her soul's taste, it feels... savory. Even a little spicy, in a bubbly way.

My heart rate hikes up to one hundred eighty beats per minute. Another hiss escapes my lips. She squeaks once more and crosses arms in front of her face, both her mom and dad leaning over her, speaking in Japanese.

"See what I mean?" I say, looking at Hunter. "This is breakfast, right here. Want to help me pick a song?"

Hunter blinks and swallows. "Please. Don't... Not here." He says in a dry voice that's barely audible.

"You're scared. Why? What's wrong with watching a siren feed? You're a siren hunter, aren't you? You're supposed to

stomach shit like this." Another wave of anger flushes me. My blood pressure soars.

Hunter says nothing, his eyes open wide, seemingly seeing only me and waiting for more, as if he's catching my words like some precious gems falling from the sky. Perhaps my voice *does* have an effect on him.

"See? That's it. You have nothing to say, do you? But I'll finish answering your question, because I'm polite. Because it's what Papa taught me, to always answer questions. So here you go. What's wrong with me? Nothing. Aside from being a monster, and aside from the fact that your job is now to kill me, nothing is wrong with me. Really. I'm fine, thank you very much." I say and draw on air in a greedy gulp. The crowd does the same, mimicking me.

"Why are you doing this?" Hunter says quietly and steps back some more, into open space and from under market roof, backing into people that surround us. Raindrops trace his forehead, run to his eyebrows, grow bigger, drip over. He doesn't blink. People part around us and close back in, moving seamlessly as we move into the open plaza, keeping us in a circle, watching quietly.

"No, why are *you* doing this?" I snap and take another step toward him.

"What do you mean? Doing what?" He licks rain off his lips.

"This! This siren hunter business! Why the fuck did you even sign up to do it. What did he tell you? What did he promise you? How could you ever agree to it? After all that fantastic bullshit you fed me about sirens, you decided to get a job to kill them. Why?"

He blinks.

"WHY? Stop acting like an idiot and answer the damn question!" I come close to him now and shout him directly in the face, getting drenched by the rain.

"What, here? Right now?"

"YES, HERE AND NOW!" I shake so hard, my teeth chatter.

My voice echoes off brick walls and metal roofs. Hush falls over the entire spectacle. About forty souls pulsate in unison, so appetizing that I want to feed right here, in public.

Hunger suddenly overwhelms me. I bend and dry heave, feeling my gut twist on a stick of desire, as if freshly skinned and bleeding. I could kill them all. And why not? What do I have to lose? What's the use of the power in my voice if I can't bring my mother back? Why continue to exist when Papa won't ever listen to me, no matter how loud I yell, no matter how beautiful my song is, no matter what I tell him. The queen of pathetic, I couldn't even properly kill myself, turning instead into some forgotten mythological creature. A siren. Ailen Bright, a siren? Really? Yeah, right. Forget femme fatale, how about a girl who's

desperately trying to be someone she's not? It's what they call *epic fail*.

I raise my head and lock my gaze with Hunter's. A fleeting something passes between us, a feeling of knowledge that it's almost over, the finale to our performance is coming. I see it reflected in his eyes, so blue they're calming, infinite. Against the racket of human discord, I hear his soul, a piercing solo, delicious and beautiful in a homey way. And I know I'm not worth his love. I dare *not* love him back. I should disappear and let him be, let him find a normal girl with normal breasts normal girly size, normal long hair, good manners, proper parents, established life. Who am I after all? A dead body of a mystic freak. That's who I am.

"Look..." He begins, quietly. "After I lost that job selling car wax, I had to find something fast. My mom... We don't have insurance, so how was I supposed to get her meds? I had no idea you'd turn into a siren, how could I know? And your dad... well, it was a perfect opportunity." His voice is calm. He knows exactly what I'm thinking and knows what to say when to make feel better, as usual. He knows how to read me so well, I hate it.

"Right." I say, momentarily deflated.

He cups my chin. Warmth shoots up my face, making me feel like I'm blushing. "I don't want to lose you again, ok? I don't

care what shape or size you are, or what you're called. It makes no difference to me, don't you get it?" He shakes my face for added effect, and says, "You turkey?" But it doesn't sound funny, it comes out as if he says it through tears.

"But I'm dead. I'm a siren, remember? Like you said. Not the mythical kind, the real siren. The girl next door. The killer kind. The one whose gaze never sits still. The way she walks, the way she talks... Every man wants a piece of her. Every man wants to hear her velvety song, the song to die for. Remember?"

"I don't care." He says, fogging up my vision with his breath.

"Listen. The real sirens are among us. They're the girls that come out at night, in the fog, to sing about their pain. Their voice makes you do things. They command you to come close to them, and then they sing your soul out."

"I know. I still don't care."

"Listen to me! I'm not done talking yet. You're... food to me. I'm having a hard time suppressing the urge to snuff you out. You sound so sweet, it's so hard to stay away from you. What if one day I won't be able to suppress this anymore? You know what will happen? I'll kill you. And they'll find you dead in the morning. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest before you died."

"Well, maybe that's what I want. Did you ever consider that?" His voice catches at the end. Rain drips down his face, soaks his cotton sweatshirt. He sniffs loudly and wipes his nose, red from being cold and wet.

The anticipation in the air makes me imagine us both on stage, our audience watching us, breathless. And I have to deliver the punch line, but I forgot my words. I search Hunter's face for a cue, search his eyes, their bluish expanse that reflect rainy clouds, so ripe with water they're bursting. And at this precise moment I understand that his is the only soul that will ever fully satisfy my hunger. Do I leave him? Do I stay? I float in indecision, quivering. He's all things home that I can never have. Never did, never will. I feel one single tear roll down my cheek and drop to the ground with such finality that it makes my heart ache like it's ripping. That's it then, decided. *I'm sorry, Hunter, I'm so very sorry. I love you, I love you more than myself. And that's why I have to go.*

"Hey, it's really creepy having all these people watch us. I don't know about you, but I... don't really... like this. Can we continue some place private?" Hunter tugs at my sleeve.

"Sure." I say, my tongue barely moving, my mouth seeming to be stuffed with cotton.

Our hands entwine.

I failed to deliver the perfect punch line, but in some weird sense I still expect applause. Of course, it never comes. There's only breathless admiration. Faces surround us, mouths ajar, hearts beating like one. People in trance, their chores forgotten, places they wanted to go to erased from their minds, things they wanted to get gone out of their memories, making them blank.

We don't bow, don't tilt our heads, we simply exit, parting the crowd, heading towards the fish stand, down into the belly of the Pike Place market, the perfect place to get lost. We move like two actors in an ancient Greek comedy that's gone sour and turned into a tragedy instead. With an ending that was supposed be resolve everything but instead confused everything even worse than before, in a typical deus ex machina way, with thunder crashing over our heads as if some god stepped in and told everyone to be friends and go home and forget everything they saw. Like Athena did in The Odyssey. Play completed. Sorry. Thank you very much. We're closed.

But the thunder is real. Lightning flashes, splits sky in two. Another boom shakes the air, adding a metallic taste to it. And that's when the cops awake and begin shouting FREEZE! on repeat again. Onlookers shake off the trance and reach out to stop us.

We clasp hands and break into a run.

Chapter 14. Public Restroom

All I can register is a pattern of blur to all these people, one string of masks instead of faces. Atonal, solid, boring. They look the way fish look, crowded by the glass of a gigantic aquarium, hoping you'd feed them, give them a morsel of that something special that will make them forget their misery for a minute. It's like we're passing a wall with moving eyes. Hunter leads and I follow, concentrating on the floor, marking its square tiles as steps for me, watching light reflect in them, skidding on wet smears from dripping shoes of the shoppers, moving through a cloud of that lingering smell of raw fish. It clings to me, sticky. We reach the stairs and quickly skim down steel reinforced steps to market's mezzanine level, deeper into labyrinth of shops and boutiques and cafes. Here human traffic gulps us up like a swamp, with a reluctant burb. Right as we reach the floor and are about to turn, Hunter trips and falls.

"Shit! Fucking sneakers." He lowers his head and shakes it, standing on all fours on the dirty ground.

"Here. Are you okay?" My hand in his, I pull to help him stand. Hunter sways.

Above us, finally out of trance, the crowd erupts into chaos ready to pour down on our heads. At level, shoppers measure us with looks reserved for homeless teenage junkies that crawled from under a bridge in a stoned daze, their typical soiled backpacks and ever-present leashed dogs lost or forgotten. We look like complete mess. Hunter's face is grey, hair matted and bunched up to the side, eyes bloodshot; his grey hoodie is splattered with mud, his jeans smeared with it, sneakers have forgotten their color. I look worse, my right side clad in shreds of clothing, naked white skin of right elbow and right knee looking through. I can't see my face, but I imagine it's very much devoid of color.

Two young couples pass by. I glare at them, defiant. It takes but a second and they turn their heads away, to tune us out. It's safer. We are their future pickpockets. They trot along with eyes averted, quickly. How disgusting. I lose my newfound appetite.

"Ignorance is the pinnacle of convenience." I say and spit.

"What?" Hunter says, looking up at the stairs, perhaps waiting for the mob to come and sweep us up. His skin turns ashen.

"Oh, nothing. Can you walk?" I say.

Suddenly Hunter's face goes green and he bends over. The after-accident shock must have finally kicked in. I hear his

soul waver and then plummet in a crash of noises, most of them sounding like breaking dishes in the kitchen. He no longer feels warm and homey, but rather a disaster brewing, his heart a struggling motor, valves flapping at an irregular pattern. I decide that if he can't walk, I will attempt to carry him.

"Hey, you all right? Wanna hide out here somewhere before the freaks get us?" I motion up.

"We need to get rid of your voice." He says quietly and passes a tremor, goose pimples visible on his neck as his Adam's apple moves up and down like crazy.

"What?" I say, momentarily stumped. "What do you mean, get rid of my voice?"

I grip his clammy hand for support, although he needs support more than me right now. I can tell he's on the verge of collapsing. People look at us weird, making a wide circle to bypass, lest we be contagious or something. And our time is up. The next events happen in a very rapid succession.

I glance up. Two cops make it to the stairs and descend gleefully, a few spectators from our performance right behind them. Their faces are agape with stench of anticipation, jeering and shouting.

I glance down. From below the market, cutting through the human souls discord, comes a sound so familiar I can recognize it in my sleep. The grating of expensive tires against asphalt,

the last revolutions of the engine, the handbreak, the opening and closing of the driver's door. It comes from several levels below, from Western avenue, the other side of Pike Place market. Although Papa ditched his old Alfa Romeo and bought Maserati only this spring, I quickly learned to recognize the sounds of his arrival so I have enough time to dispose of the joint stubs and crushed can ashtray by throwing them out of bathroom window. As expected, next I hear gentle stepping of his Gucci loafers, lace free for easy slipping on and off, their precious rubber soles grinding into concrete.

"Oh my God, he's here. My father is here. He tracked us down. Shit!" I say at exactly the same moment as Hunter says, "I think I'm gonna puke." His lips turn a shade of a floater, a corpse lying face-up in the water after being dead for a good many hours.

The first cop, short and stocky, his belly jiggling, his soul bitter, a mixture of clanking beer bottles and bowling balls, makes it down the steps while dropping his right hand to his gun and opening his mouth to shout when I beat him to it.

"FREEZE!" I yell. It's the first thing that comes to mind.

The cop clasps his mouth shut with an audible click of teeth on teeth, like a shovel against a coffin. His eyes blink rapidly in the middle of his bald head. And it feels good, it

feels so incredibly good to be able to control people with my voice. I want to do more of it, greedy.

"FREEZE, ALL OF YOU!" I yell at the upper level.

Another cop and a dozen or so people tumble down the stairs like refrigerated lobsters. Some fall, some grab the railing and stay put, glued to it, unable to move, their sweat mixed with breakfast breath, coiling towards me together with their soul noises, mostly tart and soupy. Ugh. I arrest a gag and make a mental note to avoid feeding at Pike Place market in the future.

"Stay here and don't move!" I tell them and turn to Hunter.

"There." He croaks and points to the restroom sign. "We still have time. Let's try it."

Whatever it is that he meant by getting rid of my voice, I try not to think about it so as not to panic. I can't lose my voice now, not when I learned how to use it!

Hunter pulls at my hand and we dash to the right, or, rather, I dash and he stumbles after me, into the concrete opening flanked by a woman and a man, inlaid in black porcelain mosaic, the classic honeycomb motive of the market. Entrance to public restrooms and another stairway down. Like two shadow puppets, we slink inside and pause, pulling in two different directions by instinct, Hunter into men's room, and I into ladies. Hunter veers to the left, but gets spooked by an exiting man, who gets spooked by our appearance in turn and quickly runs

up the steps without looking back. I automatically pull Hunter forward, past the door with the sign For Men Only and under the sign For Women Only.

"Dude, I'm not going in there." Hunter says alarmingly.

"It's empty." I say. "I can't hear a single soul. Plus, my father hates public restrooms, especially women's. He always says they reek of poor hygiene. Come on, please?"

"Fine." Hunter rolls his eyes but follows me.

We walk inside. The restroom sports a classic black and white interior combo, with white ceramic walls and dirty cream of tiny hexagon tiles on the floor, sprinkled with black hexagon flowers along its perimeter. Stench of human waste and chlorine hits my nose. We pass our mad reflections in dim mirrors above sinks, skip first and stop by the second row of stalls against the back wall.

"Handicapped stall?" I point.

"Sure." He says and convulses in a series of coughs that sound very much like dry heaving.

I yank open the door to the corner stall and we slide inside. I ram the door shut and lower the latch in place. The door rattles loudly for the entire market to hear. I cower, slide down on my butt, press my hand into the partition to make it stop shaking, hating its color. It clashes with the cleanliness of black and white. Muddy beige, the color of vomit.

And just as I think about this, Hunter turns his back to the door, falls to his knees, hugs the toilet and lets go. In one retch his stomach empties. I plug my nose and try not to look. Imagine smelling everything ten times stronger. I'm close to fainting, searching something to focus on, to live through the stink. And I find it. Among the drone of noises I pick out one I fear most.

"He's up a level, he's heading here. How the fuck does he know?" I whisper. "I can hear him walking."

"Your voice. He tracks you by your voice, so stop talking."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this before?" I hiss before clasping my mouth shut.

"I tried, but you wouldn't listen."

I'm tempted to say, *when*, but stop myself in time.

Hunter unrolls a handful of toilet paper, wipes his mouth with it, drops it on the floor and coughs into toilet. I close my eyes to avoid seeing what I can hear so clearly, the slimy swish of his juices against the crisp bitterness of toilet water. The dripping of his saliva, the lurching of his stomach and the pumping of his diaphragm. I cover my ears, wishing myself deaf, if only for a moment. His wet sleeve sweeps the toilet tank. My eyes still closed, I stop his hand an inch from the flush valve, taking a long look at him.

Don't, I mouth soundlessly.

"Why not?"

Too loud, I gesticulate with my hands in hopes that he'll understand me, that if my father can track me by my voice, surely he's using some tracking device that will pick up the flushing of the toiler too, since it's such a noisy endeavor.

Then something shifts in the air before Hunter can answer. Humidity goes from nonexistent to damp in a millisecond, adding an odor of mold and decay. An unmistakable aroma of a pond where fish go to die, belly up. The smell of... My eyes widen in recognition. *Canosa*.

I look at Hunter, forgetting that I'm not supposed to talk, repeating what he said on the rowboat. "We're fucked."

Hunter raises his eyes at me, incomprehensibly, struggling with another wave of nausea, and I look at the foot-wide gap between the stall door and the floor, realizing that I didn't hear the siren's approach, not a single step. Great.

First one pair of naked feet appears, trailing hair behind it, then another, then two more. They're all here, *Canosa*, *Ligeia*, *Teles* and *Pisinoe*. With *Raidne* gone, that makes four of them left. Plus me. Five sirens total.

"You left us, *Ailen Bright*. You ran away and left us to the mercy of the siren hunter. Who does this to their family? Answer me." She takes another step.

I'm about to ask if that means I'm accepted into the siren family, when she cuts in before I can utter a word.

"We were always there for you. Always waiting for you to come and give us your grief, always ready to listen, to give you a shoulder to cry on. Were we not?" Her voice drifts from behind the ugly beige stall door.

"Yes." I say quietly and swallow, thinking back to all those hours spent in the bathroom, bawling my eyes out, talking to four marble sirens and one bronze one for hours and hours on end. Hugging them, stroking their hair, wishing with my childish heart for them to come alive. Well, looks like my wish got granted.

"We never left you, did we not?"

I nod, unable to bring myself to answer. Hunter in the meantime grabs another handful of toilet paper, wipes his mouth, and whispers to me, "What's this bullshit she's talking about?" And I want to drop through the floor and disappear in some far dark corner of the world. Shame floods me with renewed force, joining in with the guilt. I never told Hunter that I called the sirens my sisters out of fear of looking immature. No need, now he knows. Perfect timing. As if she reads my mind, Canosa adds to my humiliation.

"You were the one who called us your sisters. You were the one who told us that we mean to you more than your mother and your father combined, did you not?"

I can't even bring myself to nod, I simply press into the ceramic wall, willing myself to shrink and vanish.

"And this is how you pay us? This is how you pay me, for saving your life? For giving you everything you asked for, for turning you into a siren? Tsk-tsk. How come, silly girl? Didn't your mother teach you any manners, or maybe your memory is poor and you forgot?" Canosa says, her face now hooked over the bathroom stall door by her chin, her eyes darting at me and then at Hunter and then all around the walls.

I simply stare at her back, immobile.

"You don't know? Of course you don't. Girls like you never do. How can we accept you into our family now, tell me."

A wash of terror prickles my skin and I don't know what to say. It's as if she knows how to push my mute button and disorient me with simple words. I feel confused about the whole family thing.

"But you just said *who does this to their family* so that means I was already part of the family..." I begin timidly and it comes out wrong.

"You really don't have a brain in there, do you?" She points her slender finger at my head and emits a short cackle.

"Girls, do you think she has a brain?" She looks back at the sirens, they voice their disapproval.

"I asked you not to ask stupid questions." She hooks her chin back onto the door. "Forget everything that's been said or done. This is a new life and you have to earn your right to belong, earn your right to call us your sisters for real, to be part of our family. And to begin with, you have to start acting like we already are your family. You don't just leave your family behind to save your own skin. You stick together, that's what family does. Do you understand?"

A sense of complete idiocy renders me speechless.

I stare at the wall and then notice Hunter gesticulating at me, mouthing, *What the fuck?* I open and close my mouth and nothing comes out.

While I struggle with a comeback, Canosa hops on top of the partition in one fluid movement with barely a sound, perches on it like an exotic bird with hair for wings and voluptuous lips for a beak, then flops down on her ass with a smack and sticks out her legs so they dangle right in front of my face. She wiggles her toes and sneers. "Girls, you were right, it stinks in here. Ewww!" She plugs her nose theatrically, pointing a finger at Hunter.

I see Hunter open his mouth to say something nasty, and, afraid of more confrontation, press a finger to my lips to shush him and bust in.

"How did you guys find us?" I speak louder than expected and clasp my mouth in fear, glancing at Hunter and remembering what he said, then thinking that perhaps it's no use hiding and be quiet anymore. Hunter raises his eyebrows.

But my thoughts are elsewhere already. Papa probably figured out by now where we are. If not my voice, Canosa's voice did it. But then how did the sirens find us? It dawns on me. I left them together in the lake shore and they must have struck some kind of a deal to get me together. That must be it.

"I asked you a question. And what did you do? You didn't answer. Instead, you asked me a question in return. You know what I call this type of behavior? Rude. And rudeness is not acceptable in our family." Canosa says. "Right, girls?" She looks over her shoulder, and the three remaining sirens soundlessly advance and hook their faces over the stall door in the same way she did, with their chins, nodding and looking at me like I'm crazy to even dare to contradict her. In this moment they remind me of their marble selves the way I used to see them every day, like mute pretty dolls with dead eyes and mouths forever open in some kind of perpetual wonder.

"Did you lead my father here? Or did my father lead you?" I realize I think out loud.

"Ailen Bright, I'll forgive your rudeness one more time. Just because it's too fun not to tell. Guess what? We had a little competition to see who finds you first." Canosa smiles her cold beautiful smile that has nothing good in it. Her words pierce me with that sinking stomach feeling, each of them making a hole large enough for fear to march its righteous parade.

I bite on my finger and don't feel it. *How did I end up here, cornered from all sides? Wasn't I supposed to be the newly born all-powerful siren? Isn't that what I decided to be? All women are weak,* Papa's voice chimes in, *the only thing they're good for is for hauling water.* I try to brush the thought aside but it clings to my memory holes with its dozen fingers. Solid.

"This look cozy. May we join you?" Canosa asks. "And that performance you gave at the park beach was very entertaining."

I don't know what to say anymore, completely lost in the absurdity of the situation. If my father is on his way here, why aren't they fleeing?

Mane parted in the middle, Teles hops onto partition, her grin the size of my anguish. Next to her Ligeia licks her lips and waves her hand at me, pulling herself up and over the door. Then they both soundlessly jump off and land on either side of the toilet tank, occupying far corners of the stall. Now Pisinoe

pulls herself up and over, her face and body like that of a porcelain doll coming alive after midnight. She wiggles along the floor, sits against the wall across me and Ligeia.

Canosa hops off the door, catches the top of toilet lid with her toes, slaps it shut and squats on top of it, facing the door. Now the entire stall, barely eight by six feet, is crammed with bodies. Only one of them is living.

Sirens slither by the walls like larvae over leaves, the only sound missing is that delicate caterpillar crunching. If I scratch the surface of their water lily smell, I bet they'd reek with rotten maggots.

Ligeia pouts her lips on a face of an adolescent who pretends she doesn't know she's adorable, and points at me. "You're cruel, you know that? Raidne was not just a sister to me. She was my best friend. I've lost her now, because of you. Lost her!" She points her finger at me, glaring and sniffing. I flinch at the hate in her eyes and search for an escape.

I look around for support and realize I've forgotten all about Hunter in the midst of this ridiculous banter.

He sits quietly in the corner, passes his hand through his matted hair and suddenly speaks up. "You guys done? Can I talk now? Thanks."

Canosa hisses. "Oh, would you look at that. Siren hunter's errand boy wants to talk to us. Shall we let him, girls?"

"It would be marvelous. I like the sound of his soul, it's yummy." Teles claps hysterically, her body jiggling, her breasts shaking. Pisinoe joins her, "Yes, please! He can tell me about the pet he wants."

Hunter grins and instead of fear I see mischief in his eyes. "Say, I never thought that skipping school on Monday could land me partying with naked girls. In a ladies room. I should visit more often, eh? Fantastic venue."

"Jeez, Hunter, horny much?" I say, feeling a stab of jealousy as it snakes through my gut. I look over myself, a girl clad in an oversized blue rain jacket and soaked skintight jeans. My new breasts don't show so well through this attire. Add to that bare dirty feet and messy hair. The essence of high glamour.

"Girls, how about you lift your hair in pony tails? I mean, I think it will look good on you, honest." He swallows.

"Hunter!"

"What? What did I say?"

His face is that of a surprised puppy, complete with stupidly raised eyebrows and floppy ears that decided to perk up in case a bone is coming. But I feel something else behind it, a pretense, as if he is playing stupid on purpose. I decide to trust him, exhale, press into the corner of the stall.

"Nothing." I say and lose whatever it was I wanted to say next, when I hear Papa's loafers pause directly across the inlaid porcelain man and woman. And I hear the crowd shake loose, begin talking and moving. That means my spell lasted only, what, a few minutes?

"My father..." I turn and look at Hunter, then at sirens, one by one. "He's here. What do we do now?" I attempt to stand when Canosa clasps both mine and Hunter's arms and pushes us down lest we dare move.

"Sit and watch. You'll see."

Pisinoe leans her head on Hunter's shoulder with words, "You never told me what kind of pet you want. I'm dying to know."

"Hush!" Canosa hisses.

In the following silence, terror prickles my skin, I begin trembling. I hear my father's slow taking careful steps, one at a time, now past the For Men Only sign, now past For Women Only. I turn into a jumble of emotions, I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. Hunter reaches over and clasps my hand, his warmth calms me somewhat. At the same time, the crowd pushes its way down, after Papa, towards public restrooms, in a racket of soupy souls. Another second, and they'll be here.

Unable to contain myself and stomach the idea of facing my father, I yelp. "He'll kill us! He'll kill us all. This is

madness! Hunter, do something! Why aren't you doing something about it? Let's get out of here, please, right now. We can break through the wall, maybe we can..." I shake hard, catching my breath.

"NO!" Canosa shouts, glaring at me, gripping my arm so tight it hurts. At this, I hear the crowd stop, as if unsure if they should proceed. Noise falls down to the cockroach swarming level.

"You're not going anywhere, Ailen Bright. Not bright at all. We came here to show you what being a family really means. I'm sorry you never had one, to learn from."

And I feel like crying. It's as if she poked me in the right place at the right time, like she pinched that nerve on my elbow, the one that you hit in a funny way and yowl, jumping up and down, it hurts so much. I lick my lips and try suppressing tears.

"Do you really mean it?" I say and glance at Hunter, hoping he understands my anguish, hoping he'll give me some cue as to what to do next. He grins his grin, as usual, but I detect a shifting seriousness underneath it.

"I'm with you in this. I'm not going anywhere." He says quietly, and squeezes my hand. I squeeze it back, my breaths becoming shallower and shallower. "And I love you. Don't you forget that. Now breathe."

I breathe as instructed.

"When, Canosa, when?" Pisinoe whispers with shiny eyes, trembling from what appears to be excitement.

"Shut up! She said to shut up!" Teles hisses back at her in a loud whisper, her lips quivering, glancing at Canosa for approval. She nods.

"We heard that, Teles, we're not..." Ligeia begins almost inaudibly.

"Quiet, all of you." Canosa whispers, chewing on a strand of her hair. And I think she's nervous.

I hear Papa's loafers gently hug each tile in our direction. In the momentary silence, Canosa snaps her head to the left, to look at me, tucked all the way into the corner, and winks. I have imagined this wink a thousand times, while staring in her bronze face in my bathroom. It's the encouraging wink, a wink that says, everything will be okay. You just wait and see. There will be a pleasant surprise. You'll like it, I'm sure. From one bad girl to another, if we die today, we'll die having fun. And I remember riding on the back of the stolen silver Ducati, hugging Hunter, thinking the same thing, *If I die today, I'll die having fun.*

Miraculously, I smile. Canosa smiles back.

And then the other sirens reach out and briefly touch me in unison, before quickly retracting their arms back, pressing them

to their sides like folded wings, tense, ready to fly. I grin now, thinking, *You just wait, Papa, we'll show you what women were made for, you just wait.*

Loafers pause and then I see Papa's feet step towards our stall, in the foot-wide gap between the door and the tiled floor. I hear my own rasp breaths. My heart feels afire, my lungs threaten to collapse under pressure, blood rushes through my veins at the speed that's totally over the limit.

Canosa is all attention, perked up like a perfect predator, her eyes focused on the door, pupils tiny, mouth stretched in a grinning sneer.

The loafers stop about a foot away from the door. Another second, and I see a looming shadow and expect Papa's face swim over the stall door, but it doesn't happen.

"Ailen? I know you're there, sweetie." Papa's voice comes at me muffled through my fear, luke warm. And before my throat has a chance to close, I make myself talk, looking at Hunter all the while.

"That's right, Papa, I'm here. And I'm not coming home."

Canosa drops my and Hunter's arms and shouts,

"NOW!"

Chapter 15. Restroom Stall

Four sirens open their mouths as one. I'm arrested by their terrible beauty. There is little Pisinoe, not more than a thirteen year old if you met her dressed in normal clothes, innocent and cute. Yet her face opens into a grimace of utter malice. Behind her Ligeia, tall and lanky like a gazelle, with delicate facial features that transform into a ghostly yawn. Next to her Teles forms a perfect O with her lips, but there is nothing adorable about it, never mind her slightly chubby cheeks. Her mouth is open wide, lips stretched to the breaking point, as if she's about to reek audible poison. And Canosa. Canosa's skull looks like it will break in two, every single tooth exposed, tongue trembling, eyes ablaze with hatred. If you dared to lay a finger in her mouth, she won't just bite it off, she'll swallow you whole. Me? What about me? I sit bolted to the floor, thunderstruck.

"Die, siren hunter! DIE!" They yell in perfect harmony. Sound waves hit the air and travel outward in one gigantic circle. Walls shake, stall door flies off its hinges and drops with a loud clank on tile floor, barely missing my father. Particle board dust rises in a cloud, and faucets fizz with

water. Mirrors shimmer in a way a pond's surface shimmers from a light breeze. I cover my ears, so does Hunter. We cower.

Sirens continue yelling at the top of their lungs.

"Lose your mind! Shed your skin! Let your bones rot in a pile! Vanish into our sweet siren meadow!"

Following each of their cries, one by one other stall doors fly off their hinges, crowding the floor, adding to the dust in the air and to the zapping of the pendant lights above us. Shaped like tiny barrels and emitting yellow glow, they flicker at first, then go out one by one, shattering into a sparkling shower of broken glass.

I watch it in a trance, my gaze fixed on my father. A solitary figure, he stands not more than five feet away, dust on his polished shoes, glass shards in his hair, yet he is not moving. Only his face skin tightens and looks pulled back as if he stuck his face out of a very fast moving train, letting cruel wind hit him. His eyes are on me, and I freeze. He holds a sonic gun in his right hand, his arm slowly moves, pointing at me without hesitation.

Hunter raises his head and looks back and forth between the two of us. Out of the corner of my eye I see beads of sweat prickle his forehead, his knuckles go white as he clasps hands over his ears in an effort to shield himself from siren's shouting. He loudly sucks in the air. I don't need to know,

don't need to turn my head and look. I feel him studying me and perhaps deciding what to do next.

Sirens keep yelling, deafening me.

Papa keeps standing, aiming at me.

Hunter keeps shaking, staring at me.

I feel like I'm in a middle of a terrible dream, where everything that could go wrong, did, and everything that could go right went wrong anyway just to show me that it's no use dreaming. Life sucks and so do dreams, whether I like it or not, and I better get used to it. There are no hopes, nothing ever turns out the way I want, and there is nobody to blame here except myself. I'm the one who plunged into this game, starting from the moment when I stepped into the bathtub full of water. Then I ran away. Then I jumped from the bridge. Then I dared to die and be born again.

Maybe Canosa is right, maybe there is nothing more to it than having fun while we can. All people die anyway, so why should it matter if they die as babies or adults? And who says your family is the one that gave birth to you? That's utter bullshit. Who says that guy over there is my father? Who says I have no right to snuff him out like a candle? Who?

I make up my mind.

The rest happens in slow motion. Papa squeezes the trigger on his gun as I tense and jump up, my eyes glazed, my mouth open

in a scream, my skin taut on my forehead from eyes bulging out of my sockets. I lightly touch the ceiling with the back of my head as Papa's gun fires and hits Teles instead of me. It only touches her right side, so she shimmers for a moment, a cloud of particles ready to burst into air then collects back into herself, though her shouting dies at once.

I land in front of my father, barely a few feet away, grip his wrist and tighten my fingers until he drops the gun on the floor to a thin plastic-like sound. My grip must be painful, but his face doesn't show it. Instead, I'm afraid I detect a hint of pleasure, and a genuine smile unlike any other smile I've ever seen on his face. There he stands, taking numerous measurements of my body, as if appraising livestock that he wants to buy. I bet he knows I'm not easy to kill. I bet he's wondering if he should perhaps tell me something or remain silent.

"Ailen, sweetie, so good to have found you." His face turns into a mask of politeness over cold-hearted indifference of a true hunter and a strange exultation that borders on parental pride. I shudder from the thought.

"If only for one minute you didn't devalue me, Papa. If only for one minute I didn't loathe you." I say.

"Don't talk to me like that. Why do you have to be so harsh? Let's discuss this like civil people. I'll give you one

minute to get ready, all right? The car is parked downstairs, right by the market entrance. It's waiting."

Suddenly tears cloud my vision. He doesn't hear me, he never hears me. This time I'll make him, whether he wants to or not.

"No, Papa, I told you, I'm not coming home. I hate it there, don't you understand? It's not the same without mom. Never will be. It's empty." The echo of my voice reverberates across the walls and I immediately shrink. Did I dare to yell at him? Asphyxiation grabs my throat and poisons it, makes me mute. I begin to hyperventilate.

As if to confirm my suspicion, he rolls out his big horrible eyes, perhaps knowing what power they hold over my thoughts, my movements, over my everything. Over my very being.

"I said, we're going home." He says quietly and begins wiggling out of my grip. My fingers slacken, my knees grow soft, and I want to hide from his gaze, all my siren powers forgotten.

I notice that the shouting stopped. There is an eerie silence, as if we're observed by a breathless audience, waiting to see what will happen next. Then everything erupts into action.

"Lovely, Ailen Bright. I knew it. You've got talent, silly girl. Do them like that, fool them, twist their psyche around your words. Oh, this is so entertaining." Canosa says behind my

back and pushes me to the side. Within seconds, we're surrounded by sirens. Teles, anger and hurt in her eyes, circles her fingers around my father's throat, and Ligeia and Pisinoe each take his arm and twist them, pulling to the sides, making him look like a flattened eagle.

"We'll leave his mouth to you, big sister. As always." Says Ligeia with a gleeful smile.

"So that's what it is. It's all a game to you both, isn't it? There is some history behind it, I can tell. And you're using her as bait to get back at each other. Nice." I hear Hunter spit as he walks up to us, his sneakers crunching over broken glass and wood chips. "But you don't care. Man, you don't give a *fuck*, do you? If she dies or not in the process, it's not your worry."

I see a shocked expression flash over my father's face, as if Hunter touched a painful button. But he can't talk, gaping for air as Teles playfully chokes him.

"You close your mouth and listen, Hunter Crosby boy. Use your manners and don't interrupt me. Didn't your mother teach you that it's rude to interrupt? What a pity." Canosa seizes a handful of Hunter's hoodie and pulls him closer to her, so that their noses almost touch.

"You leave my mother out of this, you stupid bronze bathroom bitch." Hunter's soul melody shifts up a notch, and I

know he's angry. "Come to think of it, your mother abandoned you, I'm sure. What was her name, let's see here, Terpsichore? Melpomene? Sterope? Can't remember."

Canosa hisses and throws Hunter to the ground. He meets it with a sickening crunch. And then there is movement to the left, by the entrance into the restroom, some slaps, some grunting, some whispering and squealing. First head peaks around the corner. The spectators have arrived.

"Hunter, son, pick yourself up. We've got a job to do." My father manages after taking a raspy breath, free from Teles's clutches, before she circles her fingers around his neck again, giggling. At the word *son* I bristle. Hunter, the son my father never had. Forget the daughter, who needs her? She's just an idiotic worthless girl, the weak kind, the kind that can't defend herself, the kind that's been made to haul water. Yet there is pleading in my father's eyes as Teles strangles him lightly, and I can't help myself. I feel there is something left in my heart for him and I'm torn.

Rush of souls hits me in the chest with their sound, but it's nothing compared to Papa's silent plea. It's full of pain and agony, his gaze unbroken as I watch him turn blue in the face. One of us has to make the move, and I know it's me this time. I breathe in, deep, yet instead of making a move to free him, crumble completely.

I hate this. I hate this! I HATE THIS! I want to scream, mad at my own indecision. Furious inside, timid on the outside. Enter wishful thinking, Ailen Bright style. See if you can slap me to make me act.

What I want to see is me performing one swift frog-leap with both feet high in the air, kicking sirens, see them flying. What I do is drag my right foot to make a small step. A step back. What I want to feel is Papa's Ralph Lauren polo shirt roughing up the palms of my hands as I grab him and shake him and yell him in the face everything I ever wanted to say. What I do is take another step, this time realizing which way I'm moving. Backwards. I'm retreating, ready to flee. Because I don't know where my allegiance lies anymore, what my family is, exactly, my father or the sirens. Or Hunter. Or someone else, or nobody at all.

A blinding thought hits me. Unless I lose control when angry, I can't hurt people.

Something rolls from under my foot and I almost stumble. Papa's plastic sonic gun. I bend and pick it up, seeing it up close for the first time. It's cool to the touch and reminds me of transparent water blasters, made from smoked grey plastic, with wires coiled inside and a black conic tube facing me like a tiny loudspeaker. Except there is nothing ergonomic about it, it's two simply cylinders welded onto each other. The big one

acting as a barrel, and the small one, stuck out at a slight angle, as a handle. A small blue button with blue wires leading to it acts as a trigger.

By some blood related impulse, I aim it at Canosa, her eyes widen. A pulsing of emotional exhaustion circuits through my head, ready to explode on anyone or anything, just so they would leave me alone and give me time to make sense of everything that's happened since morning.

A hint of a smile alights Papa's features.

"Get off my father." I say and shift the gun to point towards the blown up stall. Canosa silently nods and Teles let's my father go, so does Teles. Ligeia is last, hissing at me her contempt.

"That's my girl. Show me, Ailen, show me what women were made for. Show me what you can do, come on." Papa's eyes look like they're growing, until they fill my world with one penetrating stare. The blue of his irises is so different from Hunter's, faded, possessing a clarity of ice, his pupils as if two tiny holes drilled by an auger. And that's where I'm about to drown.

Sawdust odorizes air, when the rest of the mob burst onto the scene, complete with screaming women, the police officer with his beer belly and the fish monger. I hear their souls

behind me, retreating towards them without turning my head, my gun pointed and ready.

"Do it, Ailen," he licks his lips, "show me."

And I want to scream, *Why did you marry mom, did you even love her? Did you, ever?* But my tongue won't move.

Papa smiles with terrible knowledge. He knows he has power over me, no matter what shape I'm in. I know it too. And this knowledge wants me to kill myself all over again. I can't bear it, it poisons my soulless cavity with emptiness. No soul will ever fill that void.

I wish to scream at the top of my lungs, *Why did you decide to have me? Why did you let her go? What did you do to her, you sick fuck!* What I do is take another step back, angry tears rolling down my cheeks. Shame cooks my face, and I hate it. I want to smash him with the back of my palm, scream in his ear, yell and holler and sing. What I do is, keep moving. It's as if my body betrayed my mind and does its own thing.

Room temperature drops a few degrees. Thick fog coils around my feet. Canosa starts singing, her eyes looking straight into Hunter's, his body in her grip, his face ashen. She is aiming at sucking out his soul.

"Hunter!" I yelp and step into a puddle that formed from faucets fizzing water. I flail my arms and plop down on my ass, letting go of the sonic gun that flies out my hand and makes a

peculiar arc, landing in Papa's hands. He clutches it, backs off from the sirens and runs towards me, kneels and presses it to my chest, into my ribcage. Freshly brewed expensive coffee breath puffs over me through his perfect whitened teeth, at six hundred dollars per visit. Not covered by insurance.

"Show me what you can do, Ailen, sweetie. Prove yourself to your father. Go on." Then, with power, "DO IT!" There is expectancy in his urge, yet I can't bring myself to hurt him. What does he want me to show him? Was is this all about? Him waiting for me to resist? To hit him back? All those face slapping sessions while I grew up have served this sole purpose? The idea sickens me, and all suppressed confusion and hurt and hatred and disappointment want to exit at once.

Without a second thought, I direct them where my body tells me to. Primitive instincts take over. After all, I'm nothing more than a hungry siren.

My muscles groan as I push hard into the floor and propel myself towards the restroom's entrance, collapsing with the fishmonger, the one who asked to call 911.

"There she is, officer! I saw her myself! I saw her throw that bike. I tell you, whatever it is, it's normal. She needs to be locked up. She..." We collide and he folds over me. I hold his body and twist him in the air, slapping him on the glass-strewn floor and directing my anger toward him. His thirty something

young soul chants at me with its Seahawks super bowl cheer, barking dogs, lonely strums of a guitar. I stare directly into his pupils and see them widen. There is something else that's like an echo to an afterthought. A feeling, a presence of a girl, tucked behind his eyes but not quite by his heart, and a swarm of beautiful lies. I hear every single one. Faker. It makes me outraged, and then hungry, ravenous, famished.

I'm like a smoker who quit after smoking for twenty years just a few days ago and is dying for a drag, surrounded by the smoldering of that impossible soul aroma, acrid, almost musty. In other word, stinky yet irresistible.

If I don't feed right now, I'll die.

My pinhole of a vision excludes all light, my focus shifts from looking to igniting, sensing life on the other end, willing it to come to me, to crawl out of its cave and leave. I squat over the fishmonger's chest like a vulture, scavenging for his essence, at once oblivious to everything that's happening around me. I vaguely remember that Papa has the gun now and can blow me up any second, but I don't care. Nothing matters except food.

Fishmongers resinous apron squeaks under me. His plump face turns pallid with terror. His sweat overpowers that distinct after-shave lotion that single men wear thinking it will make them more attractive. His hair, fluffy and flaky, peaks out from under his cap onto scrunched forehead. He emits a groan. I lower

my face to his, ignoring strong garlic breath, and give myself away to instinct.

Nobody taught me how to feed, but I know now why I failed to kill Hunter. We had no eye contact. This time my victim's eyes are open, and that's key. They beckon me with magnetic force.

I lick my lips, widen my eyes and exude a strange glow that reflects in fishmonger's eyes, electric blue of a fluorescent light bulb. That's what it looks like. It comes off hot, degenerating siren glare, the one that corrupts, like my father liked to say, men's very spirit. Eye contact, that's my lighter. So that's how it works, that's why Hunter's still alive. It explains what he said about the real siren, the killer kind, the girl next door whose gaze never sits still. Locking eyes with her can mean only one thing. Death.

I imagine myself as a Dupont lighter, the fancy expensive kind. Flick open the case, ping! I open my mouth wide. Twist your thumb on the igniter. I inhale, ready to sing. My innards are cotton soaked in lighter fluid. My stare is a flint that creates a spark. My tongue is my wick, I flick it over my lips, wet with anticipation. The first notes that come out of my mouth are the fire.

"Why can't you let go of me

"Whispering in my ear

"Pulling on my skin."

What I really do is I sing the Siren Suicides song that I'd always sing in the bathroom after yet another violent tirade from my father, my cheeks swelling, my hatred fueling my voice. It's called "Let me be." It's a song for him, and I know this time he can hear me.

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I will be."

Fishmonger's cheeks are stained with tears, eyes forever open, to his death. His soul, ignited, makes its first tentative appearance out of his mouth, a trail of smoke, a shadow. I inhale slowly in case I'm too sensitive. It does taste musty, just like I thought. I don't care. As a first siren meal, it tastes beyond good. It gives me a buzz, a drowsiness, and then a sharp euphoria that spreads through my ribcage, full of his sounds, Seahawks and dogs and guitar, crammed into one bubbly tumble. I hold it in and it makes me want to float. One second goes by, then two and three. Thick fog uncoils all around me, streaming from my skin pores.

"Why don't you believe in me

"Cradling my hopes

"Strangling my dreams."

I take a sharp breath of a maniac, of a druggie getting high on coke, and one thought passes through my mind. *Man, this is the best shit ever.*

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

More tendrils of fog waterfall from my skin, like I'm a freezer opened on a hot summer day. While I sing, the soul inches into my chest, burrows into it until it's fully ingested. I inhale another whiff.

"And I will be, will be..."

The song is not done, but already the monger's face loses color. His soul is mine now, it buzzes inside me. Room temperature cools down to about fifty degrees. I feel a first pang of fever. Hold my breath, let go.

"Why can't I leave you..."

Another inhale. Vapor slinks out of monger's mouth in creamy streaks, uncoils into a smooth ribbon. Silky. I suck on it, gulp it up. It stinks of cowardice smeared with cold sweat, and it's still tasting musty. I want to taste different souls, to gorge myself up on flavors. There is faint commotion behind me.

"Stumbling in my steps

"Thrashing in my haste..."

Before I can inhale again, Hunter's on my back shaking my shoulders. I send him to the wall with a mere arm-shove. Slam!

Nothing matters now except food. More than half of monger's soul inside me, I'm still ravenous. Seems like I absorb him as I eat, void rumbles through my chest so loudly, I think the entire market will hear.

I inhale and close the song.

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, will be."

"Got you!" Papa's voice breaks my trance.

I flip my head to the left. Something happens at the end of some faraway tunnel. Insignificant. I blink, trying to get back. Papa's on top of Canosa, her writhing body in agony, Ligeia and Teles at his feet, his shoes are off, they pull at him, hissing. The sonic gun lies on the floor under the sink, a few inches from his grasp. Hunter wrestles with Pisinoe, turns to look at me. The tunnel closes. This is not important right now.

I'm back to my feeding frenzy. I have to finish it, I have to. The monger is dying. I push his eyelids apart to make him look at me, to establish eye contact again. Hunger twists me inside out, and I inhale.

"Why can't you let go..."

On the word go the last of his soul slips out and settles into my mouth.

POP!

Our gaze breaks, his eyes glass over the ceiling, lifeless. He's gone. I'm afire. I'm as warm as I was when being a girl, like I'm back to normal with hot blood rushing through my veins, late to some weed smoking party, giggly and excited.

"I said, do her now, idiot. Shoot her!" Papa shouts to Hunter. Hunter rolls with Pisinoe under the sinks, reaching out to the gun. Now she's on top of him, all sweetness and questions about what kind of pet he wants forgotten, grabbing his hair and beating his head against wet floor.

Body heat drains from the monger. I look down and it downs on me. He's dead, and it was me who killed him. My giddiness evaporates. My stomach drops. What was I thinking? I try to retch it all back out, coughing. Tough luck. It's gone, absorbed into my seawater blood now, ingested. My first feeding is over.

"How could I. How..." I stiffen and tumble off his body into the receding fog like a layer of tracing paper over the hexagon tile floor.

"Ailen, behind you!" Hunter breaks into a shrill. I turn my head to see Pisinoe begin her song and watch Hunter's eyes become transfixed. I want to stand up, but my legs are mush. The classic stoner's relaxation at the wrong time.

I open my mouth to shout when my father finally reaches the sonic weapon and, his stomach flat on the floor, points at me and pushes the button.

BLAM!

A focused beam of sound misses me by a foot and sends air into visible waves. A second later, he fires at sirens next to him. Canosa roars and the combination of her voice and the sonic blast shakes the ground and every little tile piece in the walls, every mirror, every sink. Toilet water shoots up, pipes break into a shower, faucets uproot and spray us all with fierce drizzle of chlorinated water.

My eardrums erupt with pain, I clutch my head and stoop. Ligeia and Teles join Canosa, shrieking. I back off towards the window by the entrance, sliding on wet tiles.

"You don't understand, Ailen, this is not a game. This is real. I'm trying to teach you something. If you let me." Papa shouts over siren cries and erupting water, his pink polo shirt turning reddish from getting wet.

Remorse floods me with such force, I begin singing out my pain, not knowing how else to respond, replaying in real life what I wanted to do so many times while sitting locked up in the bathroom.

"Why can't you let go of me

"Whispering in my ear

"Puling on my skin

"Where do you think you're going?" Papa asks. I realize I made a step towards the exit, where a breathless crowd is

transfixed. I catch myself in the mirror. My reflection looks scary, a bleached version of Ailen with translucent skin devoid of color, a choke of pasty matted hair, unnaturally blue eyes, bluer than Hunter's rain jacket hanging loose on my shoulders. Face split in a grimace of a sea monster, some ghostly beastie. How is this supposed to be charming?

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I will be..."

"I don't think you're going anywhere, you hear me? I think you're going home." He aims at me, standing amidst incapacitated sirens. They're breathing but not moving. Hunter crawls from under the sinks, wood chips stuck in his hair. He reaches for my father with almost tears in his voice, "Fuck you, man! She is your own..." but gets kicked in his groin and folds down, moaning.

Watching this hurts worse than a thousand sonic blasts.

"Hunter!" I lean forward.

KA-BLAM!

My father hits my legs now. My head explodes with brilliant pain. Every tissue in my legs screams and threatens to separate into a million atoms, yet somehow holds together. In a way a shattered bone is held together by sheer will. I drop on the floor, ignore ringing pain and continue singing.

"Why don't you believe in me

"Cradling my hopes

"Strangling my dreams..."

BAM!

He hits my side now. I slide across wet tiles leaving a trail with my butt. It's like he's aiming at me but not intending to kill me, only to hurt me.

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I will be."

I make it to the open frame of the tall window, slightly ajar to let in fresh air. The sweetness of the rain greets me. I pull myself up on the windowsill.

"Why can't I leave you

"Stumbling in my steps

"Thrashing in my haste

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be.

Another blast sears my torso with pain.

"I WILL BE!" I nearly shout, then hoist myself up, slink into the opening, roll over the windowsill and drop twelve feet down.

Chapter 16. Post Alley

Rain slaps me in the face, perhaps mad that I once called it stupid. I slide down the brick wall as if in apology and hit the concrete, my head tips back, my face opens to the rain. My gills ache. This is the water I needed. Not the chlorinated spray from the public restroom, but the rainwater collected from the tops of the mountains and carried over here by fierce Northwest winds. The melted snow. The lake vapor. The essence of heavy clouds ready to shed their excessive moisture onto the heads of those poor souls that happened to stand right in their shadow. It gives me back my strength. I want to talk to it, the way I hummed to the lake, the way I parted it when we rode at top speed on that stolen silver Ducati. *Ailen Bright*, rain droplets seems to whisper, *Get in the water, quickly. Escape before you get locked up in a trunk of despair, forever. You know he won't let you out of his sight, out of his control, siren or not. Be quick. Move!*

"Okay, okay. I will." I say, fully aware that this might look really weird from the side, a dirty girl in torn clothes, soaking wet, talking to the sky. It must be close to lunchtime by now, because several lunch goers stop to measure me up and

down to decide if I pose any kind of threat. I know what I look like, they don't need to show me. I'm a monster, the every day variety kind, the scariest of them all.

Full from fishmonger's soul and no longer hungry, I'm ready to go. Ready to escape the crowd's screaming and jeering from two stories above. I feel miserable at leaving Hunter like this, but who am I to deserve his love? What did I just do? I just fed on a man. I killed a man. *I'm a monster all right, a siren, and a siren hunter is no friend to us, like Canosa said.* Because I think this, because of the fact that I even dared to listen to this thought in my head, I feel even worse and want to simply run away from it all. Run and hide and think it over. Dip myself in calming water. Water is all that matters, and my gills agree. Water will lead me out, I trust it with my every timbre. It's my only true friend, it will tell me what to do.

I take a second to look south and study the landscape, deciding where to go. Puget Sound spreads in a wide smile over Aurora highway, through layers of buildings, riding a wave of seagull shrieks and salty smells. I want to grow wings and leap over this entire stretch of a thousand feet of stone in a dive of a century, six times the height of Aurora bridge spread out horizontally, to reach the water right this moment. But I can't, and I hear Papa running up to the window three stories above me. Another couple seconds, and I'm toast.

I dash left and left again, dragging my feet, weak from Papa's blasts, into a dark maze of Pike Place market's guts, its restaurant's barred windows, garbage bin stink, sewer pipes hissing steam and liquid. My bare feet slip on wet and worn cobblestones. I pass a lonely janitor emptying a bucket of dirty water right into the street, his soul a mix of a talking parakeet, boiling soup bubbles and some mixed martial arts cries, all together promising to taste pungent. I slow down a notch without realizing it, the predator in me ready to feed. I could push the guy into that gaping backdoor and snuff him out in no time, yet I get mad at myself for thinking this and pick up my pace, without looking, continuing into Post Alley, that hidden capillary across Seattle's downtown. I think I know where I'm going.

Ahead of me a flock of tourists poses in front of the Gum Wall, pretending to be stars against the background of chewed up resin. Ugh, disgusting. They take pictures and chat excitedly, about a dozen of them. Some fresh, some even minty, and one very sweet young girl. Quickly, before getting distracted by their souls, I run in between them, no doubt spoiling their photo, pushing them apart with my arms, wincing as if I touched hot pans on the stove. They shriek. I keep running, skidding on damp stones, past gaping garages, metal mesh fences, by a row of parked motorcycles, in the shadow of tall apartment buildings on

each side. Toward the light at the end of the alley, into the open.

One thought pounds in my head on repeat. *I don't belong. I don't belong. I'm a killer, and I don't belong.*

Water and solitude, it's what I need right now. Water will heal me.

I burst into the opening and shield my eyes from diffused light streaming down through the clouds. It stopped raining. Puget Sound glistens with its welcome calmness to my right, and I bolt south, cross the street, reach a stair to a lower level, skip down its forty metal steps, and continue running without looking back, towards grim columns that support the rumbling elevated section of highway 99, fifty feet above me. I pass into its looming shadow, ignore red light and jog across Alaskan way, hopping between beeping cars. There, almost made it. I step onto pedestrian way, a concrete fence and a plaza away from water. wellbeing. If there is such a thing as a wellbeing of a siren. My legs still tremble from the shock of sonic blasts. My gills ache with dull thirst.

It seems like I don't have to be in the water all the time, like people don't need to be in the sun all the time, yet it's good for them if they do, same way as water is good for my I wonder if I'd turn into a fish if I stay in the water too long, just like I used to burn in the sun if I tanned for more than

several hours. I smile at the thought, imagining myself as a trout.

There is so much water, and it's somehow very different from lake water. It feels bigger, louder, more magnificent. It whispers to me, hums to me. Enthralled by its slur I miss the danger. A homeless mushroom of a man snatches my arm just above elbow. His brown bundle of clothes is soaked through and reeking with urine. His smell hits my nose, his screeching voice assaults my ears.

"Hang on there, little birdie. Where do ye think ye're going? Eh? Spare some change for this poor man, will ye? Will ye?" His open mouth shows gaps between yellowing teeth. He's short and shrunken and trembling.

"Huh?"

I shake off his arm, ready to pick him up and throw him into the street, annoyed at the interruption of my marveling, yet knowing I might not have enough strength to do it yet. I look into his tiny pig eyes and feel his desire. He's heard my voice and he's thirsty for it, he wants to bite a piece of me, to touch me, to see if it's skin or some weird milky glass that's poking through my torn jacket and jeans. This makes me livid and I can't stomach the idea to touch the man. I forget all about water and shout.

"WHAT? What do you want? You like me, do you? What is it about me that you like, huh? My dirty feet? My adorable hair that looks like I crawled in shit since morning? Yes? No? Well, which one is it?" I know I need to go, but I want an answer. I want him to answer me, NOW. I want all of them to answer, everyone who wouldn't leave me alone, wouldn't let me be. And I feel my energy evaporate after using my voice.

The man doesn't appear to be scared, instead he takes a step closer in lucid adoration. "Oh, will ye look at those blue eyes. Very pretty. Yer mama gave ye those, little birdie? Was she pretty too? I bet she was, I bet. Give an old man for a drink. I'll drink to ye, and I'll dream of ye tonight. My beauty." A palm oh his hand is inches away from my cheek. His voice trembles and so does his soul, surprisingly serene, like hushed leaves whispering in an overgrown garden, promising to taste earthy.

"Don't touch me!" I shout in his face, and instantly regret it. The man jerks his hand away. There is so much hurt in his eyes, his lips quiver. And I want to slap myself hard, to teach myself a lesson, to control my anger. To never turn into my father, never, NEVER. Siren or not.

Then the flashes come.

Directly over the concrete fence, on the wooden platform that separates me from the water, another pack of Japanese

tourists take pictures of themselves, of the waterfront, of me and the homeless man. I know I'd have to make it through them and across the platform to dive and disappear. And, suddenly, I can't. My knees grow soft. The idea of killing anyone else by mistake or while in the rush of anger, the image of the mesmerized and terrified crowd by the market and once again by the restroom entrance, the dead face of the fishmonger, Raidne being blown up... all of this floods me with remorse and guilt. I can't do this anymore. I can't run around and simply hurt people. I can't be a siren, not with my father's DNA. I need to somehow get rid of myself, for good.

While I attempt to sort through emotions, things turn from bad to worse. A cop approaches us with a steady gait of an old man, not old enough to retire, but old enough to have hip pain, limping slightly on his left leg. His hair is curly and grey, contrasting with dark skin and blue uniform cap. A gospel handclap of a soul, he's a mix of Mardi Gras songs, old jazz and alabaster ghetto shootings, all together tasting perhaps like gumbo. My chest grumbles with hunger.

"Miss? Is he giving you trouble?" He straightens his cap, his fat fingers hairy yet cleanly manicured. I begin to think that the only way for me to escape this situation, weakened as I am and without hurting anyone in the process, is to attempt to run away.

The homeless man almost visibly shrivels and weaves a lie, which seems to come naturally to him. "She took me money, officer. Swear on me life." He crosses himself. "That her right there, took all me change. I'm jus' an honest man, trying to make a living here. An honest man, officer, trying me best. Doing me best, as best I can, in me circumstances." Saliva drips out of his open mouth. I judge the gap between him and the cop, thinking of slinking through without pushing either of them out of my way.

"Shut it, Bonny. I've heard this a thousand times. Get your sorry ass out of my sight if you don't want me to charge you with a misdemeanor." He turns his attention to me. "Miss, can I see your ID? Holy Jesus, what happened to you?" His large brown eyes widen as he notices big torn holes in my jacket and jeans.

There is enough space between slowly moving cars in the lunch traffic on Alaska way. As if sensing my resolve, the cop raises his arm, "Let me..."

I lightly brush it aside and sprint, every step rending me weaker and weaker.

"MISS! Stop!"

I hear the cop shout after me, but I'm off, weaving my way between blaring cars, back under the ugly Alaska Way Viaduct, its dark expanse hanging parallel to the waterfront like a looming imposter. I turn into a long stretch of metered parking

underneath it and run further south, concentrating on the ground to not sway from sudden dizziness, between rows of parked cars, the ever-present forest green Subarus, metallic Volkswagens, unidentifiable maroon color vans, occasional trucks and bright green hybrids. I think that if I run all the way to ship terminals where there are no tourists and gawkers, I'll slip into water there, without attracting much attention.

I keep looking to my right for a clear side street, a pier devoid of souls. My feet paddle forward, feeling heavy. Then about twenty feet ahead of me I hear the unmistakable glimpse of terror in the form of a Maserati Quattroporte Sport GT S engine, the low purring of Papa's car, behind a turn.

"Fuck!" I yelp, before realizing that it's a big mistake. Hunter said a siren hunter can track a siren by her voice, so my shouting at the homeless man must have lead him there, he must be on his way there, having to drive all the way down Western avenue and turn around to make it to the waterfront, no doubt deciding to creep along the parked cars so as not to be seen. Great. Before he whips around the corner and spots me, I have perhaps ten seconds at the most, to make myself invisible and disappear.

Pain forgotten, I sprint left, scatter a handful of pigeons into the mad cooing cloud, and run along some side street towards Harbor steps that connect this lower area of town with

its upper level. I hop over several steps at once in long strides, pulsing with with a single idea. *I need to hide. I need to hide.*

Car tires screech into the side road I took and drive up to the end of the steps below me. I don't need to turn to look, I know who it is. And he's not alone. There hangs a hint of that summery goodness and warmth in the air. And the lulling sound of Vivaldi's summer concerto gone wrong, as if no longer sweet but sour. Hunter, he's got Hunter in the car with him, and Hunter is in pain. I can't help myself, stop and turn around.

I've made it two thirds of the way and there is about one hundred feet between us. Papa gets out of the car right in the middle of the street, ignores the honking. Horrified that he'll see me, I drop flat on my stomach into one of the shallow pools by the fountains that run along the steps. Water gives me instant relief yet also burns me, it has chlorine. I can't stay here for long. *Think, Ailen, think.* He can't drive up the steps after me, and he hasn't seen me yet. If I keep quiet, he won't know where I am. Can I outrun his car? Not in this injured state. Can I make it out of this maze and into the water unseen? Probably best to wait till night when streets are deserted.

I decide to find a good hiding spot, to recover, perhaps yearning for the comfort of confinement I experienced when being locked up in the bathroom for hours on end. I wait until I hear

the engine start again and move away, then jump out of the water to the shriek of a passing lady and hysterical barking of her dog, sprint to my left into another alley. *I'll hide, I'll think, I'll wait it out, get better, and then I'll dive.*

I splash across puddles with no sense of direction, simply going somewhere, looking for a quiet place. Alley ends in a series of concrete steps and I find myself in an open plaza directly underneath one of Aurora highway exits. No, it's not a plaza, it's a dead-end the size of a concert hall, a street ending into a thirty foot high wall, one of supporting cement columns in the middle of it. Perpendicular to it and straight ahead of me stands a squat brick building. A concrete staircase runs along its side, starting from the fourth story and ending on the first, masquerading for an architectural ornament, to make the brick wall not so plain. The space underneath the staircase is walled off by a chain link fence, all the way to the top. Perfect.

It's devoid of pedestrians. I quickly jog across, pass a few parked cars and break open the metal mesh door, then turn around and lean it back so it looks like it's shut. I crawl into the rubble in the shallow end, pushing aside pieces of industrial junk reeking of machine oil and rust, scooping away rustling chip bags, damp cardboard and plain dirt, and discover a treasure. Deep under the lowest rung of the stair, stuffed

with discarded appliances and hidden from view, stands an old iron clawfoot bathtub. I can't believe my luck and dig trash out of it, to make enough room.

I slide inside and pull some of the cardboard boxes over my head to cover myself up. There, I'm hidden. I let out a sigh of relief, trembling all over from the effort of running. Then I notice a shaft of light in the dimness around me. Several shafts. I turn onto my stomach. There are three circular holes in the tub where the faucet used to be, now gone. I position myself so that my nose barely peeks through the largest hole, both of my eyes level with two other holes, like I'm some hermit crab observing its surroundings through its broken shell.

I breathe in rapid gasps, calming myself down.

You're safe, you're safe here. I'll stay here until it turns dark and then quietly find my way out and disappear into the water. I don't know exactly what I will do after that, but it doesn't matter. I'm safe now. My head buzzes with dizziness, and I feel like I'll puke.

Ailen, stop freaking out. You're good. I begin to relax. It's over with. It's all over with. I can gather my strength and think what I'm to do with myself and how. Maybe I can use this place again in the future, if need be. Maybe I can even stay here for days, alone, in peace. If not for the constant shaking

of the ground and the wheezing from traffic above, this would've been perfect.

Involuntarily, I utter a moan, perhaps because too many things happened, perhaps to release the pain. The amount of stuff that happened to me over the last twenty four hours beats all the other things that transpired throughout my entire sixteen year long life. But as soon as the sound escapes my lips, I gasp and cover my mouth. A noise. I made a noise. A bad premonition sizzles my innards.

I freeze and wait, hoping against all hope that Papa didn't hear me, that my moan wasn't loud enough for him to detect. The constant drone of cars exiting from Aurora to downtown should've dampened it, shouldn't it? They're louder than me. How exactly would he detect me, what kind of device does he use. *I wonder...*

Wondering doesn't last long, because there is a low purr of Maserati engine, its eight cylinders pumping pistons and producing a fume that contrasts with any other exhaust by virtue of its ego. Look at me, I'm Italian made. Papa's car rolls in, tires gripping asphalt in tight revolutions, crunching along parking area and then stopping directly across my hiding spot. Maserati metallic grey glistens at me through the hole, as if saying, you thought you could hide from me, sweetie? I'm afraid to move away further into the dark, afraid to make any movement

at all. Hunter's profile is barely visible from behind the passenger door window. His head is hung as if he's sleeping.

I watch all of this unfold with a kind of mortified fascination, where my senses have turned themselves off in favor of one single flood of terror. My bones turn to brittle, muscles spasm, skin feels like ice. Above all, the pounding of my heart is so loud, I wish I could push a button and turn the damn thing off before it gives me away.

Move! Go, go now, before he gets out of the car! My mind screams at my body, but my body won't listen, hand still pressed over my mouth. He doesn't know I'm here, not yet, surely it's some acoustic radar that he uses, and as soon as I'm quiet, it'll be quiet too. I think. I hope. *Get out and run, you stupid coward! You can outrun him and make it into the water. GO!* But the more my mind reels with agony, the more my body wills itself to be completely still, barely breathing. This is what they must call deer in the headlights, because I have a complete lack of motor reaction. Atrophied.

Car idles for a few seconds, as if my father is deciding on something, then it pulls into one of the empty parking spots, its tail lights flashing red at me, then going dark. Driver's door opens and Papa steps out, glances at his watch. I study his face, perhaps twenty feet away from me, cleanly shaven as always, concentrated on something. Time? I notice he changed

into a new set of clothes that he always carries in the trunk of his car in case he gets wet. Right now it's a dull lavender shirt and a pewter wool jacket, no tie. I notice something else. An echo of blue light reflecting in tiny halos on his cheeks. Pulsing. Blue light flashing at him from his watch. My guts turn to lead. The radar. It must be an acoustic radar and it's picking up my breathing right now, because I'm not making noise anymore.

Another thought pins me with pricks and needles. That's what it meant, all those times when he would glance at his watch at dinner or at breakfast, excuse himself and practically run out of the house under the pretext of being late, taking off on his boat and vanishing for days. My father was never late, and his escapades always puzzled me. I was never allowed to touch or even look at his exorbitantly expensive Italian piece of watchmaking excellence, made of titanium by a company called Officine Panerai and originally produced for Royal Italian Navy, as Papa always reminded me in case I decided to break it, telling me how he would make me pay it off. Nor did he allow my mother to handle it. And every time after he left in a hurry, mom would always go pale and start chatting gibberish to cover up the silence.

Maybe I stare at my father too hard, because as soon as I think about mom, he raises his head and looks directly at me. I

know he can't see me, but the sensation is overwhelming. I almost cry out, understanding where my paralysis is coming from. It's not so much the fear of him catching me, it's the impossibility of escape, like in a bad dream where you run and run through tangled woods, away from a predator whose breath you feel on your back, but every time you think you made it out, you find yourself back where you started, wheel around, and there it is, the monster of your nightmares, staring you in the face.

Papa puts his hand in his pant pocket and marches to the broken door, a sonic gun in his other hand. I get a whiff of his determination and shrink even further into the tub, mentally burrowing myself in it like a mole blind from fear.

You need to run! NOW!

Yet I do not hear, lost inside myself. My head seems to have swapped places with my feet, my heart somersaults down to my stomach, my lungs dry out and my gills ache with burning irritation in a way a fresh cut stings. I'm full of putrid apprehension that sears my vocal cords. *Great, Ailen, you're a mute siren now. Congratulations. Fresh catch of the day. You don't stand a fucking chance.*

"Ailen."

I don't see my father through the holes anymore, but I hear him make his way through trash and rabble.

"Come on, sweetie, we both know you're here. Let's be civil and do it quietly this time around, okay? We don't want to scare people. People do strange things when they're scared, they might imagine things that are not really happening. We don't want that."

More steps and shuffling, then his voice sounds almost above me. "One minute. I'll give you one minute to come out. You know I don't like to wait."

He pushes a knob on his Panerai. The timer starts. I never heard the actual sound, but I hear it now with my extra sensitive ears. It's mechanic and delicate at the same time.

Tick-tick-tick.

I imagine the watch second hand pass the numbers.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

This feels too much like déjà vu, like me counting seconds when stepping into the bathtub full of water this morning. Panic sets in my chest, my paralysis morphs into dread. He jingles his car keys, takes another step.

"Forty seconds, sweetie."

How he loves to set the time on me, always, using his super-precise watch, ever since I remember myself. That dreaded one minute, sixty seconds exactly, not a second less, not a second more. I picture the broken bathroom door on the floor and his shoes, suddenly hating all these beautiful things he

surrounds himself with, even my mother who was strikingly beautiful and never knew it, even her he treated like a thing. Canosa turned me into a siren to revenge my mother, that was my choice, than why am I sitting here, all stiff and afraid?

Pure loathing fills me to a bursting point and pulls my own internal trigger. My weakness is gone, replaced by an urge to tear apart, destroy and kill.

With a terrible shriek I contract my muscles and burst through a shower of debris, head first, hitting the fence, breaking it, turning one hundred and eighty degrees in the air and jumping into a fighter's stance, feet apart, hands curled into fists. Eyeballs swivel in my sockets until they find him.

"I hate your guts, Papa." I say, facing my father.

Chapter 17. Aurora Avenue

My defiance is making air taste like thick cotton wrapped around a probing stick and stuck in between my father and me. Which one of us will push it first? Who will cross these last ten feet and whose face will be slapped this time? Without a moment's hesitation, my father aims and fires at me. An earsplitting bang blasts the air and hits me in the gut. As I fall, I watch two women descend the stairs, give me a quick glance, and saunter off. The sonic gun must hardly make any noise at all, not to their ears, at least... I can't finish my thought. Ablaze with pain, I bend and fall on my ass, vibrating like a piece of glass about to shatter, seeing everything through a film of fog. My jeans catch on a sharp end of a chain link. I try to yank my leg free without breaking eye contact with my father, crossing that terrible bridge into a mind of the one who spawned me. A siren hunter without soul. I fight the oncoming nausea.

"I said, I hate your guts. Did you hear me?"

"Good. I'm glad to hear it, sweetie. Now, would you please get in the car?" He motions with his gun. I detect nervous notes in his voice. My not running away must puzzle him. It puzzles me

too, but some mad stubbornness is making me stay, to test my theory. Plus, I can barely move.

"You're not going to kill me, are you? You can't. This is all for the show." I say, slowly moving my stiff tongue, verbalizing something that's been bugging me since he first fired at me on Seward park beach. If he wanted to dispose of me, surely he would've done it already.

Behind me, the passenger door remains closed, Hunter sitting there quietly, his soul's Vivaldi now barely discernable. He's not getting outside to help me. Air thickens with my resentment, I can almost touch it. Shaking, I pick myself up, roll over my legs and edge towards my father on all fours, limping like an injured crab, staring him in the face, and I see a trace of doubt. He frowns. Then my sleeve catches on another broken chain-link and I fold down, digging into asphalt with my elbows and face.

Sprawled on the ground, I raise my head so I can see Papa.

"Go on, shoot me. I'm helpless. See, I can barely move."

And I flash him a grin. The terror that passes through his eyes is so genuine, that I burst out laughing. It shakes me to the core, sounding wrong and gleeful at the same time, releasing my fear into the open. I hear him curse and spit.

BAM!

Another shot. It hits me square in the face, slapping me on my right cheek just as Papa always does. He'd then hit my left one, for symmetry, as he would say, to make it hurt evenly and make me think about standing up to him, about growing out of my female weakness. I blink tears out of my eyes. The right side of my head is on fire, right eyes close to popping, right jaw ready to part with my face. I grit my teeth and remain quiet, expecting another blast, to my left. Nothing happens.

My father's silhouette swims against the staircase underbelly with pulsing regularity. I close my eyes and open them again, shedding more tears. Still no good. Everything around me looks as if covered with a layer of water. A gigantic bronze bell tolls in my ears, ringing on repeat, echoing the shot. I suspect there must be some sort of intensity setting on that thing, some sort of a dial that lets regulate the wavelength or the focus of the sound beam, aimed at either torturing the siren or blowing her up for good. Because how else did he blow up Raidne from a distance of fifty feet or so with one blast and can't blow me up from ten feet away? My mind clears up. Facts. Facts are my crutch and my sanity, they always pull me out. And water.

I try to turn my head towards Puget Sound, to glimpse its blue expanse. No luck. My head drops on pavement, my neck muscles twitch, exhausted. My nerves, assaulted by sonic boom,

feel detached, and then the last of my strength evaporates into a groan. I'm an escapee caught red handed and awaiting corporal punishment. On sheer will, too stubborn to give up, I manage to roll on my back and face the sky. But I don't see it. I don't see the street, I don't see the buildings. There is no highway exit above me, no clouds, no trees. Nothing. All gone, replaced by Papa's eyes. Large, round, dark. They burrow a hole through me, and I flatten.

"I'm not coming home." I whisper.

"I can't hear you, sweetie." His shadow is above me, leaning closer. He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Papa..." I can't finish. His eyes block the world, his black pupils consume my vision. I'm blank except for the constant ringing in my ears. The rest of me feels dead.

"Why don't you understand. You can't run away from me. I'm your father and you do as I say as long as you live."

"Then I don't want to live anymore." I whisper.

"Don't you ever say that." He hisses through teeth and passes the gun to his left hand.

Here it comes, the symmetrical blow. His right arm snakes high into the air, pauses, for a moment nothing more than a bent line drawn against grey sky, then it crashes down in one hard smack. Left side of my head explodes with the sound so deafening that I vibrate again to a bursting point, like I'm glass turning

to liquid. A balloon filled up with too much water. A drop of rain splattered on the ground.

Everything goes quiet and dark.

I can't see, can't hear, but I can feel. My skull compresses then rebounds with a shock of bright pain. I can't tell if it's cracked, but I'm still alive, as much as you can call a soulless siren alive. I feel Papa's hands on my neck, his fingers palpating, searching for pulse. How ironic. I'm not alive, yet I'm not quite fully dead, either. I have a heart. It's pumping liquid through veins, and that liquid is seawater. Cold, colorless, tasteless blood. No, not true, it has a taste. It's salty, like tears. Look who is crying. Ailen Bright, a siren, freshly caught, properly stunned and ready for purchase. At thousand dollars a pound, I'd say it's a steal. Except my father gets it for free, family discount, you know.

It's been a little more than a day now since I died and was born again. And I totally *feel* like a newborn, pulling up my legs until I'm curled into fetal position, my back bent, head bowed, limbs drawn into torso.

Papa leans to pick me up. The only other time he picked me up was probably when I was born. He must've been full of wonder, thinking he's getting a son, cradling my head, his hands full of love, pulling on my shoulders, freeing me from my mother's womb. Lifting me and turning me over. Until... Until he saw. That's it.

I know why I didn't run away this time. Deep inside me I was waiting for this, I was planning on it, with all of my pitiful dead heart. Too afraid to admit it before, but when close to dying a second time, not afraid anymore.

Papa, I can't help myself. I still love you.

This is my dream. My one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, worth every ounce of pain, paid for with suicide. This very moment. THIS.

Papa wedges his arms underneath me and it's more intimate contact than I ever got. He is rough, but to me his is gentle touch. He lifts me off the ground in a sharp yank, but I think he gives me a first real hug. He jerks me up and folds me over his shoulder, but I feel like he cradles my body. He throws me into the trunk of his car, stuffing me in for perfect fit, but I imagine it's the car saloon he puts me in, simply a bit too dark. He ties my hands, ankles, tapes my mouth. Yet I phantom his face over me, smiling, worried sick for my safety, buckling me up. He gives me one last punch, but I know he meant it a kiss.

"What did I tell you? We're going home." He says.

The lid of the trunk shuts with a smooth clunk and my heart sinks. Darkness is complete, so is soft silence. Papa presses on top several times to make sure it's really closed, then walks around the car and slams the driver's door. His steps and door

slamming barely trickle into my ears, I feel them more than I hear them. There is struggle, voices coming at me as if through a thick wooly wall. I'm surrounded by hushed white noise, then it's silence again. The car trunk must be soundproof to some degree, supposedly designed to transport caught sirens? I wiggle my wrists in an attempt to free hands. Forget tape. What I feel is some metal rope, no way can I break it, not without my usual strength. I grunt and attempt to roll on my back. Not enough space. I begin inching towards the backside of the trunk, to hit it with my hands and touch it. Chemical smell of glue and some kind of rubbery foam starts irritating my nostrils. Great. What I need right now is a runny nose. I convulse in a soundless sneeze.

Like a distant echo I make out the timbre of Hunter's typical talk, he seems to argue with my father. There are no words, only sharp tone of their squabble, thick with emotions. Suppressed anger, hatred, disgust, even arrogance. Then one remark from my father and silence again. I wonder what is it that he said, to shut Hunter up. It's not an easy thing to do, typically.

Car purrs to life, backs out of the parking spot, turns around and moves at an increasing speed, thrumming slightly.

That's it, I think, I've been caught. Good job, Ailen. Prepare for your final execution. Isn't this what you wanted? You wanted to die, right? Well, here is your chance.

I swallow, tasting glue from tape. It's been several minutes now that I'm locked inside, and it's increasingly difficult to breathe. Air grows warm from working engine, and exhaust fumes begin trickling in through whatever gaps they can find, choking me with gasoline smell. I'm on the verge of blacking out again. Prompted by rhythmic car motion, soft padding and darkness, trying to distract myself, I think back to being in my mother's womb, imagining what it felt like. And missing her, missing her badly.

I wish I was never born.

I wish I was frozen in time, as a fetus, feeling like this always, safe, warm and dreamy.

I pretend that the motor revolutions are her heartbeats, stuffy air her amniotic fluid soaked into the lining of the trunk, sweetly scented and plushy. Metal wire coiled around my wrists and my ankles is her misplaced placenta. Every road bump shakes me, her gestating embryo, but only mildly, in a gentle swaying manner, the way a boat sways you in the middle of a lake.

Air resembles poisonous gas now, thick with synthetic and metallic odor, getting hotter by the minute. Dizziness spins my

head. I can't tell up from down, left from right, or in from out anymore. It doesn't matter, I'm deep inside my mom, a properly developing baby.

Ailen Bright, oxygenating normally, ten fingers, ten toes, two lungs, one heart. One soul. But I have no soul, and I'm not inside my mom anymore. This is wishful bullshit! I gag into tape over my mouth and dry heave at the thought, remembering that I'm simply stuffed into Papa's car trunk, nothing else. There are no more dreams. I won't last here long, not in this *body* of a car. It will recognize me for what I truly am, an impostor, and it will get rid of me, get me out into harsh bright light. Abort me. Deliver me early.

I shake my head, wincing, because this last thought didn't make much sense and I'm afraid I'm going insane from inhaling the fumes. Or high. Or both. I concentrate on movement, trying to root myself back to reality.

Car seems to be speeding through rain, its tires producing moist slushing, and its engine... What about its engine? Here I lose it again, slipping into a kind of sick daze, unable to keep my thoughts straight, hyperventilating.

I'm back to my mother's womb. And for whatever reason I think it's when my parents were in Italy on their honeymoon, in Lake Garda theme park that my mom told me so much about. I must've been no more than a few multiplying cells at the time.

They're going down a huge water ride, and Papa is scared out of his mind because he hates getting wet, yet he's still strangely attracted to water. But my mother insisted they ride, because she loves boat rides so much. When they met, she jokingly told him she'd marry him if he bought her a boat. He did. She told me he fell in love with her like a madman. They married three weeks after that, and now I'm in her belly, swaying.

She jeers, laughs, she's soaking wet, clutching Papa's hand tightly. Papa is white like paper. My mother is too much in her enjoyment to notice, her heart goes crazy like a revving motor. I know, I can hear it from inside.

Mom? I'm a brave little girl. I swear I won't tell Papa that I'm not a boy. Promise. I tell her. I feel her turning her gaze inward, suddenly knowing that she's pregnant, sending me a stream of warmth and endless admiration. The ride ends and they climb out of the boat, stepping down from the platform into Italian sun.

"Roger? I just felt something, on the ride. Some sort of a vision. I think I'm pregnant." She says and smiles at him. "And I think it's a girl. It's going to be a beautiful baby girl." She places a hand on her stomach.

"Do me a favor, Tali, stop it." Papa says, visibly irritated and still shaken by the ride, his face grey, his shirt wet, sticking to his chest, almost transparent. "Stop talking

nonsense, all right? You'll jinx it. I want a son, remember? You'll give me a son. And that's the end of it." He grabs her hand and pulls her away from the sun, into shade.

Deep inside my mom, I recoil and float into the farthest corner of her womb, not knowing anymore where my future heart belongs, crying nonexistent tears, covering my up face that I don't have yet with hands that are not there.

For a moment, my mother is speechless, following him like a puppet. Then, proceeding with her soft diplomatic nature, she tries to soothe him, discounting his remark to jet lag and a fast ride that perhaps made him ill. That's what she always told me, constantly trying to find an excuse for what he said or did.

"How can you say such a thing? So what if it's a girl, we'll try again. I know you want a boy, Rogie. I know." Her eyes widen, so blue and beautiful and dreamy. Her brown hair contrasts with her white skin, glistening even in the shade of a tall maritime pine. She attempts to touch my father's cheek, but he pushes her hand away.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's get out of here." He says.

"Are you feeling all right? Do you want me to get you a bottle of water?" She raises her hand again, then drops it. "You might need to..."

"Don't tell me what to do, woman." He says harshly, grips her arm right above elbow and pulls her behind him, weaving his way through tourist crowd. They had their first fight in the hotel room after that. Mom wouldn't tell me what happened next.

I've imagined this scene a thousand times, and I told this story a thousand times to Canosa and her sisters while sitting in the bathroom, crying.

I won't cry right now, though. I won't. I WON'T!

But I do.

They're cold siren tears, excess seawater excreted through my tear ducts at an alarming rate, wetting my face, rolling, getting soaked into wooly soundproof lining of the trunk. If I don't stop, I'll be swimming in this cryfest soon, all hot and swollen, gills aching from dry stinky air, lungs suffocating.

My one minute of fantasy is over, and I have nothing. Forget the womb, this is a coffin. I'm going home, slated for slaughter.

A sense of dread spreads through my ribcage, as if something horrible is about to happen. I'm not afraid to die, I've thought all about it for years and years, ever since mom jumped, but I feel like some other premonition is brewing inside me. Whatever could give me this idea? It seems like My father and Hunter ride on in silence. Car speeds along what must be Aurora Ave, towards Roy street, the street I grew up on. Engine

pistons its steady rhythm. Tires pull at the gravel, spinning, wheezing. Traffic hums over distant drone of human souls packing the highway, all of them going somewhere, worried about being late, late to find their graves, every minute closer to the end, closer, in throes of constant human dilemma. How to escape death, how to pretend it's not there. If only there was a magic pill to swallow. And there is. It's called, keeping themselves busy. They do, like a chorus of atrophied puppets, moving their limbs and sauntering along life, no longer led by a puppeteer, stumbling around without direction. They resemble one big spoiled cacophony if not for Hunter's soul. A sweet note, so warm, warm like home, warm like hands can be, warm like someone who knows what being *warm* means.

Warm. Like I'll never be.

I can barely hear his melody through lining. I try to be mad at him for not helping me and I can't. Instead, I want to hold his hand, to dive into memories of games we used to play, music we used to listen to, things we used to talk about, when stoned out of our minds. Happy.

Have you ever been truly ravenously hungry, Hunter, I want to ask. Hungry for love you can never have. Have you?

Shedding water through my skin because of the increasing warmth, I manage to worm myself closer to back of the trunk, tilt my head and press my ear into wooly synthetic. It tickles

my ear, but stay put, listening to muffled echo of a conversation. I was wrong about them not talking. They are talking, and they're arguing at that.

"You don't understand. She's my friend. I can't do this to her. She's..." Hunter's voice catches at the end and I can't make out the rest.

"A siren. Your friend. I see." Papa talks in that calm manner that I know too well. Listening to him is like breathing stiff air, waiting for sky to open over your head into one downward gash, pouring anger.

"She's not just any siren. She's Ailen. Ailen, your daughter!" Hunter says with fervor.

I hold my breath.

"Help me understand something. You're a good looking kid. There are hundreds of normal girls out there. Why are you so fixated on the one that will snuff you out like a lightning bug, without so much as a second thought?" Papa says. Not even a smidge of a mention, nothing he has to say about his *daughter*. I don't why I held my breath to begin with.

"That's a load of bullcrap!" Hunter nearly shrieks now.

"She would *never* do that!"

"I'd appreciate it if you kept your voice at a lower level. Please." There is barely contained anger underneath my father's politeness now.

"I'm sorry." Hunter says. I can't hear it, but I can sense his heavy breathing.

"I'd also appreciate it if we followed the original plan, like we agreed. You know I don't like repeating myself, so I'm going to say it one more time. One time only. I'm your boss, Hunter. I pay you to do your job. You listen to me and you do as I say." Pause. "That thing back there is *not* Ailen anymore. It's a siren, a clever undying whore, the worst of its kind. When she's hungry, she'll murder anything living, even a newborn. It makes no difference to her, she has no feelings. I pay you to kill the likes of her. Are we clear?"

Silence. I can't draw a breath. His words punch me in the gut like a fist.

"Are. We. Clear?" He asks with force.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter answer so quietly, I can barely hear him. And then he keeps talking under his breath. "She's not a whore. Why would you call your own..."

Car comes to a sudden halt. Tires screech against brakes.

I wince as inertia presses me into scratchy lining.

"SILENCE!" My father bellows, his anger erupting. "Did I say I care for your opinion? Mine is the only one that matters here. All women are whores, better brandish that onto your naïve adolescent brain."

A few cars honk impatiently.

"But..."

"Did I give you permission to talk?" This Papa says quieter, getting a grip on his anger. And I think I'm getting a glimpse into what their afternoon talks must've been like, held behind closed doors in Papa's man cave behind garage, where women were forbidden. Where Hunter would be invited as a special guest once in a while, after he'd come visit me. My father would steal him for hours, under the pretext of educating my friend and giving him much needed fatherly support.

Another honk. Car idles softly.

"You don't need to do this, Hunter. Any of this. You're free to go. Right now, if you want. I'll drop you off myself. Go tell your mother she can't have her drugs. I'm sure she'll be glad to hear it."

Silence thickens.

"If I stay, can we still stick to the original plan?"

Hunter says.

"Yes."

"I'll stay then."

"Good." Pause. "Oh, one more thing. What do you think women were made for?"

"What? What do you mean, made..."

"Answer the question."

I dig my fingernails into lining, wanting to rip it out. This is my father's favorite question to torture me with.

One driver behind us seems to have lost patience, honking repeatedly and then letting out one long annoying blare.

A soft purr of rolling window follows, and then...

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Father yells from his window, and rolls window back up. Car rushes around us and off into the distance, as if upset and hurried.

"Well?" He is back to being calm, as if shouting helped. I know what he's doing, it's his favorite game. He's setting up Hunter to trip, to guess wrong, to stumble on an answer so Papa can wait one dramatic pause and be right. About everything. Always. Nothing in this world exists without him having an expert opinion on it. He'll tell you what to do and prove you wrong in case you try to argue.

An image of spit flying from his mouth startles me, flashing through my head. His flaring nostrils, his bulging eyes wedge under my eyelids into a horror movie I don't want to see but am unable to turn off. Mesmerized. Terrified. I squeeze my eyelids shut, hard. *Go away, thought, go away!*

"I don't... I don't know, Mr. Bright." Hunter's defiance is gone, his voice is flat and lifeless.

"Listen to me, son."

I attempt to burrow my head deep into scratchy lining, roll away, anything not to hear. Yet I hear every word.

"Listen to me and learn. Women were made to haul water. They're weak by nature, weak and promiscuous, and we have to teach them that it's no way to live. Work them. Work them hard, or they'll swing their lusty eye at you, charm your pants off and wrap your little cock around their fingers before you know it."

"What's this got to do with anything?" Hunter blurts.

"Did I say you could talk?" Papa says.

Long silence.

More honks. Papa finally decides to get out of the way and pulls over, pulls on the handbrake, leaving the car to idle. My fingers hurt from being curled too hard. Synthetic stink mixed with gasoline smell is overwhelming. I hyperventilate, getting dizzy, drowning in hot air.

"I'll explain. Not all of them, but most have whore DNA. You can detect it in girls as young as five. It's in their gaze. The way they look at you with their seemingly innocent eyes, little whores in the making. The way they talk, the way they walk. Flip their hair, swing their hips. Every man wants a piece of a girl like that. Those are the ones that typically get turned into sirens. Whores attract whores. Are you following me?"

"I heard you say this before." Hunter says thickly.

And suddenly I know where his siren explanation came from, the one he gave me yesterday in the bathroom. I want to puke.

"Please. Simply answer my question."

"Yeah, I'm following." There is reluctance in Hunter's voice.

"Good." The strain in Papa's voice gives way to lighter tone. "You see, if it was only about the flesh, but no. They corrupt our very spirit. Steal our very souls. It's our duty to root them out, to clean up this filth, to let our spirit shine again, unvarnished. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Um..."

Papa is on a roll, I can tell. He doesn't wait for Hunter to answer. "You think I like my job? You think I enjoy doing it, is that what you think?"

"I didn't say nothing." Hunter retorts.

"Ah, but you thought it. What you don't understand is the subtle difference here. It's not a question of want, it's a question of must."

Pause.

"What if I don't want to."

"Then why *the fuck* did you agree to take this job?"

"You said it'd be easy. You said it'd be like shooting beer cans. No one told me I'd have to kill my friend!"

"Well, no one told me I'd have a daughter when all I wanted was to have a son. How is that for a disappointment, tell me?"

The rest drowns in my humiliation. I want to shrink into a fleck of dust. Shame for my own gender burns me to embers. I'm nothing. I hate my body. My newly acquired breasts, I want to cut them off and throw them into bushes, have raccoons eat them. My uterus, I want to cut it out, feed it to sharks. And then whatever is left of me, I want it to cease to exist. Where is that button, if I could simply press it. And I know. Sonic gun. I need to steal one and kill myself for good.

Out.

I want out of this life.

As if it heard me, ready to help, the car starts moving.

Chapter 18. Bright's Garage

There is a sick triangle happening between the three of us, and I'm clearly out of the picture. Hunter doesn't have a father, for two years now. I do, but my father doesn't want me, never did, never will. He wants a son, and Hunter would be perfect for him, perfect to relay his women-hating and siren-killing knowledge to, just like he always wanted. Conflict or not, it's clear they've formed some sort of a parent-child attachment to each other. For Hunter some father is better than no father at all. For my father a son is better than a daughter. Me? I need to get out of their way, let them be. And the only way out for me is death, as it always has been. A siren's suicide. Which makes me think of Canosa and where she fits in this picture. I know. If Hunter, Papa, and I are one of those wrought iron bell triangles, Canosa is the clangor. She stirs the pot, pulls on our strings and makes us clamor. With me gone, there'd be nothing left for her to ring.

I've come full circle. That's it then, my fate is sealed. Decision made, I feel relief spread through my body, forgetting that I'm hot and aching and can barely breathe.

Mom? I wait, as if she'll speak to me. I hear nothing. Mom, wherever you are, can you hear me? Is that how you felt? That you were out of the picture? Is that why you jumped? I get it now and I'm coming. Coming soon to join you, promise. I swallow. I'm sorry I couldn't kill Papa, to avenge you. Canosa asked me to, in return for telling me what happened to you and where you are. You wouldn't want me do it though, would you? Cause you still love him, no matter what, right? I know I do. I hate it, but I can't help it. I pause, almost expecting her voice to reach me, to soothe me, to tell me what to do. *Mom, can tell me where you are, where I can find you? Can you? Please?* I wait for something, for some sign, some indication of sound or feeling or even a flicker of premonition. Anything. But there is nothing, only stuffy silence. I close my eyes, waiting for the end to come.

Car speeds in a straight line then slows down. I recognize the turns and the sound of asphalt under the tires. Away from the back trunk wall, I hear no talking, but it seems like there isn't any, only hushed stillness reeking of depression. Increased humidity makes me perspire and fade into dizziness once more. Jeans stick to me in a disgustingly warm layer of damp cotton, Hunter's rain jacket feels slick and foreign against my skin. Drowning in heated air, I'm close to fainting, rasping for oxygen, my gills ablaze.

Car stops. Papa pulls on the handbrake, leaves the engine idling. I know where we are, in his typical parking spot, a couple yards east from dark blue sign that reads 411, Raye street. My house. Despite the soundproof layering of the trunk I hear garage door creak open, or maybe I imagine it, having heard it so many times. With my father's meticulous care for his clothes and his favorite things, he never does any of it himself, always hiring someone else do the dirty job for him. Somehow in the heat of things oiling the garage door must have been neglected.

Handbrake down, car slowly moves forward. Garage door closes, handbrake up again, engine dies. Everything is still, then the trunk lid pops open letting in a sliver of cold air. Gulping it in a series of frantic breaths, I wait, skin on my face damp with cold sweat, my hands and feet numb from being tied with a metal rope for so long.

Driver door opens, so does the passenger door. Suddenly Hunter's soul melody is so close, I can almost taste it. His hand presses into the back of his seat, towards me. I attempt to move my hand, to press back or wave, as if saying, *I'm here. I'll get out of your way. I'll get out of everybody's way, I promise.*

Soft resin of Gucci loafers gently hugs the concrete. Car keys jingle. Light switch clicks on and the trunk lid flies open. Bright fluorescent light hits my eyes, I flinch and utter an involuntary moan.

"Too bright for you, sweetie? I'm sorry, there is no dimmer here. My bad. I'll have to install one."

I almost want to say, *Like you care*, but hold my tongue. It doesn't matter, telling him. Nothing matters anymore.

Papa walks off towards the back of the garage and unlocks another door. I can tell from the gush of air it's large and mostly empty. His man cave, the place of mystery for me since I remember myself, the forbidden sanctum for his manly work. Now I know what was done inside, and the thought makes me shudder.

"Hunter? Take her out, please." Papa's voice sounds hushed, almost mechanical, dying as soon as he's done talking.

There is no echo, the garage must be soundproof as well. How did I not think about this before? It explains soft paneling. I was always fond of caressing it when Papa didn't look, although he caught me once, slapped me hard, and, proclaiming I'm dirtying his walls, locked me up in the bathroom for three hours. I think I was five, and I learned to be very careful and sneaky from that moment on, managing to stroke it once in a while when he didn't look and peeling portions of wallpaper in the house behind furniture where he wouldn't look.

It was my little power over him, damaging his things when I could and staying quiet to anger him when he hit me. Playing limp, no matter what he did, so it would look like I didn't care. Like it was a piece of cake, a picnic. Like it didn't hurt, not one little bit.

I hear Hunter get out of the car, take one reluctant step, then another, then stop.

"I really don't have much time, Hunter." I can almost see Papa's painful grimace without looking. "You know I don't like waiting."

"Sorry." Hunter says and walks faster.

I open my eyes, wanting to adjust to brightness of this glowing dazzling enclosure, so rich with light yet almost devoid of smell and noise, harsh and dry, the anti-siren space. The space designed for sirens to die in, to expire. I still gasp for air, feeling my gills open and close, hurting for water, when Hunter makes it around the car and stops in front of the trunk, leaning in, looking at me. First thing he does, he reaches behind my back and squeezes my hand.

"Hey! It's okay, you're gonna be okay. Trust me." He whispers. I squeeze his hand back, wishing he didn't say what he just said, making me want to believe in a happy end, hoping he'd get my message.

Don't worry, I'm ready to die, I tell him with my eyes, I know this is what my father wants you to do. You'll look like a pro. It will be easy, I promise.

He blinks at me, his chest heaving. His face is ashen against cold bright light, white soundproof walls, white unbreakable ceiling.

"Lean on me when I pull you up, okay?" His face doesn't look like a face anymore, it's a quiet mask, torn and crumpled over conflict inside.

I want to tell him, *Listen to me. I'll make it easy for you, don't you worry, you'll do just fine. You'll keep your job. You'll get your mom her meds.* But grief chokes my throat and stops my words. I mumble into the tape.

"Enough talking. Get her out, Hunter." Father's voice cuts through and prompts Hunter into action.

"You all right?" Hunter whispers as he hoists me up, slipping his warm hands under my arms, propping me into a sitting position and swinging my legs over the edge of the trunk.

Just a heat stroke, no biggie. I croak into the tape, so no words come out, only more mumbling. Moving my tongue hurts. I want a drink of water, badly.

Hunter raises his head, opens his mouth. As if anticipating his question, my father answers. "I'll take the tape off once inside. Now, get moving."

We both pretend like everything is normal. I struggle to make it over the edge of the trunk, lock legs to stand but my knees give out and I buckle. Hunter holds me from falling. A wave of nausea hits me and I retch into his sweatshirt, then raise and turn my head to look, to study the garage with my new understanding as to why it's covered in soft acoustic panels, why Papa always claimed his hate for noises, why he hid in his man cave for hours on end, why neither me nor mom were ever permitted to enter.

The garage itself is clean and small, about fifteen feet wide and twenty five feet long, devoid of any clutter, with only a few wall shelves on each side with select tools, my father's style to keep everything organized with almost surgical precision. There is no more than four feet on either side of the car, enough space to open the doors and get out.

Watching us closely, standing in the middle of the back garage wall, Papa twirls car keys on his left forefinger, his right hand holding a sonic gun, his figure pale and small against the darkness behind him. The darkness coming out from the open man cave door. It's ominous and it suggests a very

large space, perhaps the size of a theater auditorium, I can tell by air movement.

Strange curiosity takes over me. I want to get inside, see it for myself, breach his sacred place, his private sealed off office that is not to be trampled by women. His lunatic asylum, his siren killing ground complete with an expensive ventilation system to evaporate the moisture. That's what that whizzing sound was, making my feet buzz whenever I stood barefoot in the middle of the night on the kitchen floor, sneaking in a drink of water. Papa always explained it as air conditioning motor running.

I make myself jump forward and nearly fall. Hunter supports me and I hobble along, feeling metal rope dig into my ankles with every move. I ignore the pain with elegance, greet my father with a smile, letting him know that I don't care. He doesn't seem to notice, steps into darkness. There is a click and darkness yields to light.

"Didn't think I'd ever let you set foot in my private space." A painful frown creases his forehead. "This is rather unfortunate, but... The circumstances have changed, and, well, here we are. Tell me, Ailen, what do you think?" Papa says, grimacing into a toothy proud smile and spreading his arms like a showman on the stage, welcoming his audience. Obviously proud

of his creation, he nearly jumps up, rolling back and forth from his toes to his heels and back. "Cost me a fortune."

I peer in and my mouth hangs open, as much as it can open behind tape.

I've always imagined Papa's place literally like a cave, small, dark, and closed off. I was wrong. It resembles a fiercely illuminated chamber hall, the size of our house, only underground and almost empty save for a desk with a single lamp and a few soft chairs around it at the far wall. Behind the desk hang numerous sonic guns and a few bullwhips, neatly arranged in a checker board pattern. I know what they're for. Walls to my left and right are empty, and there are no windows.

Everything about this place and the furniture is soft. Filtered fluorescent lighting, foam padding on the walls, air-conditioning fizzing quietly, even the reek of fake ocean fragrance. I'm about to join it, vaporized. Scream all I want, the walls look super-thick and there is no echo.

"Don't be shy, come in." Papa says, and I jump in. He closes the door behind me and Hunter with a large heavy clang, and locks it several times, then drops the keys into his pocket. I manage to stand on my own, without Hunter's support. Even the floor is padded here. I curl and uncurl my toes, partly for balance, partly to relish this feeling of softness.

Now that my eyes adjusted to the bright light, I see something else, and my blood chills, no, it freezes, making me feel like an icicle. What I took for a wall to my left is not a wall at all. It's a smoothly spread white cotton cover, and judging by the edges and the size of the thing it's hiding, underneath it must be a gigantic aquarium. I sniff the air. There is a faint odor of chlorine and faint whispering of the water. The aquarium must be filled to the brim, but I detect no movement. I don't want to know what's in it or what was in it, yet my mind can't stop. Images of sirens contained behind the glass and floating with their mouths open in a silent plea make me gag. For a second I wonder what happened to Canosa and the rest of the sirens in the public restroom, if he killed them all or not, or if he didn't it, where they are now.

"There is nobody there. Come." Papa says, as if reading my mind.

That's right, Papa, seal me off from the world of the living in your soundproof cave. Shelter your neighbors from the horror, yes. Give them no reason for insomnia. I think, and I'm glad I can't say it. This is no time to be angry, this is time to die.

"So, what do you think? Oh..." Papa passes the gun to his left hand and raises his right. I instinctively duck and then immediately hate myself for showing him my fear. He rips off the

tape from my mouth in one practiced movement. My lips burn and so do my cheeks, but I don't show it. "Well? I asked you a question." His eyes turn from blue to steel.

I gulp air through open mouth and then, of course, say the stupidest thing, the first thing that comes to mind. "Is this your man cave then?"

"Precisely, sweetie. Do you like it?" He tilts his head to the side, like he always does when listening to his clients. They are big important people with money and with a taste for antiques, why in the world would he deem me important?

"It's... big." I say, honestly mesmerized, not by the cave, but by his attention. He heard me, he's talking to me, he's not angry and he answered me like a normal human being. Despite the horror of what's to come, I'm elated. "Yes, I do. I like it very much."

Hunter watches our exchange with utter puzzlement on his face, glancing back and forth between us. I feel him edge towards me, perhaps to hold me or to provide support, just in case.

"Good. I'm happy you appreciate the work that's gone into this. You're about to see it in action. We *both* need to see it, don't you think?" He saunters off towards his desk, hangs the gun he is holding and picks up another one, larger. He turns and aims at the covered aquarium, playfully, smiles to his thoughts.

I chill to the core, wondering what the significance of this is and how I should take it.

Our gazes cross. In a split-second, I think of all the movies I've ever seen with bad guys giving pep talks to the ones they're about to shoot. It looks so romantic. The danger, the suspense, the thrill of what's about to happen. The last words from the victim mouth that can make all the difference. Sadly, that's not how things work in real life. In real life, things happen without a warning.

Lightning fast, he shifts his body in my direction, aims at me and pushes the button. This is my father, my only family, my bloodline, killing me. I make no attempt to escape, frozen, ready to die.

BLAM!

The sonic blast hits me straight in the face, not on the right cheek like last time, but directly into nasal bridge, in that space between eyebrows. My ears explode with brilliant pain, head thrums with pulsing energy, as if I dipped it into the world's largest waterfall and it's about to suck me into a rushing stream and throw me over the edge. I double down and roll onto padded floor with a soft thud that doesn't travel far, dying instantly. I suppose you could kill a whole whale in here, and nobody would hear.

"Ailen! What... What the *fuck* are you doing?" Hunter's voice hushes the second he's done yelling it. His heart beats so loudly, I can hear it. His soul still sings Vivaldi's summer, barely audible now, as if dampened.

"I simply stunned her. She's still alive for you, don't you worry. You'll get your turn. Patience, Hunter, patience." Papa says. Although I suspected it, it still it hurts to hear the confirmation to a terrible guess and know it's real. Hunter is supposed to kill me. That sounds so much like my father, always having someone else do the dirty job for him. I can't think about anything else, because pain from the blast spreads from my head to the rest of my body, ripping through muscles in pangs akin to electric shocks. I twitch, wincing at the metal ropes digging into my skin.

"Dude, this is not what we agreed on!" Hunter nearly shrieks now, takes one step, then another in my direction. "You said you were only going to..."

"Enough!" My father yells. There is no echo and his yell dies quickly, without the typical grand effect. "I haven't forgotten. I would appreciate it if you shut your mouth and step aside."

Hunter steps back without another word.

A deal. They made some kind of a deal. What was it, to let me die painlessly, from one shot only? I wait. Papa comes to me and leans over.

"Come on, sweetie, show me what you're made of." He aims at me again, at close range now, from five feet ten inches of his height. I look into the black muzzle of the gun and pretend I'm looking into a subwoofer blasting one of Siren Suicides songs. Blasting them so loud that the air hits me in the face at every big bass. My muscles contract before I realize what I'm doing. I smile and open my mouth. Terror darkens Papa's face for a split second, enough for me to notice.

"What's wrong, Papa, can't kill me yourself? Aren't you supposed to be *the* siren hunter? The one who disposes of us, sirens, cleans up this planet from our womanly filth? Yet even you have to hire a hit man." I attempt to raise my head to look Hunter in the eyes.

I don't get a chance, because another blast hits my chest and for a second I think I'll sink into concrete floor below the padding and then flatten and burst into nothing, the force of the focused sound wave is that strong.

I don't exactly black out, but rather swirl in my own consciousness and awareness of terrible pain in every single cell of my being, feeling them all inflate with desire to fly, to rupture and be no more. Then somehow they deflate and shrink

back together into what's supposed to be Ailen Bright, body and all. Sounds become jumbled, light pulses with colorful circles, and I taste bitterness on my tongue, like I turned toxic or something.

Next I see my father's face above me, strangely happy. "What do you say now? Come on, tell me everything you ever wanted to tell me. Isn't that what's been eating you for years? I'm listening now."

I understand why he's giddy. I'm supposed to fight back, to be angry, to prove to him that I'm not weak, that I can change my life, I can stand up to force and shed my female frailty. He's doing to me the same thing he did to mom. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps she died not for herself but for him. Perhaps she loved him so much that she decided to rid this world of her own presence, to make him happy, because she felt she contributed to his misery. All of this flashes in my mind in barely a second, and I decide not to fight. Anger leads to pain, and I know this pain first hand. I regret having said what I told him earlier. No matter what it will cost me, I don't want to be like my father. I won't, never ever, even if it means having to die.

"Papa... Just tell me one thing, please. Did you love mom? Did you really love her? I want to know before - before I - before..." I don't finish, because a look of disgust contorts my father's face.

"You're no use, after all." He says quietly, and it's worse than rage. It's pure hatred. It can't be all for me, can it?

"What a paradox. How can a vessel of such beauty house so much evil? Women..." The tip of his Gucci loafer nudges me in the ribs, as if to probe a road kill, to see if it's still moving. "I always wondered... Then I realized - it's all a test for us. For us, men. To make us stronger, more resilient. It pains me to do this, oh, if you only knew how much it pains me. But it must be done."

I know what he means, and I swallow but say nothing.

Papa turns away from me and walks towards the door, then pauses there, jingling keys.

"Hunter, finish her off."

"What?" Hunter's voice sounds sleepy, like it always does after he drifts into one of his daydreaming spells.

"I changed my mind. Be quick about it, please. Call me on the intercom when done." He inserts the keys into first lock, then another and another, opening them one by one, until I feel a draft of fresh air reach me. It's raining.

"What? What do you mean, finish?" Hunter says again, not comprehending. I twist and roll over on my other side so I can see. Hunter's whole body appears to have shrunk, frail and somehow old in his damp hoodie and jeans and sneakers, his arms

hanging uselessly to each side. My father stands in the doorway again, framed by white light this time.

"You heard me. Do your job. I'll have your payment ready." At that, he shuts the door with a soft metal clang and locks us in.

"But..." Hunter is in shock, I can tell. He shakes violently, and then, a few seconds too late, finds his voice and shouts. "WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU, MAN! YOU'RE FUCKED UP! YOU'RE FUCKED UP IN YOUR FUCKING HEAD! YOU'RE..."

I drown out the rest, shutting my eyes and willing myself to stillness. It takes another minute for him to stop shouting, then another several minutes of pounding on the door, then on the walls, then running to the desk, throwing down the lamp until it shatters, throwing down what looks like an intercom device and stomping on it until it cracks, then grabbing sonic guns one by one and smashing them into the floor. Except they don't break, because the floor is padded and they are made of unbreakable plastic. Or so I think.

"YOU'RE ONE SICK FUCK!" Hunter shouts once more and slams his fist into the wall, then slides onto the floor and starts crying. I've never seen him cry before. He loses his head into his knees and mashes handfuls of his hair as if attempting to tear it all out. He sobs loudly, wailing like a child, snorting

snot and then letting it hang again. It takes a few minutes for him to calm down and notice me staring.

I'm on the floor, twisted up, about twenty feet away from him, searching his eyes, feeling lost in this huge padded vastness of space, big enough to house a chamber hall yet wrong and menacing because of its low ceiling. Now in disarray, with sonic guns and whips and lamp shards scattered all over.

"It's okay, Hunter, I don't want to live anyway."

He looks at me. "Oh God, Ailen, no..."

"I mean, not like this, I don't. Today is my birthday, remember? I'm sixteen, so it's kind of a big deal. Can I ask you for something?"

"No, no, no, don't. Don't talk like this." Hunter wipes his nose with a sleeve. "It's... It's my fault." He hangs his head.

I ignore him. "Can you kill me, please? It'd be easier if you did it. It's okay if you can't, though, just let me know. I'll do it myself." I say, bend my legs, lift my torso and sit up. Moving hurts, but I'm strangely numb to pain. I stretch out my legs and study metal rope around my ankles and the nearest sonic gun about five feet away, made of matte plastic so no wires are visible, only a single blue button.

"Ailen... What did I do? Oh, I fucked up. I fucked everything up." Hunter's words scatter and die in a low whiz of the ventilation system that clicks on. Father must have turned it on

remotely. At this noise Hunter shakes like a leaf on the wind and lowers his face into his hands.

"Do it. Please." I repeat.

He holds my gaze, stands and walks towards me, then pauses, color creeping into his cheeks.

"All right, Hunter Crossby, mister fucking chickenshit, do it already! It's your job, isn't it? Then do it! DO IT!" I scream at him. I wait, but Hunter doesn't take the gun. Instead, he runs up to me, sticks his hands under my arms, pulls me up and drags me like this towards the aquarium wall, leans me against it, grunting. Then he takes my face into his hands and leans so close that our lips almost touch.

I peer at him, breathing fast. He looks strangely delicate and fragile against the vastness of the cave.

"If you die, I die." He says quietly, his eyes cold, his breathing ragged.

"Really?" I ask, momentarily deflated.

"Really." He says.

My heart beats so hard, it feels like the entire aquarium is pulsing. And maybe it is. I freeze for a second, sensing movement with my back pressed against thick glass, through its cotton cover. Then all is still. It's nothing. I feel nothing.

Chapter 19. Man Cave

Before I can say anything, Hunter pulls me into a kiss. The melody of his soul overwhelms me. It's so close, I want to gulp it, momentarily hungry. I try to resist, pushing my hands into his chest, horrified at a sudden urge to fall apart and cry. Holding it, holding it, holding it. And then losing it completely and letting go, unable to keep on the lid, feeling water trace my cheeks and drop with quiet splats on the rain jacket. Hunter's lips and tongue burn mine with living heat, make my skin tingle. His irises shimmer in feverish frenzy, bluer than before, saturated to the maximum. His scent overpowers the stupid smell of fake ocean fragrance my father likes so much, and I inhale it, feeling almost alive. It's pine. He smells of pine, linden flowers and sugar. I stand there and let him kiss me, let him pull me closer. Why not? I'll be dead soon anyway.

We're like two inexperienced theater goers who came not to watch the play, but to secretly kiss in the back row, because it's more sophisticated than kissing in a movie theater and more cool to try and absorb a live performance at the same time. *For the sake of divine experience*, as Hunter would say. I imagine

that we really are standing in a chamber hall after the opera singers, the spectators, and the orchestra departed, even the janitors left and unknowingly locked us up for the night.

I'm bitter. Bitter at how my life turned out and how it's about to end. Bitter that I can't be one or the other, not girl nor siren. Fine, since I can't let myself eat him, I decide to take as much of this goodness with me as I can, suddenly kissing Hunter back with fervor, nearly grazing him in my haste, staring him in the eyes, pretending to swim in them like in two pools of beautiful blue water. Like I'm a pebble thrown inside with an expert twist, skipping. I hop, hop, hop, make little round waves, then finally give in to gravity and sink. Tears gush now out of my eyes.

I won't cry, I won't, I WON'T! I stomp my foot to believe it. Hunter breaks away.

"What's wrong?" He says, alarmed.

"What do you mean, *what's wrong?* Everything is wrong! Everything!" I cry and then break into sobs, not caring anymore.

"I'm sorry..." He says and trails off. "I'm sorry I fucked up. I really am." He hangs his head, his arms fall to his sides. And I'm furious at myself for wishing his arms would rise and embrace me, for lusting after him, for wanting to eat his soul, for...

"No, *I'm* sorry. It's my fault. I'm the one who started it all, I'm the one who jumped and got turned into a siren and stuff. You had no idea it would've been *me* you'd have to kill on the job, so I get it. I hate myself. I really do. I deserve to die." I sniff, unable to wipe off tears, my hands still tied behind my back. I think Hunter doesn't offer to untie me because on some level he thinks it's safer this way, and I agree, not asking him to do it, not fully trusting my ability to control myself.

"Well, I don't hate you. And I don't think you deserve to die. It's bullshit. You're..." He hesitates.

"I'm a what? What? Go on, say it. Say what you really think." I say with force.

"I don't think anything. It's not what I..."

"Bullshit!" I cut him off, shaking, and then regretting immediately what I said, feeling my sireny self wanting to break out and feed, battling it, pushing it down. I take a deep breath and exhale loudly, through pressed lips. "I'm sorry. Just kill me, all right? I can't stand this anymore. Please?" These last words I say so quietly, I can barely hear myself, afraid that if he doesn't do it first, I'll lose control and kill him, and then kill myself afterwards.

"You're not mad at me then? For, you know, for getting this job?" He has this puppy look about him that used to make me swoon. Suddenly I want to shake him really hard.

"Look, I don't know how much longer I can stay calm, okay? Thank God my hands are tied. It's fucking hard, with you standing so close." I swallow, hurting from hunger. His soul is teasing me, I want to suck it out in one big gulp. He touches my neck.

"You're not helping." I flinch away.

"I don't care." He cradles my face.

"Dude, let's be real here." I pat the aquarium wall behind me for support. There is nowhere else to retreat. "Your mother is dying, but she still has a chance. I'm dead already. Well, almost. So finish me. What's so difficult about pushing a button on that thing? I mean, it's not even a real trigger, so pretend you're playing a computer game. All right?"

Our noses touch. "Ailen, why are you saying these things? What's wrong?" He asks again, and that does it.

"Why do you keep repeating the same stupid question? You just asked me, a minute ago. What do you mean, *what's wrong?* You're - I'm..." I stumble, bewildered at his idiocy and at my inability to communicate clearly. "I just explained to you everything!"

He brushes my cheek. "Why are you crying? Talk to me."

"I *am* talking to you!" I take a deep breath and explode.

"FUCKING *KILL* ME ALREADY!"

Wall panels shimmer from the force of my voice and then settle back into their position. I feel the glass vibrate behind my back. Hunter cups his ears for a moment, then takes his hands off again.

"I can't kill you, you know that." He studies the floor, arms hanging aimlessly down his sides.

"No I don't! How would I know?" I sniff. "You're such a liar sometimes, it's disgusting. You need the money, I know you do. Your mom needs the money. So be a man and fucking do it, finish what you started, all right? Or if you can't, I'll do it myself." I look at the sonic guns scattered on the floor, wiggle my hands, wondering if I can break the metal rope. "Looks easy enough."

"No, you won't!" Hunter says in alarm.

"Fine. You do it then. Come on, I'm tired of waiting."

He looks at me, then at the guns, then back at me again. "I can't. I just can't."

"Then you're a fucking loser! Kill me, you idiot! Get rid of this!" I bend, stick my butt in between my arms, plop on the floor and pull my hands up and over my tied ankles, then jump up again and stick my hands under his nose. "See this? Feel it." I push them into his chest. "What do they feel like?"

"Um, like your hands..."

"Jeez, Hunter, I hate it when you act like an idiot. You know exactly what I mean. How do my hands feel to you, temperature-wise?"

"Cold."

I grab his hand with both of mine and press it against my chest, right in the middle.

"How about here?"

He blinks.

"Answer me. Do you feel my heart?"

"Yeah, sure." He blinks again as if unsure where this is going.

"You know what it pumps?"

"Not really." He stammers.

"Not really? Stop lying. Every siren hunter should know. It pumps water, cold dark water. It's not even blood, it's some fucking dead liquid, get it? Dead!" I must look scary, because he takes a step back.

"I get it. Honest." His hands rise in that self-protecting gesture.

"I'm dead, Hunter. D-E-A-D. Dead. This—" I tap my face, touch my gills, spread out my fingers, "—is fake, ok? It's not real, it can't live. It can exist by stealing. Stealing life from others, temporarily, while it lasts. Always on the lookout

for the next meal, that next soul that would feel my void." I slap my chest. "Hear it ringing? It's empty. If you have no soul, if you're empty, if you can't even love, then what's the point of this existence, tell me, what? WHAT?"

I glare at him, unmoving, knowing that if he makes a wrong move, I will lose control.

"You." He says under his breath, his eyes open wide, his face vulnerable somehow.

"LIAR!" I cry. "You're one fucking liar, you..." I feel tears roll down my cheeks, but now that I can wipe them off, I make no effort. I'm beyond caring. "I hate you. You only say this because you pity me. Well, I have news for you. I don't need your pity. I won't ever fall for this again. Never. Ever." Tears fall from my chin. "It's not a game, okay? We're not stoned, sitting in the bathroom, talking mythology and shit. This is real. Your job is to kill me, my job is to kill you. So just do it already, before I do it. Why do you always have to make everything so difficult?"

He just stands there, looking helpless, wringing his hands, as if unsure what to do next. It makes me even more furious.

"What do you want, Hunter, tell me, what? You want to be in love with a siren, is that it? Is that what you want? For me to constantly fight the urge to sniff you out, for you to walk every day in danger of potentially dying from my song? I want to

kill you! I want to kill you right now and feed on you, do you understand?"

"Sorry, I can't help it. I just... love you." His mouth slightly open, he stares at me like a child who discovered the biggest candy on the planet, unable to believe in its existence. Dumbstruck and euphoric, fingering his empty pockets, knowing he can't afford it.

"Why?" I nearly shriek. "Why do you love me?"

"Cause - I just do. You're -- awesome." He stares at me with such naivete, I begin to tremble all over with fury.

"That's a stupid reason. I don't believe you. I'm not worth it. I'm a monster. You can't... love... a monster." I say in a loud whisper and recognize my father's voice in mine, the tones of a barely hidden anger that's about to break loose.

"Yeah, you can." He says.

"So you agree." A sudden realization dawns on me. No, it was always there, but I was afraid to believe it, afraid to let it grow in my mind and become real, clinging to the hope of being loveable. "I'm a monster after all. I'm a siren. And it's my voice." I say, shaking from hunger and from terrible understanding. "My voice, isn't it? My siren voice mesmerizes you and makes you love me. That's what it's designed for. That's what it's doing. How did I not see this before..." My last words come out as a hiss.

"Ailen. I'm a siren hunter, remember? Your voice has no effect on me." He says calmly.

"Yeah, right. Nice try." I say, yet I think back to commanding him to kill me and how he didn't do shit, unlike those cops at Pike Place market who froze when I told them to. A small portion of my mind knows there is some truth to what he says, but that something sinister that woke up in me for the first time when converted to siren is quickly taking over. The soul of the fishmonger is long gone from my chest. I'm utterly empty and famished. A curtain of blind desire clouds my vision and all I want to do is strike. Hunter stops being Hunter, he is food.

"Step... back." I hiss, now visibly trembling, drowning in his soul's melody, so impossibly delicious and sweet that it feels like I haven't eaten for a whole week and there is cake right in front of me, taken out from the oven minutes ago, steaming and emitting this irresistible aroma.

"Try me." He says, endless admiration in his eyes.

"No!" I say, but this is it. Something snaps and the siren in me takes over, greedy and happy to finally have her most coveted meal. I charge at Hunter, ravenous, reeling with blind determination, my mind pulsing with one single thought.

Food.

I jump forward, my ankles still tied, locking my eyes with his. As if with a flick of a lighter I ignite his soul, beginning to sing "We can't be apart" by Siren Suicides from their album Fatal, the song I tried to kill him with before, on the boat when I floated up lake Union, before I knew it was Hunter roaming there, trying to find me. Everything that's been bottled up in me for the last several hours erupts into one powerful gush, pours out into first verses, sounding less like singing and more like wounded animalistic howls.

"There you are

"Without me you cry

"I surround you

"Love me or I die..."

Hunter falls to his knees a few feet away from me, opens his arms wide and lets his soul escape, a thin ribbon of his precious sixteen years, a silky strand of his essence. A thin puff of smoke at first, it trails through the air between us and lands in my open mouth, thickening as it goes. I taste it on the tip of my tongue and my hunger intensifies, ringing through my empty chest. *Forget smoking weed, this is the best junk ever*, I think. I suck in his soul with a whoosh, wolf it down.

"I adore you

"See me or I fly

"I dream of you

"Dream with me, don't lie..."

I'm high. I can't stop. It feels so good, like a first drag after a week of abstinence. No, like a shot of heroin, the way they describe it movies, because I've never tried it myself. Make it double-dose, right in the vein.

"Can you hold my hand

"Can you hold my heart

"Can you hold my soul

"I can't be apart..."

I want more. I realize I won't be able to stop until he's all mine. Never mind me wanting to dive inside his eyes, reserve that for stupid romantics. He'll be swimming in my ribcage soon, round and round, for real. This is so much better. I watch his soul string between us in a ribbon of smoke, linger, like that herb smell of marijuana. Pungent.

It gives me power. I inhale and holler more.

"Here I am

"Without you I fall

"You astound me

"I'm a crumbling wall

"You let go of me

"I'm a broken doll

"You dream of me

"I'm your waking call..."

Walls shake, ground shifts, door gets jammed in the frame. I feel the water in the aquarium splash and creep towards me, wetting the cotton cover. I command it with my voice, command it to come. Lights flicker and in those few seconds when darkness is complete, Hunter's soul illuminates the air between us. The ceiling vibrates and splits in several places. I hear glass creak and break and water seep out of the aquarium with a hiss. Fog rolls off my skin like a cascade of waves from the freezer, coiling, obscuring everything around us.

I focus on Hunter, ready to finish him.

"Can I hold your hand

"Can I hold your heart

"Can I hold your soul

"We can't be apart."

The last of his soul wisps up in a barely visible plume and I swallow it. His eyes well up and shed tears, his face goes grey, he loses balance, falls and rolls to his side.

He's dying.

And I know what he did. He made me kill him, he made me believe his lie. Fear pierces me and I gag. I retch and retch and part of Hunter's soul oozes back into his mouth, greedy to reconnect with its rightful owner. I make myself heave and vomit more, until all of it is out, snaking in a faint cloud back into

his mouth. He gasps and arches in a spasm, then groans and rolls onto his other side, lays still.

I fall down on my knees next to him, exhausted and momentarily sober, my hunger gone in a flash.

"Hunter! Hunter, are you ok? Oh my God, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. What did I do? Oh shit, did I almost kill you? Will you ever forgive me? Please, please, please..." I continue yammering excuses, when my father's fists rain on the door that's jammed now, slightly crooked. It appears I have shifted the walls and the ceiling, only a few inches, but still.

"Ailen, open the door please, sweetie." Comes through, muffled.

"Shit!" I nearly spit. My heart jumps out of habit before settling back down into its normal rhythm. I know he can't get in. But that means we can't get out either. Before I can think more, Hunter pulls on my sleeve. I hover, peel hair off his forehead, clammy and sweaty.

"Are you all right?"

He moves his lips, dry and cracked. "Wow, tha..."

"Say what?" I stick my ear right over his lips.

"Man, that was... awesome. It was - It was better than getting stoned. Like triple stoned or something. Can we do it again?" He gulps.

"WHAT? Fuck off! You're sick! You sick junkie!" I push him but my anger evaporates and my lips want to curl into a smile, as ridiculous as smiling would be at the moment. He jokes, that means he's really okay. And I'm happy, happy he's alive, disgusted at what I almost did. Almost killed him. Yet I can't help myself and finally grin.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder. The door rattles but it's jammed pretty well and doesn't give. I hear the key being stuck in and turned again and again, and then the door being tried again.

"It looks like Papa can't get in." I say.

"So it appears." Hunter says.

An urge for mischief flashes between us as we glance towards the door and then back at each other. He grins and I love how his face splits in two, with that dimple on his right cheek. It pulls me in like a magnet, closer, until our lips touch and we're kissing. He burns me with his warmth like with high fever. And I exhale whatever is left of his soul back into him, I give him all I have. I wish I could give more, I wish I could give everything there was to give. But I can't. I have nothing else, only one dead girl's fantasy. I'm a thief who simply returned what was stolen.

Something shifts in the air. I break away, look behind me. The cotton cover slipped off the aquarium completely. I stare at

it, for a second thinking I'd see sirens but it's empty. It's full of clear water, and then I see something else. Chains. Heavy steel chains and locks on the bottom of it, coiling like snakes, waiting for that next siren to be bolted to it forever. I shudder, chasing thoughts away, not wanting to think about what kind of sick stuff my father used to do in here or was prepping to do in the future.

"Holy shit!" Hunter says, propping himself on his elbows.

"Don't tell me you haven't seen this before." I croak.

"No, I haven't. I swear. It was always covered." Hunter says, staring at the aquarium, its glass cracked in several places, oozing water. "Fuck me running..." He sits up.

There is a dull thud, then another. My father seems to be kicking at the door with something heavy. And there is another noise. Digging. Like soft slushing away of dirt, right above me. I slowly raise my head.

Ten feet above, behind one of the vent grilles sitting flush in a padded ceiling panel, as if trickling through several feet of water, a strange noise intensifies, sounding like crunching and biting, shuffling and squirming. A trail of sand falls through the grille's metal net and then the vent pops open and falls, followed by a gush of dirt and little stones raining onto the floor. Cold moist air and earthy damp aroma uncoil from the hole. Then someone kicks at the panels surrounding the vent.

They detach and fall down, revealing a ragged hole about three feet in diameter, followed by more dirt and then a face.

"Canosa?" I whisper, unbelieving.

"What the hell..." Hunter echoes.

Canosa's head pokes through the hole in the ceiling and turns until she sees me, her eyes peeking through her matted hair, hanging upside down, brown and dirty, her eyes glistening with triumphant glee.

"What are you looking at? Ailen Bright, I'm talking to you. Don't be rude." She says and worms her body down, her skin streaked and smudged, oozing that odor of a pond with dying plants and decaying animal remnants, those that dared to wade into its murk and drown.

Hunter opens his mouth to say something, when she shushes him with a hideous hiss. He promptly closes his mouth and simply stares.

"I thought he killed you. My father. I thought..." I begin.

"You think too much." She cuts me off. "What's wrong with your lover boy?" Even hanging upside down, looking dirty and comical and ridiculous, Canosa has this bossy demeanor to her that makes me feel like I owe her for saving my life.

Before I can say anything, she talks again.

"What's the matter with you? Couldn't finish your meal? Or did you leave him for me to snack on? I think I'd like that. In fact, I think I'd like that very much." She smiles.

"No!" I shout and hop in front of Hunter, to shield him. "Don't you dare. Don't you fucking dare." I raise my tied up hands at her. She clasps the edges of the broken ceiling panels and falls down, quickly jumping upright, brushing dirt off her hair and shaking her head.

"Or what?" She says, smiling. "What would you do to stop me?" She takes a step toward me.

I raise my tied hands in front of me, determined to fight her no matter what.

"We should have snuffed him out in that public restroom, would've been less trouble to deal with now." She says, looking down at Hunter with pity. Then looks at me, suddenly serious. "You know, you won't be able to stop next time. Once you've tasted a soul, you can't let it go." And deep inside me somehow I know she's right, and I look at Hunter, terrified. "So, would you like to finish him now or later? Because we need to go. Your old man seems to be very impatient, which won't end in a good way. I'd bet my life on that, so I would."

Behind us, a whizzing noise comes alive and begins burrowing into the door. I think Papa is attempting to cut a hole in it with a chainsaw.

I glance at Hunter, then at Canosa, then at the door, then at Hunter again.

"Make a choice." Canosa tells me, wickedness gone from her voice, no trace of mocking or jeering or bossing in it either. She's serious, and she looks me straight in the eyes. I think I see hint of pain in there, cleverly hidden. "Stop running, stop fidgeting like you're three, and make a choice. Now."

She saw right through me, and there is nowhere for me to hide. I gawk, wanting to fall through the floor, wanting to burrow into the bottom of the deepest ocean, deep in its deepest cave, like a tiny unsightly sea worm, or a leech, an ugly and colorless and disgusting creature, not worthy of any attention, hideous, her only friends being sand grains, all of them mute.

"NOW!" She yells.

I hear the chainsaw cut through the door, and I know that if my father realizes that there is a hole in the ground leading into his man cave from our front yard, that will be the end of us all.

Chapter 20. Ship Canals

I hold Canosa's gaze and think of love, of what it is, what it means to me. Think how it reminds of a shiny lure at the end of a fishing line, iridescent, sparkly. How clever it is, in making you bite, only to discover that it has a hook. A treble hook in my case. First sharp point for mom, who left me. Second one for Papa, who never loved me. Third one for Hunter, who fell victim to my siren voice. Yeah, that's right, from that first moment on the boat, when he heard me. All three are big fat lies that I bit into, desperate, stuck under a layer of self-pity, wanting to get out, no matter what it takes. Wanting to belong. Barely a second passes as I think through this. Images flash through my mind, and I'm trying to make sense of them, hoping it will come to me. The courage to make a decision.

I study Canosa and somehow I think she's the angler, the one hunting me, the one who threw in the fishing line and is now pulling me out. *What's it gonna be, I want to ask, catch and release or sell? Or will you eat me, gut and sinew and all?* But I know she'll only giggle, together with her sirens. They'll all laugh in my face. *Poor Ailen Bright, they'll say, you still believe in love? Oh, you naïve little girl, grow up already. How*

stupid of you, how pathetic. Silly almost. People were not made to be loved, they're food. And they're right. I'm a siren now, I belong with them. They're my family, whether I want it or not.

I stand straight, determined.

"Where are you going?" Hunter asks, alarmed, as if he read my mind, propping himself up and standing.

I breathe in, breathe out, and make myself do it. "You picked the wrong girl, okay? Go find somebody else. Somebody normal. Living." I throw out each word through pressed lips, breathing hard, gagging on self-hatred.

For a moment the whizzing through the door stops, and I know I have minutes left, before my father makes his final attempt and breaks in. The door is only that thick, shouldn't take him long to cut through.

"What do you mean, picked - I don't want somebody else. I don't--"

"You're full of shit." I say quietly. "Stop painting a rosy picture in your head and look at me, look at who I am. I want out of these walls, I want out of this skin. I want out! OUT! Don't you understand?" I wail. "I have no choice!"

"Ailen Bright--" Canosa begins, and I yell, "SHUT UP!"

She continues mocking me. Hunters continues his plea for me to stay. My father starts up his whizzing again and now there is

a gap in the door, rotating chainsaw blades poke through it. He's cutting a circular hole.

"Leave me alone, all of you!" I holler, back away from Hunter who comes at me with outstretched arms, and break into hysteric sobs, looking up at the ceiling, into the hole above me, seeing a little bit of the cloudy sky peeking through.

"Mom, if you hear me, answer me! Why did you leave me? Why? Was I that ugly? That unloveable? Did you love me at all? Tell me, did you love me?" I wait, but there is no answer. Not even an echo in this stupid soundproof place. And I weep uncontrollably. I regret I never asked her flat out, now I'll never know for sure. She was not the type who said "I love you" at every bedtime, she never said it at all, at least not that I remember. Still, I don't believe what Papa always tells me, I know he's lying. I wasn't an accident. My mother wanted me, she did. She did! Or did she? Was I simply an inconvenience? An unwanted purple stripe on a cheap drugstore pregnancy test that she peed on while on their honeymoon in Italy?

"Was it, mom? Is it true?" I say, looking up.

"Kill the siren hunter, and I'll tell you." Canosa says. There is mockery in her voice again, like she knows. She knows that I'll probably never muster enough courage to kill my own father. My typical instinct kicks in, to run, to run away from it all.

Twisted in pain, I jump towards the ceiling, head first, propelling upwards, a hard line of muscle and disgust. I'm not good enough. Not good enough for my mother, not good enough for my father, not good enough for Hunter, not even good enough for Canosa and her sisters. Can't even kill a siren hunter, like she asked me to. What am I after this? A half-dead girl? A half-alive siren? Whoever I am, I don't want to be me anymore.

Midair, arms stretched into a line over my head, I want to smash to pieces. I imagine myself as a slimy mess, which is exactly what I am. Can't die properly, can't seem to be able to find a way to do it for sure. I should've taken a gun with me, I should have taken a gun! Too late.

My head passes ceiling level and I burrow into the tunnel of dirt. Momentum carries me a few more feet and then I stick out my arms and legs to arrest my fall, staying still for a second, then pushing off and flying upwards again, spitting out bits of clay and stone that dribble on me, brushing roots away from my face. My body probably resembles a jumping caterpillar, contracting and shooting up again, through the mass of broken acoustic paneling, rubber sealant, plastic, foam board, bent roof trusses, and several feet of torn-up concrete. I'm horrified at an image of Canosa eating through it. How the hell did she do it, with her teeth?

But the chance to finish my thought is lost. I make a spectacular exit out of the hole and onto our front yard covered with bright green grass and flanked by feeble bamboo shoots, Papa's attempt at beautifying the front of our house and paying an exorbitant amount of money to some fancy local gardener. All of his designer landscaping at its best, Seattle style, natural and ecologically sound, now ruined, looking like a giant mole hole, brown and torn up.

I cough and sputter soil and mud, crawling on all fours away from the hole, then standing and staggering towards the bushes that separate our yard and the neighbor's. His trees stand dark against grey afternoon sky, covered with clouds. The usual. No rain, no sun, a typical September day.

My jeans are a mess, Hunter's rain jacket that I'm wearing is torn, covered in filthy muck. I dust myself off, shake sand out of my hair, and brush my face, suddenly unsure where to go next. Moist air fills my lungs together with that earthy smell. So grimy, it's almost crunching on my teeth.

"I hate it, I hate it, I hate it." I say through gritted teeth. "How can I make myself cease to exist?"

"Walk back to Papa, why don't you, silly girl? He's a siren killer, he'll make you disappear, will he not?" Canosa climbs out of the hole behind me. I spin around to face her.

"You again. Will you leave me alone?" I retort. She scowls at me and tugs me towards the bushes, her lovely face dirty yet beautiful when framed by the greenery.

"Let go of me, I don't want to..." I begin, but then hear the whizzing of the chainsaw stop, then a faint crash, curses, the opening of the creaky garage door, and, finally, soft footsteps.

"Stupid." Canosa smacks me on the back of my head. It doesn't hurt, but it floods me with shame. "Stupid and rude. Follow me, and keep your mouth shut." She digs her fingers into my arm and pulls me through the bushes into our neighbor's yard. She glances back at me, and I feel guilty for yelling. She saved me, after all, she saved me, and I didn't even thank her.

"Ailen? Ailen, stop!" I hear from behind and below, and then a shot of a focused soundwave hits the ground behind me, sending up a puff of dust. We duck, fall on the grass, and roll. I hope that nobody sees us and none of the neighbors decide to call the cops, because I really don't feel like throwing another scene and killing people right now. On top of that, I'm sure that wherever we go, we're going to attract lots of attention. Canosa looks like a naked corpse that just crawled out of her grave, after having spent there a good hundred years or so, growing out her hair to floor length, stark naked. I don't look much better. My jeans and jacket are torn to the point where I'm almost naked as well, and as dirty as her. Except my hair is

short and it sticks out this way and that in matted nasty clamps.

"When I tell you, *go*, you stand up and... GO!" Canosa whispers in my ear and pulls me upright. I don't fight her anymore and simply follow, talking in between breaths. "Where are... the others? Teles... Ligeia... and, what's her name, Pisinoe? Did you... guys... all make it... out, or..."

"SHUT YOUR TRAP!" Canosa yells, and more shots fire right at my feet. Like a frightened bunny, I jump, clutch Canosa's hand and dash in between trees into neighbor's yard, trampling his blooming azaleas, breaking his rhododendrons, stupidly hoping he's not home and won't see us. But of course he's home, as always, retired navy officer Mr. Thompson, the neighborhood watch and an eager ear for Missis Elliott's stories. I can hear his soul for the first time, a mix of military movie shouts and golf clubs hitting the ball and what appears like skin smacking that you hear in bad porn, at least what me and Hunter saw on the net when stoned. Brrrr. It feels like it'll taste mushy, his soul. Mushy and rotten. I suppress an involuntarily gag. Now I hear him slam his front porch door, gasp, and give his usual tirade.

"Oh Jesus, sweet Mary!" His voice shakes with that elderly timbre, almost singing but not quite. "How dare you - She's damaging... my garden! Roger, your daughter is damaging my garden!"

Every week I clean out cigarette stubs from my flowers, and now this? I'm calling police! That's right, I am. You'd be damned I am! I'm calling them right now, right this second--"

But I'm already several yards away, focusing on Canosa's white hair, holding her hand. We make it to Missis Elliott's garden, and I trample her flowers with some hateful glee, knowing that what I'm doing is very wrong but not giving it a second thought, letting that mad siren brood in me, bloom in me like a terrible destructive force. Lamb-chop, the poodle, sees us and starts barking hysterically from behind the window, his white mane shaking in that dandelion fashion.

"Shut up, you little shit!" I yell at him and hear his tiny muzzle clamp shut behind the glass. His soul has one single repetitive sound to it, a squeak of a rubber ball.

"My voice!" I pant behind Canosa. "It works, my voice still works, and it works on animals too!"

She doesn't answer but keeps pulling me, as if saying, duh! I feel stupid. And I wish Missis Elliott was here, so I could command her to do something nasty, but she's nowhere to be seen. Bummer, next time, I decide. I'll come for you and I'll show you how to properly care for people. Right now I have only one goal in mind and that is, to belong. I'm filled with hope that I finally found someone with whom I do belong for real. My sirens sisters. *I hope I'm good enough for them.*

There are no more shots, then I hear Maserati Quattroporte engine come to life, that means my father is after us. Canosa pulls me over the garden's fence and we skim down familiar forty stone steps that separate the upper and the lower Rave streets. At the bottom of the steps we stop to look for cars and dash across. It feels like déjà vu, only this time I'm not going onto Aurora bridge like I did this morning, but under. We hop over pavement and plop on the hilly incline, slide on the grass and make it to a concrete pedestrian way that lays perpendicular to the bridge, cutting right across its underbelly.

We slink into shadow.

I cringe from the racket of traffic passing overhead, mechanical engines and added cacophony of human souls breaking up the sleepiness of my neighborhood. Canosa flicks in between supporting anchors, her hair flipping behind her like torn dirty sail. We sprint down, to the water. There are several roads to cross. They cut into the hill like long concrete steps, making its surface look layered. Three more layers to the lake.

I slip on wet grass and nearly fall, but she keeps pulling me, without turning her head. We cross one more road, then another one. We flit past honking cars and gawking drivers, down, towards marina where Papa's Pershing yacht bobs gently on waves to the crying of seagulls and the jingling of other yachts' masts.

A few pedestrians point their fingers at us from the Fremont bridge, but there is not a single soul at marina, not even one cruising boat.

Canosa lets go of my hand, pushes off wooden pier and dives. I follow, hitting the lake with my head, gulping cold water, reeling in its smoothness, feeling my gills open and pump oxygen into my blood. Silence hushes me at once. Lake licks dust out of my hair, soothes me, quiets me, so velvety and serene, it feels like it hugs me. I float. This is my gigantic bathtub, my therapy, my home. I flap my legs and speed towards the bottom of the lake using Canosa's matted mane as my guide. Her whole body emits faint glow into the murk of dark water. Seldom fish squirt by, kelp stalks shimmer in a forest. Suddenly I'm happy at the prospect of seeing other sirens. I guess I missed them. We don't need to pity each other and nod our heads and say that we understand. We get it without words.

We sing.

We sing the song of the low scum that decided to call it quits. I wonder if all of them survived my father's attack at Pike Place market restroom, if they're okay. I wonder how they became sirens in the first place, if what I've read in books is true or not, and decide to ask them when I see them.

"This is where I belong." I say into water.