

Ksenia Anske  
PO Box 55871  
Seattle, WA 98155  
kseniaanske@gmail.com

Siren Suicides

a novel by Ksenia Anske

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1. Bright's Bathroom.

I chose to die in the bathroom because it's the only room in the house that locks. Besides, water calms me down, and I have to be calm to pull the plug on my life. Nothing would irritate Daddy more than finding a fully clothed corpse of his sixteen year old daughter on the morning of her birthday, floating in his beloved antique clawfoot cast iron tub held up by four enameled sirens, ruled by the Siren of Canosa, or, in plain bathroom fixture speak, the bronze gooseneck faucet. How fitting. Ailen Bright, the deceased, to be guided into the after-life by a tap.

It's not only my birthday today. Today marks six years since Mommy jumped off the Aurora bridge, on that rainy morning on September 9<sup>th</sup> of 2003. I'm tired of the pain, and it's all Daddy's fault. I want to hurt him the only way I can.

Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty.

Twenty seconds since I took the plunge, carefully stepping into the water, wearing my favorite Levis jeans and my violet-blue Garfield high school hoodie. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an

average person to drown. Only two minutes and forty seconds left. I hold my breath.

"Ailen, you there?" Daddy's voice comes muffled through two feet of water. Luke warm. Fear jumps into my throat.

*Shit, he shouldn't be up this early. Damn it.*

He knocks on the door.

Thirty seconds.

Just two and a half minutes more. I can ignore him. I can do it. I'll have to think of something to distract myself. Think about Mommy. No, I can't, it's too much. I push the thought down. Think about Hunter. There, that's better. I think about this game we play, Hunter and me. It's called, have you ever. We usually hang out in the bathroom, because it's the only room that has a fan and a window. I don't know what Daddy would do to me if he found out that I smoke weed. Last week when Hunter came over, he pointed to the relief on the bathtub. By then we'd had a couple joints.

"Have you ever met a siren?" he asked.

"This one?" I kneel on the blue tiles, face to face with the enameled creature. She winked her iron eye at me -- I must have been really stoned by then.

"No, not the mythical kind from books. No. 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 say.

"No, no, listen." He sucks in on his joint, his fingers dance. "The real sirens are among us. They're the girls that come out at night, in the fog, and sing 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?"

"They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped. They search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What's creepy is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died."

"You say it like you met one."

"Maybe I did."

I look at his face. I like it. I like his grin, it sort of splits his face in two, with that dimple on his right cheek. His hair looks funny when he brushes it back. He told me a cow licked him when he was a baby.

"Liar." I say.

He laughs.

Fifty seconds. I suppress the urge to sit up.

"Ailen, I know you're there, sweetie. Open the door, please. I'll give you one minute."

"One minute of fantasy is better than nothing," I say into the water with the last of my air and watch the bubbles speed to the surface. Pop. Pop. Pop. I look at the ceiling, its face concerned over my wellbeing. Its wrinkles, long intricate ornaments that are supposed to reminisce the Roman baths of the gods. That white plaster type a dirty shade of a cleaning lady's absence.

One minute under water.

Only two minutes left. I think back to my conversation with Hunter last week.

It was my turn to ask. I slouched on the floor and propped my feet right over the siren's face. Ligeia was her name, one of the five sisters.

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

He choked on a cough. "What?"

"I said, have you ever wanted to kill yourself?"

"Are you out of your mind, Ailen? What kind of a question is that?"

"Ok, *if* you ever wanted to kill yourself, how would you do it?"

He blew out a coil of smoke, then said, "I'd get my hands on the fastest motorcycle, get on a highway and ride as fast as I can, without stopping for cops."

"And then?"

"Then I'd crash!" He grinned.

"Do you even know how to ride one?"

"Oh, I snuck out my dad's a couple times." He pressed the joint into the sink, twisted it, listened to it hiss. "I mean, before... I snuck it out, before he left us last year."

"You're so pulling my leg."

One minute thirty seconds.

Circles swim in front of my eyes, and my throat tightens. It takes all my willpower to not inhale the water or simply jump out of the tub.

"Ailen, your time is up. Open the door. Please." Daddy is always impatient. "I said, open the damn door!" Louder. Fear pumps through my heart, but I push it down.

The bathroom door is the only door in our house that can be clicked shut for longer than one minute, under the pretext of monthly "girly" problems. Stomach aches, cramps, mood swings, and tampons. All things Daddy doesn't want to hear about because he doesn't want to play Mommy. If only I could see her one more time.

The door rattles under Daddy's fists. He shouts "open the door" on repeat, slamming it.

Two minutes. I'm ready to die.

Time comes to a standstill. I watch the water pause the clock. Both handles strike sixteen and halt.

It's that moment of tranquility I've been craving. The land of no yesterday, no tomorrow. The place where everything exists as a single snapshot of now and is momentarily gone, to be replaced by the next one. A carousel of pictures, sounds, smells.

Flash. The wide expanse of the freshly freckled forearm soil. Flash. The forest of hairs, upright, scared into dizziness by the goose bumps. Flash. The brilliant blue of the jeans, two mountain ridges to be scaled against the cold shimmering liquid of an atmosphere. Flash. The whale call of my heart. Thump. Thump. Thump.

My body thinks otherwise. My body says, *stop this nonsense*. My body says, *get the hell out!* I tell it to stop shouting, but it won't listen. It flips me a finger and throws my arms to the sides in one desperate stroke. There should be polished rims to grab, smooth and secure. Instead, my fingers close at nothing. I try again, same result. The bathtub is gone. Maybe it expanded. Maybe I shrunk. I watch my sleeves float into one hushed ultramarine veil. The rainbow of rolling unconsciousness strips

my eyelids in waves. Waves. I'm in a lake. I float up and I look and there she is.

The Siren of Canosa. The real one. The killer kind. A sugar stick up to her waist in the sea of green waterlily leaves. She pins me with a practiced innocent gaze, a beautiful thing. Her hair hangs in thick clumps and disappears into emerald mess. The morning sun reflects in the dream of her hair cascade, a golden cloak over white marble skin. Warm wind lifts a strand to her face and wafts back to me a distinct vacation smell gone wrong. If that's what the after-life looks like, with my luck, I guess I scored.

She sings. It's the fake sorrow for me, pitched a d-minor too high. It's a quarter note off, a hairline too far from the treble clef. It jingles over a tie, a slur too short, and the notes fall apart. She has no soul. Her song is a tool. Because it's her job, she doesn't care. She transports us, the dead, to the other side, and who knows when was the last time she got a raise. But it works.

I want to drown in her song, instead I nearly drown in the lake and cough. Her song hangs on a high note and breaks. I interrupted her. I freeze.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who thought she could outsmart everyone," she says.

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

"Go away, silly girl." Her lips two slugs. "It's not your turn."

"Aren't you a faucet—" I begin.

"If you want to play my game, you've got to play by the rules. I make up the rules, you take turns. And I say, it's not your turn yet. Go away. What part of 'go away' do you not understand?"

"What game?" I forget to close my mouth and some water seeps in. It tastes like stale brine. I cough again. "You're just a bronze bathroom fixture, aren't you?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. And don't interrupt me. That's one of my rules. Never do it again." Her lips string into a hard line.

"But—"

"Are you deaf?"

I shake my head. This is so bizarre, I don't know what to say.

"Good. Go on then. Move along. Go play." At the wave of her hand I'm dismissed. At the turn of her head the lake comes alive with clammy hands. At her dive they snake around my legs, and the green waterline shakes me her last goodbye. Lily stalks form a thick noodle soup, writhe, tangle and tug and spit me out like a foreign object that doesn't belong. Not in this a cappella. Not yet.

Three minutes.

I gasp for air.

Green water turns clear. It rolls off me in one mad oxygen rush. I sit. I'm back in the tub, chilled to the bone as if covered with snow. I don't care. I keep hearing that song in my head, over and over. I twist to look. 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 stroke her bronze hair, glance at the bathroom tiles behind, their blue eaten away into memory. The cracks between them black with age spread into a net of a checkered pattern that belongs to a board game propped up against the wall, its game pieces lost to the floor. That's what gravity does. We want to fly, when it yanks us back least we dare to forget where we belong. Do I want to play? Do I dare to pretend I can stand on a wall, a perpendicular fish bone stuck in life's throat? Am I one of the pieces that's been lost? I take a long look at the wall and it splits into layers. A layer of tiles, a layer of air. A loud crack, a thump. A layer of dust. A layer of woodchips. A layer of screams.

I turn.

Daddy steps on the broken door.

"Daddy!" I want to say, I'm ok. I'm fine.

I choke on a layer of dust kicked up by his polished shoes, I gag on 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 the door. Do you even know how much a door costs. How much it costs to replace a lock.

The only room in our house that doesn't lock anymore.

"Daddy, don't worry, I'm fine."

He doesn't hear me. He yells. He wants to know what the hell I'm doing, dressed, in the tub full of water.

I listen and choose not to hear.

Shame wraps around my head and dampens the sound. Or, is it a hand? *Thanks*, I say and turn to look. *You're so sweet*, says Ligeia, one the sirens, her ceramic chin propped on the tub's rim. I try to remember how many joints it took me for courage this morning. *Focus on the tiles*, she whispers. *What do you see?* Oh, Hunter, where the hell did you get this weed? I'm having a bad trip. I see tiny specks of indigo dance on azure ceramic plates, square yet uneven, imperfect, fluid. *Do you like water?* I nod. I hug my knees and rock, back and forth, in and out of the dream.

Three more sirens surface their heads over corners of the tub, blink their iridescent eyes, chew on their hair.

Daddy is about to end the yelling tirade.

Here it comes. His pitch a tenor too high, balanced on a precipice of that familiar place before sharp tumble into the abyss of rage. I stiffen.

Sirens wink.

Slap.

Daddy's hand greets me hard, but to me he brushes my cheek, his face is so close. I ignore the salt in my tears, I pretend it's a taste of the sea. My ears still ring when he slaps again with a grunt, but I imagine it's his way of telling me how to throw pebbles into a lake so they skittle along like little frogs. Slap. Slap. Slap. I'm all ears. I think he shows me his master throw so I can learn how to do it myself. I watch, afraid to miss some important detail.

He reaches under me and yanks out the bathtub plug so hard, it breaks. He blows on his hand. It must hurt.

Water gurgles down the drain.

I stare into the mouth of the bronze faucet.

"Ailen Bright, a flawed rock that can't even sink," she says. The sirens giggle.

"Please, stop making fun of me. Not now. Not today."

"Is that what you want?"

"I want to die. Last time I saw you, you told me to go away. I got the message. Now, leave me alone." I turn to the side.

"Oh, I changed my mind. This is fun. I can help you, if you'll play my game."

My mumbling drives Daddy nuts. "Want to die, you say? Leave you alone?" He leans over the tub and pulls me upright. I imagine my cheeks don't hurt, they burn from his kisses. I decide to try one more time.

I whisper. "I'm sixteen today, Daddy."

"What was it you said before this? Please, repeat."

He doesn't hear me. He never does. Never comes to listen to me sing in choir. I burst from hurt.

The sirens duck out of sight.

"Daddy, today I'm—"

"I asked you a question. I expect a response. Would you look at those eyes darting left and right. Don't you dare looking at me, so innocent. You're high." He holds me by the neck in a heap of failure.

"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."

Daddy's face fills the crack between my sanity and freedom, waiting. His eyes bulge, neck veins push against the skin. I open and close my mouth, twice, like a beached fish.

"Answer the damn question." He leans in and I slide more. The last of the water exits with a slurp. Daddy clamps my hoodie and yanks me upright. *Play limp, just play limp.*

"You forgot. As always. Let me remind you."

His lips brush my ear, eager to share their big secret.

"Women were made to haul water. Beat this into your little pretty head. Take your mother. I wanted a son, and what did she give me? She mocked me, she made fun of me, that's what. All women are sluts. Well, I won't let this happen to you. It's already in your voice. Those seductive notes. I can hear it when you talk. I'll root it out of you, you'll see."

He drops me into the tub and wipes his hands on the towel, finger by finger, until they're dry.

"We'll talk after school. I want you home by three. You're grounded for three months." My heart drops. He checks his tie in the mirror.

I clasp the tub's rims and crawl over the edge onto the tiled floor. A puddle forms around me bare feet, but I stand high.

"I'm not coming back." I never talked to Daddy like that. Not once.

"What?" His eyebrows fly up.

"This is for Mommy. I agree to play." The Siren of Canosa, she squeals in delight.

"What's this nonsense about, Ailen?"

I step towards the hole where the door used to be. Daddy aims at my arm, lifts his foot to make a step, when Ligeia

sticks out her bathtub claw and he trips over it, face down.

This is my chance, to hurt Daddy the only way I can.

I run.

2. Aurora Bridge.

September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009. It's like the day Mommy left, only now I'm sixteen. What's this? Do I hear blows dealt to her delicate face, in hushed echoes through the master bedroom door? No, it's the clap of my feet on the parquet floor. Is that a swish of her nightgown against the foyer wallpaper, its cotton threads in love with tracing printed sea stars that I liked to peel, no matter how many times Daddy sent me to stand in the corner? No, it's the rub of my sleeves, still wet. Can it be her voice, calling to me one last time, before clicking the front door shut? I'd tear out my little heart to make it true. No need. Three flights of stairs later, there is nothing there except my own wail. I'm one minute too late, again. She's gone.

I open the front door.

Multiply my tears by a million, that's September morning rain. Hang my face over a pond nose to nose with algae, that's the smell of a wet street. Tear my love letter in half and crinkle it over my ears, that's as close as it gets. We weep together, sky and me.

"What do I do?" I ask.

It drips silence.

"Tell me about Mommy. Did she look up at you when she fell?"

It leaks indifference.

"Why didn't you stop her, answer me, you stupid rain!"

Its gaze somewhere else, its mouth open, that long dribble of saliva splatters on tar like on some overused pillow. I want to mash its case, to dirty it beyond recognition. I want to poke my finger and tear holes in its fabric. Eleven porch steps later, I hit it with my feet until my tendons threaten to snap. It soaks me wet in response.

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!" I yell.

"Ailen. Get back here, sweetie. Now."

Daddy holds a napkin to his face, his silk tie splattered with blood, so brilliant red against the mousy grey of the house.

My heart drops to my stomach.

"I will count till three."

It drops to my knees.

"One..."

It's stuck in my feet. I know it wants to burrow a hole in the ground, a hole a mile long. Traitor.

"Two..."

His gaze is his hand on my shoulders, all fifty two years of his might. My sixteen against that? Fat chance. Can't shake those bolts off my feet, can't move those unbending legs.

"Three."

He leans forward to take a step. The second siren, Teles, pinches his pant cuffs back with a titter. He turns to see what's the snag a moment too late. Her white mane disappears into the house.

"Make your move." The Siren of Canosa winks at me, slinks out the door an inch away from Daddy's back, over the porch railing, into the garden, and is gone. Four sirens follow. I rub my eyes. Daddy wheels back around.

His trot breaks my stupor.

"Make it six months. You're grounded for six months, you hear me? That'll teach you, you'll see." His steps small and careful on wet stairs, he's a few feet away.

"You forgot something." I back into the concrete path, towards white arbor gate scalloped with trellis. Overgrown vines brush my face.

"What's that you said?"

Trapped in his stare, I don't know if I can make another step. Rain beads trace my cheeks. Drop. Drop. Drop.

"Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Today is my birthday. And I'm not coming back home."

"Is that right?"

His raised arm forces me into another step. I fumble with the gate latch, jerk it open, ease in. My foot slips on the wet moss, I grab the fence so as not to fall on my ass. A passing car honks below with a gusty douse of a puddle. Daddy waves his resolve to stay dry aside and flits down the porch steps, one yard of a garden path between us left.

And I make my move. I bolt.

Seven stone steps down, I hear him yell for me to come back. Four bronze riser caps later, the soles of his Italian shoes make a racket at the speed of I-will-get-you-or-else. I round the last newel of Daddy's beloved 1909 charmer and dash up Raye street. It's a dead end, he knows, he'll have to drive around to catch me. The last I hear is the rattle of the garage door over a curse. I don't look back. I run.

There is a question over the neighbor's mushy nose poking out of his rain jacket, the have-to-get-my-morning-coffee-no-matter-the-weather companion.

"Hi, Mr. Thompson!"

I keep running.

Missis Elliott's poodle barks at me, his hysterics echo into her open door, her ever-curious face taking in the scene for the latest Monday gossip, but I keep running. Up the right leg of the street, forty one hidden stone steps down, cutting

across the hill, spilling onto the left leg of the street, also Raye. Tween sisters at the base of the Aurora bridge.

I jog across the zebra. I'm on it, on the pedestrian pathway, the famous Seattle attraction for suicide jumpers of all kinds. Fifty deaths over the past decade. 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 phone booth door and discover the miracle of free calling in the age when those that are dear to you can't hear you anymore. It takes a stranger to lend a hand. That is, if they can make out your last words over the noise of passing trucks passing.

The car vapor stinks over the roused mist. I stop, clasp my knees and bend down with each breath until my forehead can't go any further. I shiver from being wet and cold, sneeze. This is where she walked, this is where she jumped. This is where I gaze every weekend for hours, down into the water, wondering.

Why. Why. Why.

The bridge spans over the lake in one concrete stroke, solid and high.

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

I pound on metal railings, they bristle at me.

"Mommy, I'm here." I say to the rain. It pummels the road.

What I'm looking for is a white nightgown, somewhere in the middle of the two thousand nine hundred forty five feet. What I see is Monday morning commute busting its way across the inverted truss. I hope for a glimpse of some kind of an answer, anything at all. It comes in the form of a tire screech twenty feet behind my back. Daddy's car whips around the corner on Halladay street, the bronze golden 1969 Ford Mustang Fastback about to nose into the northbound traffic. I have five minutes at most to run across to the other side and hide somewhere behind the Fremont troll. Or make it to Hunter's house on Linden avenue.

I take off.

Two minutes and a blur of posts later, I stop to rub my freezing hands. A shiver takes over me.

Trill-trill.

I look up and see a biker pedaling happily my way. No helmet, as always, his favorite rain jacket over low-strung jeans. He waves.

"Hunter," I exhale.

"Ailen, hey!"

This interrupts my mind's flow. While I think what do next, the body takes over. My heart somersaults, kicks my kidneys. They give me a fresh burst of adrenaline and send me to sprint.

"Are you ok?" Hunter yells over the buzz of the traffic and rain combined, ducks, pedals faster.

It takes us a minute. We nearly collide. He drops his bike and catches me before I fall.

"Dude, what the hell?"

His rain jacket drips water on my face and wipes off the last of my direction. I'm lost. What now? I study his irises, the stroma of two indigo pools on smooth sclera globes. Two lifesavers painted pulsing blue. Blue is my favorite color. Blue is where I want to end up, to get lost, skin and flesh and bones. I want to get lost so deep that I'm never found. No need to move.

But Daddy will come any minute now.

I need to run.

I balance on this new indecision, caught by surprise. My route is lost. My hands begin to shake, then my breathing, then my chin. Panic takes over the rain.

"Hunter!" I hyperventilate through a smile.

"What's going on, girl? You're soaking wet!" He props me against the railing and pulls off his jacket.

"Hunter, what do I do?" My teeth jump between syllables like pinched yapping dogs.

"You get sick like that, that's what you do. Let me give you my jacket." He talks from a tunnel, from the far end.

"No, it's ok, I'm fine." Our fingers cross over the zipper, I clasp his warm hand. My knuckles go white.

"Look at me!" He pulls up my chin. "Ailen, look at me. Breathe. You have to slow down and breathe. Let's do it together, ok? I will count till three."

That does it, that count-till-three that Daddy always says. I flash cold, warm. I burn, sweat, choke, all at once. I gag and heave, my heart shrinks into a tight knot of ache. The daylight fades fast. Air turns to water. I forget how to inhale.

"Ailen, listen to me! Breathe!" Hunter shakes me. He is the puppeteer, I'm the doll. Wet, torn, beyond repair.

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

I manage to suck in some air.

It's this game we play, Hunter and me. Only I'm not high on weed, I'm high on a suicide bridge.

"Remember I asked you last week?" I choke, hyperventilate again.

"Yes?" His iris lifesavers give way to two large black pupils. They drill.

"I asked you, have you ever wanted to—"

He leans.

"—kill yourself?"

"What?"

A slam on the brakes, a screech of tires, a splash of the water over Hunter and me. Daddy's beloved bronze golden 1969 Ford Mustang Fastback brakes through the traffic hum right into the curb rail. One bent bumper away, I'm toast.

Hunter turns around.

"Mr. Bright. Ailen here. She's having a panic attack. I thought I could help... Mr. Bright..." It must have been something on Daddy's face that makes Hunter stumble. I don't need to look.

"Get your hands off my daughter." Daddy slams the driver door shut.

Whack!

My direction is back like a slap in the face. I remember what I wanted to do.

I pull myself up the railing, make a step, another, break into a shaky run. Rain drones on. Cars honk. I hear yells.

"Ailen, wait!" That's Hunter.

"Ailen! Stop, you hear me? You stop and you get in the car!" That's Daddy.

I don't look. I concentrate on my feet. Left, right. Left, right. Don't slow down, keep going. You'll make it. Keep going. Another few feet. And a few more.

I hear struggle, turn to look. Daddy wrestles Hunter, pulls himself over the railing. I turn back and break into an Olympic run. Except I don't run for a prize, I run for life.

"You can't run away from me, you little whore. I'm your father and you do as I say!"

The end of the bridge is so close. I can't feel my feet anymore.

A police car flashes lights and veers onto the bridge from the Fremont side. Its front bumper hell-bent on making it through the blockade of cars.

I wheel around.

"Look what you did to my car!" Daddy's splattered suit arm ends in a gnarled finger, his close-cropped scalp shiny wet, his hook of a stare ten feet away. The bridge comes alive with honks, the police car screams.

"Ailen!"

Hunter comes up behind Daddy.

"This is family matter, Hunter. Make yourself scarce."

Daddy pushes him back.

I turn back. The police car stops another twenty feet away, an officer steps out.

I turn again.

Daddy. Officer. Daddy. Officer. Which way? I'm one hare of a lure, one dear caught in the headlights of fright.

"Which way do I go?" I ask the rain and break into a rapid heave.

"Ailen Bright, the girl who can't make up her mind. What did I say? Don't ask stupid questions, my dear. There is only one way, you know which. Look down."

I lean over the rail. My breath gets stuck in my throat and my fingers slide off the rail from the sudden sweat. The Siren of Canosa waves her tiny doll-hand from one hundred sixty seven feet below. Her tangle of hair bobs in and out of sight.

"Ailen Bright, you agreed to play. For your dear Mommy, remember that? Come on, get down here, it's fun." She begins to sing. The other four sirens surface and form a circle of moving foam around her. I stare into this abyss of an eye. It's my target, I'll have to aim at it just right.

"Mommy, I'm coming."

I pull myself up and over the rail. My clammy hands slide over the rain covered metal. I'm one of the bathtub sirens, proud and fierce, my arms wings that clasp the railing top behind my back, like the siren's hands hook over the bathtub's rim. My feet planted on the brush block. I curl my toes into a ball. I'm a feathered triangle, ready to fly.

I look down.

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 will always be there for me. It won't leave me like Mommy did. It doesn't look scary at all.

I hear cars honk.

I hear people slam doors and gasp.

I hear Daddy shout at me to climb back over or else.

I hear the officer shout at Daddy to stay away or else.

I hear Hunter call my name. Twice.

It's a boring drone against the Siren of Canosa's song. Maybe she'll tell me where Mommy went. Maybe she'll tell me why we never found her body.

I listen to my heart. It's calm like the lake. And I'm calm. I'm 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. Daddy struggles with a police officer a few feet away. Hunter fights another officer.

"Ailen, don't! I got it, I got your question! Listen to me, Ailen—" The officer places a hand over his mouth. Hunter goes berserk and kicks him in the groin.

"Ailen, get down here! Now!" Daddy yells.

"Sir! You're not helping by yelling, sir."

"This is my daughter there, you moron!"

"I understand, sir. If you want to have her saved, we have to follow the protocol. Ailen, please listen to me."

I don't need to hear. And I think I know what that protocol is. I've read it a thousand times. Printed in those little yellow phone emergency phone boxes in emergency letters.

LIFT THE PHONE.

I let go of the rail and lift up my arms.

PRESS RED BUTTON ONCE.

I search Daddy's face. Anger, fear, frustration. I balance, waiting. But there is nothing else. And I'm done waiting, done hoping.

SPEAK CLEARLY TO OPERATOR.

"Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Remember? Today is my birthday. And like Mommy, today I'm going to die."

REPLACE PHONE WHEN FINISHED.

I jump.

### 3. Lake Union.

It takes one and a half seconds to fall down one hundred sixty seven feet through rainy September morning. It takes me two seconds, because I don't eat all that much. Bad habit picked up in the womb.

Ailen Bright, born at 6:30am on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1993, two weeks early, weighing only five and a half pounds, sixteen inches long. Head first.

Ailen Bright, leaping to death at 6:31am on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009, weighing one hundred and seven pounds, five feet six inches tall. Feet first.

I cut my umbilical cord in one downward stroke. Air sucks me into a vortex of a mad rush. 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 that of an unfeathered bird, feet climb invisible stairs, ears ring with regret. A siren that lost in the singing contest to the Muses who tore off her wings for good measure.

One second. I'm half-way down.

And I know I made the biggest mistake of my life. One minute of fantasy is better than nothing? Forget that, I changed

my mind. Six years of wanting to die down the drain. All this gazing into the water, wondering how Mommy felt, out of my mind. I want to turn back the time. What the hell am I doing? Daddy, please, I don't want to die!

"It's too late." Comes from below.

I fall, and then I don't fall anymore.

At two seconds, falling stops.

It's not the water I hit, it's a big lie of a rock, solid and hard, braced by giggling sirens who dash apart into a five-legged sea star. I pierce its heart at seventy miles per hour. The impact rips off my hoodie and my bra, turns pockets on jeans inside out. My feet collide with my legs into a shattered bag on femur bones. Someone once told me that hitting the water feet first is the only way to survive. Right. Try driving into a concrete wall at full highway speed, you'll know how I feel. Smell, sound, taste, sight, touch, all collapse into a tight knot of an abrasive hand that rips off my clothes, breaks my ribs, and collapses my lungs. A concentrate of a girl, a hard-packed snowball of a fight for life, hurled underwater forty feet deep, to melt in her sorrow and never come back. This is no bathtub game, there are no rims I can grab and pull myself out. This is real.

The real land of no yesterday, no tomorrow. This is as now as it will ever get. On the brink of death, I'm alive like never

before. My pain is gone, everything that needed to be fixed doesn't cost a single joint. There is only one thing that can't be reversed. My jump.

I'm suspended ten feet from the bottom of the lake, the force of the fall recedes, and I balance in that place of not moving, in a momentary pause. It's murky and dark. I'm freezing, my skin is on fire, each endoskeleton spike mashed with tissue into one miscellaneous bruise. I start sinking.

My head is a bell, the big heavy secular one, the kind that can kill you if you get in its way. It rings and swings, its bronze walls ashudder with clapper the heart. Someone pulls on the rope, and I wonder who it might be.

Out of the dark, a dot looms closer, now a few feet away, now at arms length, a glistening blanket of hair, huge eyes. The Siren of Canosa. She smiles. It's not a happy smile, it's a final smile, with the knowledge that I don't have, and I choke on premonition. She licks her lips. She cups my frozen face.

Our noses touch. I dip my head into an old pond where all fish go to die, to rot, to float bellies for birds to feast.

"There you are, Ailen Bright. You came to play *my* game, did you not?"

*I don't want to play, I changed my mind. Let me go. I can't move, can't talk, can't breathe.*

She yanks me down, that shiny leech of a woman, her voice a slinky toy vibrating in my ear, squished together, stretched apart, collapsed again under the pressure of water. A sunken sound wave of a monologue.

"That was one big leap, Ailen. Want to do it again? Was it fun?" She cocks her head to the side. I will myself to wiggle in her grip, last air bubbles up and out of my mouth. *I wish I never jumped, I tell them, I wouldn't ever do it again, never ever, I promise. Just give me another chance at life. Please.*

They're indifferent. They say. Pop. Pop. Pop.

"Speak up, silly girl. I can't hear what you're saying."

*Suicide rates are highest on Mondays, I want to say, but I don't want to die. It's a mistake. I want to wake up.* Like in slow motion, I watch my limbs struggle to move against the thicket of the water.

Her laughter rings clear, a thousand dolphin squeals on the under-lake wind.

"Ailen Bright. Once upon a time, I was a stupid little girl like you." She sort of sings each syllable, they echo off my body.

"Girls, we've got ourselves a new player here."

Her fateful flock of sirens pops out of the murk, four fizzing pain killer tablets, the kind that never fully

dissolves, dropped in a glass full of Lake Union, through a ship canal straw. Don't drink it or you'll get sick.

"Let's have her be ours, what do you say?"

The sirens giggle, clap.

Ligeia at my feet and I rush further down. Teles around my ankles and I propel deeper.

Ten seconds underwater.

The pain is overwhelming. I'm going to die.

"Raidne? I decided. It'll be your turn."

Raidne tilts her head.

"Me? Oh, me again? How splendid!" Her voice reverberates in a jingle of waves. She clasps her chubby hands together. Lead fills my stomach. Thump. Thump-thump. My heart wants to explode.

Whack!

A body slams me in the broken ribs. I groan.

"She had her turn last week, Canosa, it's not fair!"

Pisinoe's arms tighten around my neck. My chest burns, I want to inhale.

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. I make up the rules, you take turns. Get off her, Pisinoe. Now."

They pull me down. My feet touch the bottom of the lake. I scream a silent agony.

The sand is the game board, the sirens are players, and I'm the die to be cast.

It's pitch dark. Grey light seeps in shafts from the sirens glowing bodies. They float around me, grotesquely twisted in motion, their arms and legs stretched out or curled, eyes directed at me, greedy. I'm fresh meat, and they're starving, their skin devoid of color like someone dumped an entire supermarket's supply of bleach over their heads and forgot to stir. 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.

I'm in a gigantic bathtub of a lake with huge broken rocks for the tile pattern, moss for the towels, dead hungry sirens for bath toys.

They huddle together to take a better look at me. To sniff. To chant. A whale call of a serenade wrapped in Greek mythology and offered on a stick of a lollipop tune. They toss me from one to another, their hair floats, eyes glisten, arms worm in the wriggle of lust. Pinching, stroking, squeezing, mushing. Like I'm the most adorable baby doll they've ever seen.

Water jingles with siren calls.

"Let go! It's her turn now."

"Who says?"

"I said!"

"My turn, my turn!"

"Quiet, you all. This is my game, and we will play by my rules."

Canosa snatches me, presses me to her side. Her profile perfect marble, eyes silver spoons licked clean. A beam of shine against dark water, white hair her torn sail.

Thirty seconds go bye-bye. I'm losing it. I need to breathe. I thought I could last minutes.

My lips turn not blue but black, my teeth don't chatter because my muscles don't work anymore, I stop feeling my limbs.

"Well," she turns me this way and that, "she'll do for six. Girls, what do you think?" They cheer their agreement. "Together, we'll make twenty one."

Canosa giggles and lowers her face over mine. All goes still. The cheering stops. She cradles me, opens her mouth, and sings. A high note, it trails through the water, it matches my heart rhythm, beats to staccato. A hum and a thrill amplified by the lake, a fortress with walls of pure glass and blue ceiling, the blue that I love most. A thousand violins fill the space with mint that can calm a sore throat or a high fever. I want this to never end. I'm not scared anymore. The water is so clear, it looks like air.

I inhale Canosa's song.

She spreads her arms over her head, opens into a tuba of a throat and hollers a chant. Guttural, painful, piercing. It

leaves her mouth and enters mine, turning water to milk, rising an octave, soaring up, into the sky and down again in one rush of comfort.

I'm back in the womb, listening to Mommy's heart. Pump-pump. Pause. Pump-pump. Pause. Pain is gone, so is the freezing water. There are no memories, no past, no future. Only one voice that fills me to the bursting point. It hurts, it threatens, louder, louder. I can't stand the vibration, it's about to pop my heart. I want out, I want to be born.

"Aaaaaah!"

My desire pours out into a yelp. It snakes from my throat and slings into her lips like an underwater bridge, deep into her gut. She gulps. I yelp again. She gulps more. I float above my life, above my worries. I give up my soul.

Canosa drinks it from me, glowering. The bridge between us shimmers with all of my sixteen years. The last of it escapes me with a snap and she gobbles it up. Her tongue over lips, they smack.

"Pity I can't have you for dinner every night. Ailen Bright, a soul-cake of innocence, sprinkled with bits of hope. Made from scratch."

She burps.

I don't feel the water or my bones or my skin. The silence is absolute.

"Inhale." Canosa commands.

I obey.

Water splits my throat and exist through... gills?

I scream a newborn wail.

My eyes blind, my lungs on fire, my body a tense string of anxiety and fear and shame and regret. I inhale more icy water, it burns me, it spreads through my chest and exits behind my ears.

It feels good. I want more.

"Happy Birthday, Ailen." Canosa says impossibly loud.

"Welcome to my game. Make a move, it's your turn."

I hear every syllable. I hear the movement of her lips. I hear the pressing and the rolling of her tongue. I hear every wet gush that wisps between the words as she speaks. The world comes alive with sound. I clasp my ears.

"Give her space. Shoo." Canosa says.

The sirens float away.

I look at my hands. White. I wiggle my fingers. They work. Try my feet, they're back to how they were before. I'm a faded self, just a notch, a few grades of saturation lost. The water feels luke warm, which means I'm as cold as a fish from a freezer. I reach behind my ears and feel water sprouting out of my gills.

"Weird," I say and clasp my mouth. My throat is on fire. This is when I wish to be mute. Sirens giggle. I wish to be deaf. The light from siren's bodies hurts my eyes. I wish to be blind. Everything hurts. The world blares at me with discord, without inhibition.

Dozens of people talk at once, look down from the Aurora bridge. Hundreds of cars honk. Thousands of hearts pump into a pulsing rhythm. I notice a pattern, tune out two souls. Two people, two lives. So warm and full of useless hope. I realize I know who they are.

Familiar. Mouthwatering.

"I'm hungry." I say and wince.

## 4. Boat.

My body is not a prison anymore. Cut open from neck to pelvis, gutted, turned inside out and sewn back together, my soul is gone. Ailen Bright, reborn. It's what I wanted. It's what I regret. That empty soulless ribcage booms with knowledge, a volume-knob turned up, it exits through a cry.

"Mommy, why did you leave me? Mommy, Mommy."

A speck of fire drops into the water forty feet above. Its fizz and hiss shoots right into my eardrums. Curse siren senses, it's as if I'm raw. I shield my eyes from burning light. Quick arm movement is all it takes. I propel downward into a puff of sand.

"Owww!"

My hands shoot out to arrest the fall, instead I touch the ground and jet in the opposite direction. Ten times the strength. The sirens clap.

"Shut up!" I cringe from the sound of my voice, yet deep inside me something sinister is grinning. That something tells me, *try it out*. That something nags at me, *it's cool. Crush bones between two fingers, talk at one hundred thirty decibels and watch those windows burst, chase submarines, syphon entire*

*oceans through gills, charm people into puppets.* I think of Hunter, wishing he could see me now. His face would light and split into that crooked grin. He'd throw two thumbs up and ask me how the hell I did it, and I'd tell him..

A boat cruises right above us, the rescue squad. I look up and crouch to push off towards the surface. Canosa grabs my arm.

"Where are you going, Ailen Bright? Tired of the game already?"

"I'm sorry, I don't feel like playing. I've got to find my Mommy's body."

"Awww." The sirens circle me in mock despair.

"What do you know, where is your mother now, huh? Is it Melpomene? Who is it? Do you even know her, has she ever sung you a lullaby?" I curl my fists, ready to fight.

"Girls, did you hear that? She's being mean." Canosa shakes with sobs. Imagine theatrical bawling under fifty feet of water. "I'm not telling her my secret." She stomps her foot and turns on her heels rousing a little cloud of sand-dust.

I feel left out. "Not telling what?"

Canosa peeks back over her shoulder.

"Perhaps I know where she lays."

Her whisper makes me jump.

"Who, my mom? You do? Can you show me, please?"

"If you play *my* game and make your move." She pouts, her foot a pencil on the sand tracing circles, round and round. What a tease.

I sigh. "What do you want me to do?"

"Is that a yes?"

"Sure."

She giggles. "You owe me two."

"Two what?"

She curls her fingers. "Two moves. One, for making you a siren. You asked me in the bathtub."

"Oh, I forgot."

"I know, I don't ever. Ailen Bright, the girl who doesn't remember the things she says. Two is for showing your Mommy's bones." She flashes me a row of teeth.

A helicopter flips its blades above us. Two divers lean over the water, I can hear their souls.

"Rely on me, I'll tell you what to do. Take your turn. Make your move. Kill your charming Daddy." Lips curled into a sneer, the sirens pick up her hiss.

"Kill him."

"Kill him."

The calls become a chant.

"Kill the siren hunter. Suck out his soul. Tear at his flesh. Feed him to the crabs." They join hands into a swirl.

"What? No! I'll never do that. Forget it, he's my dad!  
Why?"

"Oh, you want to. You know you do. You want to make him  
hear your song, do you not? I heard you say it a million times  
in the bathtub, wishing him dead with all your might. Tell me  
I'm wrong."

I lower my head, I want to stick it in the sand.

"See?" Canosa cheers. "Quick, make up your mind."

The first diver goes in, about ten yards off. The  
firecracker drifted. Wrong place. One out of eight suicide  
jumper bodies is never found.

"Kill the siren hunter. Suck out his soul. Tear at his  
flesh. Feed him to the crabs."

I'm torn. It's not the first time, but it's been six years  
since I had to choose between Mommy and Daddy.

Daddy.

My hate collides with childish love. I tether on the edge  
of indecision. I love him. I hate him. I'm a petal torn off a  
daisy, in the perpetual wonder. He loves me, he loves me not, he  
loves me, he loves me not. I don't want him to die, but he made  
Mommy jump.

"Wait. Did you say siren hunter?"

"Oh yes, didn't you know? Didn't he tell you where he goes  
on those long long boat rides? Didn't you ever wonder *why* he

goes alone, all alone? He hunts us, sirens, he wants to kill us all. He didn't see us, all this time, hiding right under his nose."

"That's right, under his nose." The sirens nod, four glowing sticks, used up and broken and discarded.

"Why would he do that, hunt you, I mean."

"Ailen Bright. Not bright at all. Because we're sirens and he's a siren hunter. We exist to kill each other. That's the game we play. And now it's your turn."

I look at Canosa's face, forever young.

"I've read every single book about sirens, and none of them mention any siren hunters. It can't be true." Yet I know it makes sense. Women were made to haul water, he'd tell me all the time. He hated Mommy's singing. I imagined terrible ways to make him hurt. Of course, I flipped it through the guilt to hurt myself instead, hoping he would care. He never did, he never will. I get it now.

"How do you know for sure?"

"No time to talk right now, Ailen Bright, later. Make up your mind already. See for yourself and tell me if I'm wrong. Or kiss goodbye your Mommy a second time."

"Ok, ok, I'll do it." I hope that she'll believe me. "How?"

Above us water boils with activity and life.

"Go." They wave me up.

I'm starving.

Fives coast guard souls, pictures strung into a blur of life, yummy but too many. The divers I don't know how to approach. Up on the bridge, no sound of Daddy. Hunter's gone too. What's that? Lake Washington Rowing Club, where Daddy is a member, twenty yards north from here, a kayak. It detaches off its dock, glides across canal into the drizzle of the rain, away from the rescue racket, south. It's like it knows where I am, then halts, unsure.

It's Daddy's. Is it? I don't know.

I wonder how he tracks a siren.

Tongue over lips, anticipation makes me shake.

"I'll show you what women were made for, Daddy. You wait."

Twenty yards to cover, easy. Fish pass me, bicycle bell souls. Jing-jing. A quiet "shhh" of kelp stems, waves goodbye. Then silence.

And then I hear his soul. Familiar and warm, like home, like hands, like breakfast. Even a bit like Vivaldi's four seasons, can't tell which though. And I don't believe it, what a contrast.

I float up and drift, submerged a few inches from the surface. Hunger punches my stomach, blasts my ears, slides down my throat, twists my intestines, wet rags in the hands of a

washing woman. Its fingers pull my gut and snap my knees to forehead. I have to feed. The kayak inches closer.

Too much to bear, I retch.

"I'm sorry Mommy, I can't do this."

I hug the pain and float. Driftwood.

He's above me. His violins burst into melody, wipe every thought but one. I'm hungry. I tense and shake and close my eyes. It will be easier this way, to never see his face.

I strike.

*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. The leap into the air, the shriek mid-jump to scare and arrest the target, the landing on the kayak within a breath of his face. All at once my senses get overwhelmed. The noise, the smells, the wind above the water hit me.

*Not now, please, not now. I have to do this, please.* I nearly throw up and grab onto the kayak.

I can't see him but I feel his surprise. A hinge of pain. A surge of joy? His soul emits vibrations. Fear? Awe? Is this how it's supposed to be, some killer admiration? My eyes still closed, I begin to sing.

I drown out the rescue operation noise.

I sing the only song that makes me ache, I wish Hunter was here, I wish he was with me.

"How I wish, how I wish you were here.

"We're just two lost souls...

"Swimming in a fish bowl,

"Year after year,

"Running over the same old ground.

"And how we found..."

Deep notes weave out of my mouth, drip into his, a kiss of death without touch. A surge of goose bumps passes me.

Disgusting. I hear him cry. I don't want to hear it or I'll lose control. His soul resonates with my rhythm, tunes in and morphs into a harmony. I imagine it happening. I imagine bending it, telling it to shed its host, pulsing to my beat, slinking inside me. I imagine the warmth filling my chest, unclenching the 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.

"The same old fears.

"Wish you were here."

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 over the usual blurry.

I blink through tears. My song dies at once.

"Hunter?" My voice multiplies into invisible maximum volume headphones and threatens to tear my eardrums apart. "Why are you—" I clasp my ears and sit there with my mouth open.

Of all things Hunter could do, he grins his crooked smile, with that dimple in the right cheek, wipes hair strands out of his face. Blinks off raindrops. Looks at me with two ferris-wheel eyes, spinning, spinning. Spinning to the magnificent summer season by Vivaldi. It makes me dizzy, makes my senses tunnel and drop.

My siren heart beats like that of a wet squirrel.

"Where is Daddy? And what the hell are you doing in his boat?" I myself talk through hands over ears.

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

I realize I'm naked from waist up.

"Jeez, stop staring!"

Imagine twisting into a pretzel to cover yourself up while balancing on a tip of a kayak that drifts down Lake Washington. Good luck.

"Don't look! I said—" I cringe. My body is a natural sound amplifier, it vibrates to every syllable.

"I'm not looking!" He throws me his blue rain jacket.

I thrust my arms inside and zip it up, knees pressed against my stomach. It feels good. "Why didn't you tell me it was you? Why didn't you stop me? You're disgusting." I try to talk as quietly as I can, still it comes out as yelling.

"Who says I didn't try? Honest. I swear, a couple times. Man, it was good though. Your song, I mean. I liked it." That grin again. "Your voice... it's like you talk through a speaker, at an acid rave or something..."

"It hurts. And you're so full of shit. You liked looking at me stripped, and now you're hoping a compliment would make me forget it." I lean to push him, change my mind. "Hang on, how do you know I'm a siren?"

"Well, let's see. You don't strike me as a Fremont troll's wife..."

"Stop it. It's not funny, ok? It's serious. I could've killed you, you know that?" Talking is easier. I'm adjusting. Hunter's face isn't screaming neon-markers at me anymore.

"What a pity."

"You're impossible!" This time I push him in the stomach and he doubles over, his head collides with the edge of the cockpit. Smack!

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I forgot I'm stronger. Are you ok?"

He gasps for air and rubs his forehead. "Dude, that was awesome."

I cradle my head. It's no use. He fishes in his jeans pocket, pulls out a little flattened blue box tied with a blue ribbon, straightens it out. I study the deck hatch, try to grab it with my toes, wiggle them. He pushes the box under my nose. Rain polka dots the wrapping paper, blue, indigo, deep royal. Waves of hues overlap into a dance of composites, paper particles dipped into shades between violet and green. I see almost fiber-deep.

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

"Go away." I reach out for the box. I hear my fingers touch it, the slightest movement of fingertip ridges against the paper-hairs. Over it, I hear Hunter's soul, the impossible sound of happiness wrapped in that homey comfortable feeling.

"Translation. I act like I hate you but I want you to stay."

"No, it's not that." I swallow. I don't move a single muscle. "It's just hard. I'm hungry. And you're so—" I turn the box this way and that.

"—sweet and delicious?"

"Full of yourself!" I shout. My voice carries across the open water and I shrink. The bubble bursts. The rescuers notice,

the police on the bridge yell and point. Another soul speeds about a mile away, on top of a motorboat, same purr, same swish through the waves. The noises crash on my head all at once in a gigantic downpour-gash. I taste it on my tongue.

We turn our heads at the same time. We can't see it yet but we can hear it.

"Daddy!" I say. His words ring in my head, on repeat, *tell me what women were made for, go on*. My legs are lead, my stomach flips up, my heart propels down. I'd rather die than face him again.

"Shit, he'll be here in two minutes tops. Look at that!" I point at the coast guard that speeds our way now, outlines sharply against the water. I see every little detail. A helicopter circles over our heads, I clasp my ears to drown out the racket. The box scratches my ear, I stuff it inside the rain jacket pocket. There is no way we'll make it. Police talk to us over the loud speakers.

An incomprehensible headache pounds its spike into my head.

Hunter's grin fades, he grabs the paddles, sets into a rhythm, shakes from adrenaline, his heart beats crazy. His eyes on me, arms one with the movement. Plop-whoosh. Plop-whoosh. I'm supposed to kill Daddy, but I flee instead.

I'm a coward.

I hear a whirr, turn to look.

The coast guard is advancing on us, Daddy's boat behind it. Two diesel water-jet engines going at the speed of seven knots, or eight miles per hour, one grey with red lip for a sneer, another grey without. It doesn't know how to smile, it only knows how to hunt. Our kayak goes at three miles per hour - that's as fast as Hunter can row.

I'm dipped into an oversaturated triple-acid trip. The world is no longer grey. I look back at the boats.

In thirty seconds Daddy will be here. I imagine his eyes, and I'm double dead. Suddenly, all of this is too much. My hands go numb, my feet slide down. All I want to do is to get away from here, as far as possible, to somewhere colorless, tasteless and quiet. Hide under a rock. Disappear.

"Shit!" Beads of sweat on Hunter's forehead. Two motorboats on our tail. A helicopter over us. Rescuers wave their arms, Daddy leans out of the window, his hand in a fist. I tremble, shake my head 'no'.

"I'm not coming home, Daddy." I say. "I'm sorry, I'm not."

My breaths come out in sharp draws, faster, faster. I lean forward, legs in a lotus, hugging the kayak, as if it can save me somehow. Daddy is shouting my name on repeat, Hunter is rowing fast. I hyperventilate.

Water calms me down, so I dive into its rhythm, let my arms hang to the sides and trail an inch deep. *I'm in the bathtub*, I

tell myself, *it's all right*. I listen to the beat. The motorboats. The paddles. The rain. My heart. I let out a moan of pain and hum to the lake. It hums back. Together, we create motion. The kayak slides faster. Foam sprays us in a shower of drops, like we're on a seaplane about to take off. Our speed doubles, triples, then we nearly fly.

"This is awesome." Hunter drops the paddles, yells over the noise. "Sirens can't possibly do this, not from what I know. We lost them, look!"

It takes me a moment to get back. I stop humming. We float past Gas Works park's monstrous pipes, dark and twisted in the rain, shimmering in my new field of vision. I hug the kayak, veer it to the left, around the green tip of the park, along the canal, under the I-5 bridge, to the right into the Portage bay, under the Montlake bridge, past the marshy greenery of Union bay, and spit us out into Lake Washington, to the bewildered gazes of drivers from the 520 floating bridge.

I pause to breathe. The sky decides to open all the way into a downpour, the wind picks up, waves break against the bridge's elongated body. I inhale the wet stink of the marshes and the metallic taste of a brewing storm.

"I think I can talk to the water. I'm not sure. It hurts to talk."

"Fascinating. The speed of liquid particles must have somehow meshed with the rhythm of your voice and resonated... Exactly how did you do this?" Hunter beams, his shirt so wet it's glued to his torso, his jeans soaked.

"I don't know. I just told it how I feel." I smile. I forget I'm a siren. I feel like I'm ten, the summer we met at the lake, skipping stones, when I beat him seven to six.

"Remember when we played that game, at Gas Works park, when you asked me for the first time, have you ever skipped ten? And I said, no, have you? And you said, of course, and I called you a liar?"

"I was eleven, give me a break." He laughs. "I remember. You used to hide behind the pipes and I used to pretend like I didn't see you." He looks at my pocket. I know what he wants me to do.

"Let's get some place quiet." I say.

He nods.

I hum and we slide under the 520 onramp, where the white eagle sits, along Lake Washington boulevard, skirting the edge of this gigantic bathtub, to surprised shrieks of the onlookers eyeing the speeding kayak before, under the onramp to the I-90 bridge all the way south to Seward park. It pretends to be an island, one foot always safely on coast. Cheater. This is where I stop.

The world is bearable.

The kayak dips its nose into the north end of the park, a plastic bath toy against a bathtub lip. A line of old growth forest grins with pines and wild brush, taking a shower. I jump off and stand ankle-deep in the pulsing water, Hunter's jacket reaches to my mid-thighs slung in skin-tight jeans.

Hunter steps out and pulls at the kayak, his sneakers slosh-slosh with every step. "Give me a hand?"

"Sure." I say, mesmerized by the greenery. It's emerald in color, pulsing malachite with roughly five hundred seventy nanometers, a moving mantis of crocodile skin. Green like I've never seen green before.

Hunter sighs and pulls the kayak up across the strip of sand. I stare at the forest, wet and empty at this hour.

"This is as close as it gets to the flowery island of Anthemoessa. Seattle style, of course, forever damp."

"What's that?" Hunter asks.

"Sirens, femme fatales. They dwell on an island in a flowery meadow. I always imagined they'd live here." I inhale the smell of pine, pungent from the drizzle. I can focus on a single droplet of water splashing to the ground, or I can choose to hear it all in one loud stream. I try very hard not to listen to Hunter's soul, which is like trying to not gobble up a candy after a week of starving.

Hunter's mind is elsewhere.

"Can you open it already?"

"Ah, yeah, the present?" I tune several miles out to the rush of the water at Union Bay. "We've got to get out of here, Daddy will be here soon. And police, and who knows what else."

"Please?" His lips take on a shade of purple, shaking.

I want to eat him. I don't. "You're freezing!" I grab my jacket's zipper, pause.

"It's ok, I'm fine. I hope you like it." Goose bumps trail up his neck. I know it's no use arguing. And I can't warm him, I'm cold as a fish. He emanates warmth in waves of sound. It makes my knees soft.

I focus on the task at hand. I take out the box, tear off the wrapping, open the lid. Inside is a sheet of paper that quickly dampens in the rain. The letters smudge into long inky trails.

"Two tickets to Siren Suicides -- Wait, what -- Tonight? This is so awesome!"

I watch the words melt, hear paper turn soggy. Try not to think of the fact that Daddy grounded me and there is no way I would be able to get out of the house unnoticed.

"Yeah, they're in town. Your favorite. Well, ours. I wanted to keep it a secret."

"Oh my God, this is the best present ever." I throw up my arms to give him a hug. There is a hint of blush in his face. He steps back and shushes me with a finger to his mouth.

"Shhh. Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"A siren."

"Where?" I whir around, see nothing, hear nothing, turn back to Hunter. His breath coils into puffs, droplets roll off his trembling shoulders.

"Right under your nose." He points to my chest. "Listen to this. Twenty minutes ago, I'm kayaking along, ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, and then BAM! she jumps out of the water. Scared the shit out of me."

It takes me a second. "Hunter!" I scowl and I can't tune him out anymore. His soul orchestrates Vivaldi's summer. Allegro non molto. Overwhelming.

He cups my face, his palms on fire. His breath that summer filled with bird whistles, laughter, and all things home, presto e forte. "I'm just trying to make you feel better, ok? Why the hell did you jump off that bridge? Why? Why did you do it, Ailen? Tell me."

Rain streaks my head and gathers on my eyebrows, I blink and try to look away. I with myself deaf.

Hunter exhales. "It's ok, no pressure, you don't have to answer if you don't want to. I get it. Look, I'm happy I found you, that's all. I thought I never would. I thought you drowned." His soul hovers at the end of first movement, on "languor caused by heat". And 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. "Feel it. I'm not human anymore. The human Ailen is gone. Gone! I'm a siren now, understand? S-I-R-E-N. Siren, a soulless killing machine, rotten."

"No, you're not."

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

"No, you don't."

I want to slap him but I 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 him to, like he always does. But I won't. I know I won't.

"Happy Birthday."

I can't resist and breathe in his exhale. He touches my sorrow. There comes a moment when two magnets snap because they are too close.

We kiss.

The taste of that first linden blossom fills my mouth. Edible flower dipped in stolen honey. I'm a thief, I have no right to take this, but I draw on it like a thirsty maniac. More. More.

The sheet of paper with the song slides out of my hand. I hear it trail a fallen leaf dance to the ground. The world is spinning. Sky, ground, lake, all tangle into one impossible mess and burst onto my tongue into a million sugar pellets.

The rain stops.

I hear a soul on a morning jog along the loop road. She stops, considers, changes her mind, continues. And something else. I freeze, the magic moment broken.

Hunter pulls away. "What is it?"

"Shhhh." I listen. "The Siren of Canosa. Others with her. Here we go." I point.

Two things happen at once.

Daddy's motorboat appears from behind Lake Washington boulevard's bend, thirty seconds away.

Canosa howls behind us.

5. Seward park.

Me, I'm a speck of soap. Hunter's an iridescent bubble on my side. We're on the edge of a heavy duty scrub sponge, three hundred acres thick with douglas fir. The Bailey peninsula. Sirens hoot and fizz and jiggle, five of them, one fist-full of bacterial growth. Nasty. I expect the park to dip in sky's gigantic hand, trail across the shore to clean the edges of Lake Washington, monstrous sink stuffed with dish-boats on every corner. If there was a plug, I'd dive in and pull it.

Daddy's boat sprays up foam. The coast guard wails, glides closer. Two plastic wind-up tub toys gone berserk. I wonder how many turns it takes for them to fizzle.

Hunter squeezes my hand. "Shit!"

"I hope he wrecked his boat." I say.

We turn to run.

A sonic boom hits me in the back. My eyeballs turn to burnt marshmallows at that detonating point.

"Owww!"

*A clean blow, Daddy used to say. This is how you slap a woman. Keep your palm open, then strike as if you crack a whip, deliberate and fast. Blast her. It hurts but leaves no mark, how*

about it? Genius, I'd say. You scorch that stinking siren into a puff of fog, a sorry mist of womanly oblivion. That makes her shut her mouth, all this whining. Have you read Walter Perry? Wise man. "Their song," he said, "though irresistibly sweet," look at me, "was no less sad than sweet, and lapped both body and soul in a fatal lethargy," hear this, "the forerunner of death and corruption." Listen to his words. You women corrupt us, men. That's what you do. Not that you need to know. You disappoint me. You were supposed to be a boy. A son. I'll never have a son. Who will I pass my knowledge to now? He'd slap me on the head to drive home the message. I'd stick out my tongue, lick off the tears, quickly, before he'd notice. Quiet.

Hatred floods me. I turn to face him and I roar. I roar for Mommy, for all those years she suffered from his hands, his maniac control, his zeal. I watch his round eyes grow wild, a stick of a man clad in casual attire, his rotten nature hidden under an expensive polo shirt, classic khakis, Lacoste boat shoes, so proper, stylish, you'd never guess. I holler at him, I want him dead. The wind of my voice knocks him down. He drops his fine leather Australian bullwhip. Sand flies into his face, gets stuck in his close-cropped curly hair. His boat moves backwards, about to collide with the arriving coast guard.

"Ailen!" Hunter breaks my stride.

Someone grabs my arm. The Siren of Canosa. Her brilliant white hair shines into my new vision. "Good move, Ailen Bright. I'm proud of you. Almost done. Go on, finish him. You owe me your move, remember? Kill the siren hunter." She hisses.

"Let her go." Hunter says. I gape. His legs apart, he pulls a coiled bullwhip from under his sweatshirt, his lips set into a line, his smell that of a final resolve.

I lick my lips and hold on to the jacket. "Hunter? What the hell are you doing?"

"My job."

"And what would that be?" I don't need the answer, suddenly I know. All those times he came over to have his little chats with Daddy. The son my father never had, to pass on the knowledge, how splendid. I feel an edge of betrayal squirm between us, smiling, knowing.

"Traitor." I say.

"Ailen, you don't understand—"

"Of course I don't. How could I. I'm a woman. We're stupid in the head by birth, didn't you know?"

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

"Scare me?" My laughter echoes off every single douglas fir fifty yards around. "You didn't want to scare me? The noble Hunter Crosby. You need a statue erected or something, for me

to bow to." I don't need to look, I can hear Daddy's edging closer.

Canosa pinches me. "I'll take care of him, you take care of your Daddy."

"Hunter is my friend." I say, but that last word 'friend' wavers in uncertainty.

"He's no friend to us, Ailen." Canosa hisses. "He's a siren hunter."

"Siren hunter," echo the sirens, circling closer. "Kill the siren hunter. Suck out his soul. Tear at his flesh. Feed him to the crabs." They whisper the chant in semi-circle, careful to stay behind Canosa.

The coast guard boat hits the pier. I turn a second too late. A bullwhip shoots its frog-tongue, misses. Another crack follows, this time on target, to Daddy's delight. He bursts into a grin as Raidne bursts into nothing. I see her chubby hands in a clasp, still see it imprinted in my retina, but she's gone. A tiny wisp of cloud is all that's left, braking on warm wind. I look at Daddy, a gleeful boy with a slingshot who managed to take down his first street pigeon. There is a momentary silence in the air, that half-second of comprehension that refuses to settle one way or the other, tipping, left, right, strung on the impossible.

A seagull shrieks.

The waiting crashes.

Violin concerto, A minor, timpani roll announces first movement. The sonata.

Daddy cracks his whip, misses, reaches for me, yells something like "nice catch, Hunter, not bad for your first time," yells something else. The coast guards spill from the boat onto the shore, take in the scene, start barking orders. Hunter swipes his arm to grab a hold of me, misses, calls my name. Canosa shrieks, drones on about her game and her rules, pulls at me and ducks behind Teles. Teles pushes Ligeia and Pisinoe in front of her. They all squeal in punctured toddler howls. Hunter dives into the tangle of bodies.

Enter dramatic piano flourish.

Choose between a dramatic scene, or a lyrical.

I feel sick. Sick and angry, stuck in the middle of a pile of squirming maggots.

"Leave me alone, all of you!" My spit tastes bitter, that bile of disgust and maddening confusion.

Hunter pulls himself out of the pile, cracks his whip. Its tongue coils out in a snake-arm and curls its forefinger around Daddy's outstretched hand. A yelp of pain later, his whip falls on the sand. Hunter strikes again. Canosa lets me go. Amidst confusion, I see Hunter's hand, our eyes lock. I know he's on my side.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

Teeter, totter, tip. I take his hand and we run.

An elderly couple that happened to have their morning stroll interrupted gawks at us as we dart into the woods. Past galley oaks, douglas firs, and poplars, into the thicket of deer fern, salal bushes, over mossy logs, slippery and wet and impossibly emerald. The shouting behind us quickly recedes into our immediate grunting. The rank smell of rotting leaves mixes with our breathing. Blackberry hands catch on our jeans, squirrels scat, we run. Occasional droplets skate off the leaves. We stumble into raccoon holes, slip on the soft ground around them, but we keep running. After five minutes Hunter stops under a young vine maple, spits and arrests a shriek when a couple spiders run up his shoulder.

"If I ever told you I like spiders, forget that. I changed my mind." He sputters out the sticky strands and brushes himself quickly.

"Do spiders bite?" I ask and exhale, perhaps too theatrically.

"Like you would care." He motions at my 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 blue of the wet skin-tight jeans.

"Upset much? I thought we were friends."

He furrows his eyebrows. It takes him a second.

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

I watch another spider make its way across the maple's trunk, in mourning of our destruction. I hear all its half-a-million feet setules shuffle across thousands of moss rhizoids. Mnemonic.

Hunter notices the silence, and a flash of understanding crosses his face. He opens his mouth, but he knows it's too late.

I look him in the eyes.

"Mommy is dead, you know that. Don't ever talk to me about my mother. Don't ever mention to me anything about my mother, you got that? You got that, punk? Never. N-E-V-E-R. You know what never means?"

Hunter dog-shakes his head. "Man, Ailen, I didn't mean it like that. Come on. I had to have this job. I just had to—"

"Well, you're about to lose it. It seems like you're failing from the get-go. Aren't you supposed to kill me? Isn't this what siren hunting is about? Well, go on, I haven't got all day." I cross my arms.

The air tastes bitter with our defiance. A squirrel shrieks, another answers. And 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, the fragrant melon at the end of summer, 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."

"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?"

Hunter takes a step and falls into another raccoon hole right under the maple. As he brushes twigs out of his face, I grab the whole tree and uproot it in one great pull. Dozens of insect souls peep in protest.

"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?"

I slowly put the tree down, but not before shaking it for an extra dramatic effect. A soul surfaces into my field of hearing about a mile or so away. And some kind of motor.

"We're not alone anymore." I say.

Hunter's lost, his eyes on the tree. "I wish I could do that. That's so awesome."

"Let's go!" I tug on his sleeve.

He keeps looking back at the tree, then at me, then finally settles into pace.

We stagger, hands forward, like two divers, parting the feeble spider-silk instead of water, darting into the ticket of green underbrush and bramble, under the watchful eye of the rare September sun. The luscious salmonberry smell signals a change in scenery. With the flailing of the arms, we stumble onto a trail.

"Where to now?" I say, listening for souls. A bunch of them walk around the park, and one of them is really close, but not close enough to sound an alarm.

"I think I know." Hunter pulls me with him, and I let him lead.

Another twenty minutes, and we crash through the last of the trees into a clearing. A flash of a bathroom light multiplied by a thousand blinds me. The sky is ablaze with diffused sunlight, a million tiny suns shining through a thin cloud-veil, an aerosol spray of earthy spores responsible for that sweet after-the-rain smell. The ground tilts away into a hill, bristles with a thin line of fir trees twenty yards away or so and then drops into nothing. Into the lake beyond. I step on the grass, a burnt expanse of a prairie. It carpets into a meadow, slinks along wooden benches set into the slope in front of a concrete slab. A stage.

"An amphitheater." I whisper.

"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.

"You don't say... It's perfect." I say.

"For real?" I ask.

"I dunno. Let's go see."

At this moment I feel like we're being watched, turn, but see nothing in the woods. Though it seems like the trees themselves have moved in and hovering closer, as if they carry a dangerous weight on their top branches, ready to spill it on our heads. I wait a beat. I don't like this silence, it presses down like something is about to erupt.

A soul pulses about thirty yards away.

"What is it?" Hunter peers into the darkness behind.

"Just some hiker." I say and wonder where the sirens are, where Daddy is and the coast guard, but curiosity wins over.

We join hands and cross the thin asphalt road lined with empty parking spots. Hunter hops from bench to bench, I follow. A pair of twenty-foot posts with a five-foot beam across make a gigantic Greek letter Pi. Two of them flank the concrete stage, a protruding jawbone of the week-old mound-stubble. The whole scene reminds me too much of a Salvador Dali's Face of Mae West. If not for two huge Pi's. For a second I think of them as

gigantic bird perches, two sirens roosting on each, their hair resembling feathered wings. I blink and there is nothing there.

"Hunter, what is this place? Have you been here before?"

Hunter jumps up on to the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let me introduce our special guest, the star of tonight's performance, the magnificent, all-powerfull, queen of seas and the songs and all things magical, the newborn siren 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 the sate, a very quick succession of steps, almost too careful to not be noticed, and then silence again. Goose bumps wash over me.

"We don't have time for this!"

"Oh, who cares about time when the magnificent Ailen Bright graces us, poor mortals, with her jingling presence. Like a thousand bells on the wind—"

"Hunter, stop it! Let's go."

"Ok, ok."

He pulls me up and we descend down the hill behind the stage, into another road and another parking lot. He drops my hand.

"Look, just what we needed."

On the far side of the parking lot a white drop of speed glistens with that wet after-rain-shine against the tangle of blackberry bushes.

"Who in their right mind would ride a motorcycle to Seward park on a Monday..." I scratch my head.

"Who cares." Hunter pulls me with him.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Watch."

Hunter drops into the puddle next to the bike hardly noticing that he gets himself wet all over again, hugs the front fairing and sticks his hand into the guts.

"Jeez, what the hell—" I say and resent my mounting excitement, I try to not jump up and down at the prospect of doing something so utterly illegal and scary.

"Shhh. Why don't you stand guard, watch the road." Hunter pulls a short piece of wire from his pocket, bends it with his teeth and shoves it inside 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.

"It worked, get on!"

"Hey!" A man in an all-leather suit surfaces on the road, his zipper forgotten, helmet swinging in his hand in a mad run to catch us. I recognize the soul I heard not too long ago. His

careful steps explained with the zipping motion. "Get off my bike, you morons!"

"Quick." Hunter gives gas, bike roars. My world explodes with noise. I slink over the back seat, my hands in a lock around Hunter's waist. He guns the throttle and we fly.

## 6. Pike Place Market.

We join in one resounding crescendo, Hunter, bike, and me. Two screams over a motor, allegro trio. We roar and lunge, a precocious hooligan of a wheeled beast with two heads, eight limbs, one soul. From zero to twenty miles per hour, down Seward park s-curve, complete. From first to fourth gear, twisting along the scenic Lake Washington boulevard, making onlookers jealous. Done. We speed across the sunken eyes of the lazy suburban neighborhood, wake up the dogs, splash puddles, gun through intersections in great motorized coughs. An hour ago the world alighted me with sound. Now it's my turn to inject it with an elegy.

We skirt the lake, too close to the curb, turns too daring.

"You need to slow down!" I yell.

Hunter doesn't hear me. After a minute, with I-90 floating bridge in sight, I glance back at the beach where we left the kayak. Daddy's boat is gone, so is the coast guard, so are the sirens. I can't hear any of them for miles, except a few morning joggers and the poor chap whose bike we stole. An echo of his phone-transmitted voice breaks through the drone of a mechanical

answering service. He's calling police. Not good. My gut tells me something is brewing.

Hunter veers to the right to avoid an oncoming old clunk of a beamer from behind a blind turn. Driver gapes into panic, jerks the wheel. Wrong direction. Old tires slide on wet asphalt. We squeeze by, but his bumper hits the front of an oncoming expensive convertible that was on our tail, obviously annoyed.

Crack!

Seat belts snap under unfolding air bags, mix with tire-swishing and that fresh burned smell of a car wreck. Three heart rates go berserk. Two souls yanked out of their Monday morning boredom.

"You're crazy!" I yell at Hunter. He doesn't hear me. He pretends he doesn't, focused on the road, washed in a cardiac high at one hundred eighty beats per minute. Bike swerves into the next side-road in a vicious slide, my left knee scrapes the road.

"Hunter!"

"It's ok, I got it!"

"Yeah, right. I see as much."

Up we go, to the honks of cars politely huddled at the all-way stop sign, over Genesee street, into the mass of morning traffic.

"Shit!" Hunter slides to the left of the car-centipede snaking into the blaring hullabaloo, the Rainier avenue, a major artery to the daily prisoner ensemble. The ones enclosed in cubicles. Perspiring, doomed, unhappy. I remember Hunter's words: *"They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped. They search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What's creepy is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest before you died."* One minute of fantasy is better than nothing. I mark Seattle downtown as a feeding ground, file it in my mental notes.

"Where the hell are we going?"

Hunter dashes left, runs a red light, skirts yellow expanse of a school bus wee too close, 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, dog-shake my head.

We fly over Beacon hill, then down south, right again under the highway. I can tell Hunter is lost. I can tell a police car is speeding our way.

"We've been spotted!"

"I know!"

The bike pinholes through a profusion of that fresh-baked bread aroma, a pastoral. It doesn't tease me like it used to, but I know where we are. We're heading north up on Aurora. Faster, faster. Presto. Tires screech, cars honk, people shriek, curse, gasp. One by one we set their souls alight, like flashing dots of plankton stirred by hand in nightly seawater. Except, it's morning. It's September 9<sup>th</sup> of 2009.

Today is my birthday. I'm sixteen.

Today I died and was born again. As a siren.

It's been two hours.

It feels like it's been two years.

Hunter shifts gears. I cement my hands around his waist. The bike jerks to sixty miles per hour. More honks, a crash. Another shift. Seventy miles. Eighty. We're the leading note in this pulsing requiem, a curling after-smoke on the edge of the asphalt licked by rain. The red dinosaur-cranes stretch their necks over the West Seattle bridge, about to make a step and gobble us up, bike and all. The sky itself pops open its mouth, greedy.

I don't know how much longer I'll live in this new shape. I don't know who'll get me first, Daddy or Canosa. I don't care. I hope they've killed each other on that beach where we left them. I know only one thing, if I die today, I'll die having fun.

The rain decides to join the party. Enters its reprise. Like notes in a tremolo, drops follow suit into beyond the cloud, down over the highway, a bucket overturned. We're doused. Hunter verves, leaves the bike to lurch like crazy.

"I can't see shit!" He yells. "Fucking rain, I'm blinded! Man, I wish I had some goggles or something!"

"Darn it. Sorry!" I face the rain the second time this morning. "Darn you! Why did you have to start right now, stupid?"

A sheriff on our tail, we pass another police car with an officer inside. He's picking his nose, bored. We spray his windows with muddy water, skid away in a mad squiggle, narrowly avoiding a collision. I flash him a smile, he flashes me the lights. Red-blue, red-blue, red-blue. Whips a mechanical siren.

Wheeeee-wee. Wheeeee-wee.

"Stinking cheater! Eat my what?" I try.

I scream contralto over its castrato, an etude of fury. My voice echoes and multiplies with glee, threatening to shutter the glass of every highrise building we are passing. Downtown. Hunter brushes a car in a spray of showers up the tires. We drip water.

"Getting off highway, can't see!" He yells.

Air whips my hair, tears mix the rain with sorrow. My wail explodes into an overture, a sharp treble, higher, higher,

shocking lazy commuters to skitter, tire-bump into the highway barrier, bumper-scratch the off-ramp. We swing to Seneca, a second behind us two police cars, blaring. Hunter tries to weave through the traffic-carpet, pouring north, his soul alight with panic.

We're flanked by cop patrols on both sides.

There is no time to think.

I holler and the water moves. It hears me, it listens. Drop by drop, it collects into puddles, licks the street clean all the way to the curb. The blanket of the rain parts in the middle, directly over us, into a tunnel of dry air. Hunter cheers. I bellow. I'm a conductor. The tunnel widens, grey veil of mist no more. Cars glide to both sides of the road, their tires skid across the thin film of the liquid, doors slam against each other to drivers' shrieks and sighs.

I grin, stick out my tongue to catch the rain, still wailing.

A motorcycle cop pops out into the facing intersection, Hunter lurches left, we pitch forward, I gasp and lose my tempo. Hooded passersby our audience, Pike street cobble stones our stage, my etude is over. We perform the final cadence, voila. The bike resin-squeaks over every single stone to my teeth's chatter. We waltz up the grand entrance of Pike Place fish market, the perfect place for getting lost, with its labyrinth

of one-door stores five layers deep into the ground, selling everything from fish to veggies to tie-dye shirts.

Two trucks are parked on the left, the road goes to the right, that's where Hunter is aiming. A farmer emerges from behind a truck, hauling a box full of peaches, stops agape smack in the middle of road, staring. His tarp drips water from the rain. Hunter leans to avoid him, misses the turn, pushes on both brakes. The bike stutters, back wheel locks. A split second and we're about to play xylophone on the cobbles, with our teeth. I stick out both legs. My naked feet make a yard long trail on pavement and we slide ankle-deep into a bronze pig.

Thud!

Hunter manages to lift his left leg mid-fall, hop on top and maneuver the bike like a gigantic warbled skateboard, sashaying on its side. Now a sorry mess wrapped around pig's feet and weighing all its four hundred pounds on my left thigh. We're wet, straight out of the river of Tibet, twins Romulus and Remus, suckling on the she-wolf. That's how we look, except it's not a she-wolf but a domestic sow, and her bronze teats threaten to scratch my face.

"Did you know her name is Rachel?" Hunter says into the silence, shaken but unscathed, his jean-leg ripped but no blood drawn.

"What? Who?"

"The pig!"

I look up, and it's not a pig. It's the bronze faucet, the Siren of Canosa, it's mouth open in a repeated hiss, *you owe me, Ailen Bright, you owe me.* I blink. It is a pig.

"Are you ok?" I ask Hunter, really wondering if I'm ok myself or not. Pushing the thought of facing Canosa down, deep deep down, trying to forget.

"Always. I'm one lucky bastard." He grins with dilated pupils of an adrenaline junkie. And I know he is fine.

I notice the silence. There is only the lapping of the rain. The usual human buzz hangs in the air, on pause. Early shoppers who dared to come out here in this weather stare at us, especially the older lady by the fish display. Her mouth opens, her index finger still pointing to a salmon, about to be wrapped by a fishmonger, in a bright yellow apron, khaki shorts and black resin boots. He turns to us mid-shout "Wild king salmon, ten pounds...", wrapped fish in his hands. His voice rings sharp amidst confusion. The fishermen behind the counter gape, then slowly comprehend.

"What the... Kids, are you all right? Johnny, we've got a crash here. Look. Someone, call 911. Now!"

No need. Mechanical sirens blare behind us.

The old lady shifts her finger at me, her knee-long nylon raincoat shakes, her crumpled face ablaze with terror. And I

can't help myself, the lid flies open. Everything that's happened since this morning spirals out of my stomach, up, up, into a bile of fear, regret, disappointment, shame, guilt, hatred, helplessness, and anguish. They all demand an end to their fermata. I grab the pig's head and jerk myself from under the bike with a grunt, bike tumbles to the street, I hobble on my good leg and retch into the crowd.

"Siren, a hundred dollars 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 my jeans from below, "What the hell are you doing?"

I turn to him. He gets a full blow.

"Oh, you think I'm selling myself too cheap? Good point."

I turn back. I ignore him. I ignore the policemen who finally arrived at the scene. I can't stop. I've crossed the line.

The entire fish stand gawks, and the flower lady, and the butcher two stands down, and a couple fruit merchants, and a few tourists with their cameras at the ready, and police behind me. All mesmerized by my voice.

I wipe my nose. Suck the moisture in.

"Dear shoppers, I 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 turn to Hunter. "How do I put this?" Back to the crowd. "From a girl to a siren in three hours. Caught twenty minutes ago. Wild, fresh, hundred percent organic. You can't find a better deal anywhere else."

I spread my arms and bow.

A few claps follow suit.

"Stop it!" Hunter yells. "Are you out of your mind?"

"And out of my body, too." I say. "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 Daddy is not here, to keep you company." Every word a piece of ice, spit out carelessly, propelling down on his face, to bite. Crushed and bitter. I'm a Bollywood tawaif item girl, pointing at Hunter, palms up. I'm a model at a car shows, my smile triple bright.

"Please, welcome, the siren hunter with his catch of the day!" I strike a pirouette. One full turn on the toe. Who needs pointe shoes when my feet are iron.

Pause.

My talking ceased, the crowd sighs in relief. The spell is gone. A flash blinds me, then another. People are taking pictures. I mouth to Hunter, "smile, you idiot."

"Jeez, Ailen, what's wrong with you? Did you hit your head or something?" He stoops off the bike and bumps into an officer.

That jerks him from the slumber. Uncomprehending, he does the only thing to not lose his face.

"FREEZE!" He shouts. Two more come behind him.

"Shut up and sit!" I bark, and all three of them flop down, their blue uniforms in sharp contrast with the shiny cobblestone, the tone of lipstick, Chanel Rouge Allure, the luminous number seventy nine, impertinente. They turn their heads like wind-up tin-dolls whose spring drive is about to stop.

Click-click-click.

A crowd forms around, some people cheer. I ignore them and turn to Hunter.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to answer your question. You asked what's wrong with me? Well, nothing, really. Except that I'm a living breathing walking dead, with gills for breathing and a voice that can control people, suck out their souls, you know, for breakfast. Watch me."

Hunters face widens in shock.

I pick a target, one of the Japanese tourists, a teenage girl with a huge camera. Pink. I hate her perfectly long hair, her branded outfit, her manicured nails, her over-protective mom and dad, so complete a family, my muscles wash in epinephrine. Accelerando.

"Lie down!"

With a squeal, she tumbles on the pavement, designer skirt and all.

My heart rate hikes at one hundred eighty beats per minute. Forte.

"See what I mean?"

Hunter eyes blink, two spitting pools.

My blood pressure soars to two hundred twenty over one hundred thirty. Presto.

"Aside from this, and aside from the fact that your job is to kill me, nothing is wrong with me. I'm fine, thank you very much."

I reach for oxygen in greedy gulps, my blood-sugar gone into this play of accelerated tempo. Fight-or-flight grandioso, siren style.

"Why are you doing this?" Raindrops collect over Hunter's eyebrows, grow bigger, drip over. He doesn't blink.

I'm one soft contracted tissue awash with sliding protein filaments, coagulating, maestro gone nuts.

"No, why are you doing this?" I snap.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean! Stop acting like an idiot and answer the damn question!"

"What, here? Right now?"

"YES, HERE AND NOW!"

Echo is my hook. I'm fish out of the water, trembling.

Hush falls over the entire spectacle at the speed of about eleven hundred feet per second. Diminuendo. Thirty three souls pulsate in unison, so appetizing that I want to feed right here, in public. Hunger suddenly overwhelms me. A gut twisted on a stick, freshly skinned, leeching. And why not? What do I have to lose? The pinnacle of human oratorium, I'm utterly alone. What's the use of my voice if it can't bring Mommy back. Why continue to exist when Daddy won't ever listen to me, no matter how loud I yell, no matter how beautiful my song. The queen of pathetic, I couldn't even properly kill myself, turning instead into some forgotten mythological creature. A siren. Forget femme fatale, how about a girl who's desperately trying to be deadly. Epic fail.

I suction into our final gaze, that feeling of knowing that it's almost over, the finale is coming. I see it reflected in Hunter's eyes, a calming blue of the infinite, all-things-home feeling that's not worth me. Not this dead body of a freak, no way. No.

"Look—" He begins. He's serene. I hate it that he knows how to read me.

"It's ok, I know the answer. Don't bother."

"I don't want to lose you again, ok? That's why. I don't care what shape or size you ARE. It makes no difference to me, don't you get it?"

"I'm dead. I'm a siren, remember? Not the mythical kind from the books. The real, the killer kind. The girl next door. 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."

"I don't care."

I press on. I circle him with vengeance.

"The real sirens, they're the women that come out at night, in the fog, and sing. Their voice makes you do things. They command you to come close to them, and then they sing your soul out."

"I know. It was me who said it."

"Exactly. And I'm repeating it to you, in case you happened to forget. I'll kill you, and they'll find you dead in the morning. It will look like your heart stopped. They'll search and won't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What will be creepy is that you'll be smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest before you died."

"Well maybe that's what I want. Maybe one minute of happiness is what it's all about!" His voice takes on a piercing shrill.

We're on stage, and our audience is breathless. It's denouement. I have to deliver the punch line, they're waiting, but I forgot my words. I search Hunter's face for cue, search his eyes, their bluish-grey expanse of rainy clouds, so ripe they're bursting. At this moment I understand that his is the only soul that will ever fully satisfy my hunger. I leave him, I leave him not, I leave him, I leave him not. There is but one petal left, quivering. All things home that I can never have. Never did, never will. I tear the petal off and let it fly. *I'm sorry, Hunter, I'm so very sorry.*

"Can we go now?" He tugs at me.

"Sure." My mouth is stuffed with cotton.

We stand, our hands entwined.

I wait for the applause that never comes. There's only breathless admiration. No bows, not even a tilt of our heads, we exit. Elegy completed.

## 7. Public Restroom.

There is a pattern of blur to all these people, one string of tiles instead of faces. Atonal, solid, boring. A bathroom wall with moving eyes, stone carpet for a floor, pendant lamps polka-dotting through the lingering smell of raw fish, discordant. It clings to us as an after thought, en papillote. Sticky. We cantilever forward, skim over metal-stripped stairs to mezzanine level, under the sign that says Public Restrooms and Telephones, down into the market's belly. A parody of a labyrinth. It gulps us like a swamp, with a reluctant burb of Hunter falling. I'm on the precipice, about to flee.

"Shit. Fucking sneakers." He picks himself up. My hand in his, I am his anchor. And I've lost my moment. Above us, the crowd erupts with salt and vigor. At level, shoppers measure us with looks reserved for homeless teenage junkies that crawled from under the bridge in a stoned daze, their typical soiled backpacks and ever-present leashed doggies forgotten. It takes but a second and they turn their thoughts up a notch, to tune us out. It's safer. We're 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?"

"Nothing."

A beat.

That's all it takes. A fall, a twisted ankle, and a pause. Hunter's face goes green, he bends over. The after accident shock finally kicks in. His soul wavers then plummets in a crash of breaking dishes in the kitchen. No longer warm and homey, rather a disaster of a beginning chef, frustrated, scared, banging his fists in a disarrayed piano. His heart is a struggling motor, his valves flap in an irregular pattern.

"Hey, you all right? We have no time, let's go!"

"Yeah, I'm coming. Just a second."

I grip his clammy hand and pull him up. It's like I pull the plug and cause a water-rushing.

Half a second, and I look up the stairs. Three cops make it to our level mid-rush, a few onlookers from our performance on their feet. Their faces agape with the stench of anticipation, shouting.

Half a second, and I look down the stairs. A sound so familiar I can recognize it for miles, the grating of the tires against the asphalt, the last revolutions of the engine, the break, the opening and the closing of the driver's door, three or four levels below. Lacoste loafers, lace free for easy

slipping on and off, their precious rubber soles grinding into concrete.

"Daddy. He's tracked us down, he's here." I say at exactly the same moment as Hunter says, "I think I'm going to throw up." His lips turn a shade of a floater, as in, a corpse floating face-up in the water.

I look up.

The first officer, short and stocky, hinges a yard away, his mouth one breath from shouting a command and then reciting us our Miranda Warning. I beat him to it.

"FREEZE!" I yell the first thing that comes to mind, what I heard myself not too long ago. He clasps his mouth shut with an audible click of teeth on teeth, like a shovel against a coffin.

"FREEZE, ALL OF YOU!"

A dozen of them tumble down the stairs like refrigerated lobsters, some fall, some grab the railing and stay like that, glued, unable to move, their sweat mixed with breakfast breath, coiling towards me on inertia. 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 turn to Hunter.

"Restrooms." He points, tries to shout but it comes out croaked.

He pulls me by the hand and we dash to the right, into a hexagon mosaic, flanked by a woman and a man, inlaid in black

porcelain over the crema of classic honeycomb, framing the stairway opening in the middle. Like shadow puppets, we slink down its drain. Hunter veers to the left, but gets spooked by an exiting man. I automatically pull Hunter forward, past the door with the sign For Men Only.

"Ah, whatever."

"It's empty." I say.

We dash inside the women's section, two rows deep, floor seeded with black hexagon flowers as if to show us the path. The stench of waste and chlorine hits my nose. Not a single soul is present. We pass our mad reflections in dim mirror-lined walls.

"Wait, it's a dead end!" I suddenly protest.

"We'll figure something out." He chokes. "I don't want to do it on your feet. Please?"

We slide inside the handicapped stall in the corner and slam the door shut. It rattles, and I think the entire market will hear and seek us out from this phenolic reek the color of a muddy pond about to bloom.

Hunter falls to his knees, hugs the toilet and lets go. In one retch his stomach empties. I plug my nose.

"He's on mezzanine level." I whisper. "I can hear him walking."

"It'll take him a while, trust me. I just need a minute."

Hunter coughs again. 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. Like a leech on a saliva-leash, one end still on his lip. I clasp my ears, wish myself deaf, if only for a moment. His wet sleeve sweeps the toilet tank. I stop his hand an inch from the flush valve, take a long look at him.

"Don't." I say.

"Why?"

"They'll hear us. He will hear."

Something shifts in the air before Hunter can answer. It goes from dry to damp in a millisecond.

"Ailen Bright, a smart girl, for once, but, oh, one minute too late, too late again. As always."

A wash of terror prickles my skin and flips my head upward.

Perched on top of the stall partition, like a sparrow in a second-hand wig, sits the Siren of Canosa, her feet free-dangling directly above Hunter's head.

"How the hell did you get here?"

"It's not your turn to ask questions, silly girl. You owe me, you promised. He is coming." Her words pierce me with that sinking stomach feeling, each of them makes a hole large enough for fear to march its righteous parade.

I bite on my finger, I don't feel it. *How did I end up here, cornered from all sides? Wasn't I supposed to flee? Isn't that what I decided? All women are stupid, Daddy's voice comes in, the only thing they're good for is for hauling water.* I try to brush the thought aside but it clings to my holes with its dozen fingers. Solid.

Mane parted in the middle, Teles pokes her head at me from under the partition, her grin the size of my anguish. Next to her Ligeia licks her lips and waves. Pisinoe pulls herself up and over the door, hooks on it with her chin that of a porcelain doll coming alive after midnight. All four of them slither 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. "You're so mean, look what you did, it's all your fault. Raidne was my bestest friend, and I have lost her now. Lost her! Who will be my bestest friend again? I'll cry." She sniffles, flicks her eyes, then tries to cry again.

All this time Hunter is perched frozen over the toilet bowl, while his hand struggles to draw the whip from under the sweatshirt, stuck half-way down the jeans. Wet. No traction. He

yanks on it, springs to stand but Canosa plants her feet on his shoulders. Two circus acrobats, they balance.

"Oh, look at that, the siren hunter wants to play with us. Shall we let him, girls?"

"It would be marvelous for you to join us." Teles claps hysterically, her body dogging its way into our stall. Knees follow elbows and she plops on her behind with a smack. Bare skin against bare floor. Imagine. Ligeia follows. Pisinoe flops over the door and lands in a corner.

Suddenly, Hunter grins.

"Say, never thought that skipping school on Monday could land me partying with naked girls. In a women's restroom. I should visit more often, eh? Fantastic venue."

"Jeez, Hunter, horny much?" I shake my head. Jealousy snakes through my intestines. I look over myself, flat-chested girl clad in an over-sized blue rain jacket and soaked skin-tight jeans. Bare dirty feet. Short 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 did I say?"

His face a surprised puppy, complete with floppy ears that decided to perk up in case a bone is coming.

I exhale, press into the corner of the stall, like that cat in the riddle. Except it's all about sirens. An idea tickles me.

"Hey, Canosa, wanna hear a riddle?" I try to think why I said it and what I will say next, not sure, catching that fleeting idea by its tail.

Daddy's loafers pause directly across the inlaid porcelain man and woman. I hear the crowd shake loose, so my spell lasted only, what, a few minutes?

"A riddle, a riddle. Please, I want to hear a riddle!" Teles claps.

"Hush!" Canosa urges. I can hear the crowd stop, the noise falls down to the cockroach swarming level.

"Please? Pretty please?" Teles is an epiphany of irresistible. "I'll help her make her move. I promise. I haven't heard a riddle in forever."

Canosa leaps, catches the toilet lid with her toes and slams it shut, twisting and landing on top like a bleached crow. Hunters falls on his butt. Canosa's fingers skim through her hair.

"Only if Ligeia and Pisinoe will help you too."

Teles elbows Ligeia.

"Ow!"

"Come on, say yes."

"Fine, I'll help." Ligeia hisses, Pisinoe nods her agreement.

"Ailen Bright, the girl who likes riddles. Let's hear it." Canosa cradles her face.

I lick my lips, there but a few seconds to come up with something. I lock my eyes with Hunter's, hope he understands what I'm trying to do, hope he'll give me some cue. He grins his grin, as usual, but I detect a shifting skin of panic underneath it.

"So?" Canosa says.

I twist it. "There was a siren in each corner of a bathtub, and in front of each siren there were three other sirens, how many sirens total?" Of course, the second it came out of my mouth, I knew it was there all along.

"Ooh, oh, I know!" Teles' hand shoots up. "Can I say, can I say it?"

"Shhh! Let me think." Canosa rubs her temples, still in that precariously perched position on top of her toes, on top of the toilet lid, not moving. I realize that none of them heard it before. Hunter flips me thumbs up with his left hand, his right still stuck on top of the whip, mid-draw.

"Guess what, I got it too! I got it, I got it!" Ligeia shifts and jives, and twists her hands.

"I don't want to play games, I want a lamb. Like I'm a goddess and they'd sacrifice it for me, but I'd keep it," Pisinoe says, eyes vacant, lips quivering as if she's about to cry.

"Poor Pisione, talking rubbish again."

"I don't care for your stupid games, I want a pet!" Pisinoe sticks out her tongue at Ligeia, which she promptly returns. It's like watching two marble statues mock the sculptor who forgot to paint their tongues some lively rosy color.

"Quiet, all of you." Canosa chews on a strand of her hair.

"But it's easy!" Teles giggles.

Daddy's shoes point in, slide one step at a time, under For Men Only sign and then inside. I'm mush and jumble of emotions, hidden internal shaking invisible but bursting soon. It prickles my skin with goose bumps.

Hunter misinterprets my expression. He flicks his eyebrows up and down. He tries so hard, his muscles sigh with straining. I bulge out my eyes in an effort to project, *I get it, idiot, stop moving.*

Shouting and shuffling outside joins in the racket of pouring souls. Another second, and they'll be here.

"Shut it!" Canosa yells. They stop, but I still hear the loafers gently hug each tile in our direction.

In the momentary silence, Canosa snaps her head to the right, to look at me, tucked all the way into the corner.

"Four. Four sirens."

"No, sixteen. I calculated, I would know." Teles covers her mouth under Canosa's look. Ligeia yanks at her hair with the words, "it's four, you stupid cow".

"Wrong answer." It comes to me in a flash. I squint at Hunter. "Both of you, wrong answer."

Hunter shifts under my gaze in that what-are-you-doing wonder, I roll my eyes in as wide a circle as I can, my lips one scar of stupidity intolerance.

"Ailen Bright, not bright at all it seems. Why, tell me, am I wrong, what would be correct?"

Loafers enter the women's restroom, and I know that if I don't go now, I will not ever.

"It's none!" I shout through rasp breaths. My heart afire, my lungs collapsing under rapid pressure, then expanding, then repeat. Loud trucks of blood that hobble through my veins at the speed that's over the limit.

Canosa is all attention. I'm her worry number one.

"The answer, silly girl, explain your answer."

All four of them and Hunter pause in a moment of surprise. The loafers pause in front of the stall and join the silence.

"Because you left the bathroom, stupid! You vacated." I hear an incomprehensible shift of weight from the balls of the loafers to its toes. I know I got his attention, and I shout as loud as I can. "You're in the public restroom now, all four of you are HERE. And I am GONE. SO LONG!"

Hunter turns his head to catch the shadow under the stall, turns back to me. Beads of sweat prickle his forehead. His knuckles go white. His feet by the gap between the stall wall and the tiled floor, he sucks in the air, ready. We stare at each other for a beat and I know he got it.

"Ailen, you there?" Daddy's voice comes muffled through two feet of my hopeful courage. Luke warm. Before fear has a chance to jump my throat, I make myself talk.

"That's right, Daddy, I'm here. But I'm not staying."

I leap and make my move.

## 8. Restroom Stall.

Forget what Canosa said, this is a game with no rules. A special bathroom chess edition that failed to sell even after the ninety eight percent price reduction. The tiles our gameboard and we are the pieces. Seven of us left, without Raidne. Canosa perches on the lid, Hunter at my feet, and three more sirens occupy the corners. Aghast at me. Behind the door stands Daddy. There is no time control, no conduct or ethics. We take turns when it seems like it's the only answer, when the waiting for the ultimate checkmate gets too much. My piece? I'm a bony seahorse. The straight aquarium edge above my head is the only escape, yet I don't know if I'm making the right choice, pipefish out of the water. Maybe that welcoming hand will crush me the second I flip my anxiety tail all over her board. I realize who the real player is. That makes me a liar, because there is one rule. How could I forget. That rule is, the loser dies.

One second, and I roost on the edge of the stall door, a freeze-dried sparrow, ready to jump over. Glass eyes, artificial beak. My skin is removed, to be later tanned and treated. There stands the taxidermist, taking numerous measurements of my body.

I bet he knows I'm mounted and can't move. I bet he's wondering if he should retain the original skull to preserve the likeness, keep the original leg bones to use as a mannequin basis.

"Ailen, sweetie, so good to have found you." Daddy smiles, a mask of politeness over the cold-hearted indifference.

"If only for one minute you didn't devalue me, Daddy. If only for one minute I didn't loathe you." I say.

"Why do you have to be so harsh. Let's talk like civil people. I'll give you one minute to get ready. The car is 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, Daddy, I'm not coming home. I told you, remember?" The echo of my voice reverberates across the walls and I shrink. Did I just dare to yell at him? Asphyxiation grabs my throat. Poisons. I begin to hyperventilate.

The echo aftershock shifts everyone to action.

"Lovely, Ailen, lovely. Please, proceed." Canosa says behind my back.

"That's what it is. It's all a game to you, is it?" I hear Hunter spit.

"Close your mouth and listen, Hunter Crosby, the boy without manners. Your mother didn't teach you? What a pity."

"You leave my mother out of this, you hear me?" Hunter's soul melody shifts up a notch, and I know he's angry.

There is movement in the stall, slaps, grunting, hands yanking at my jacket, whispering, squealing.

"Hunter, son, I need you here. Will you please hurry up?" Daddy says. On the word *son* I bristle. Hunter, the son my father never had. Forget the daughter, who needs her? She's just a stupid worthless girl.

There is a rush of souls down the corridor that hits me in the chest with their sound, but it's nothing compared to Daddy's scrutiny. He measures me for what I'm worth, his gaze unbroken. One of us has to make the move, and I know it's me this time. I breathe in, deep.

Hands press on my back, I don't know whose. Balance lost, I jump on the floor, or, rather, stumble down.

Enter wishful thinking, Ailen Bright style.

What I want to see is me performing one swift frog-leap with both feet on Daddy's chest to pin him down. What I do is pick myself up from a sorry Gore-Tex heap and make a step. What I want to feel is Daddy's Ralph Lauren polo shirt roughing up my soles as he folds into a puppet and hits his head on the tile floor in one beat. What I do is raise my arm to push him in the chest. A childish shove never finished.

Because Daddy holds a weapon.

It looks like a bloated water gun, plastic and transparent, with wires coiled inside and a black conic tube facing me like a barrel. Prehistoric yet laden with some pulsing technology. I get a feeling that this is not a toy.

A hint of a smile alights Daddy's features.

"Where did my girl go? Show me, Ailen, show me what women were made for. Show me what you can do, come on." Those eyes of his, I think they're growing, until they fill the world with one penetrating stare. The blue of his irises so different from Hunter's, faded into the clarity of ice, his pupils two eight-inch holes drilled by an auger. I'm about to drown.

Behind me the stall door swings open with a metal clank. Cheap hardware, wrap and slide latch in chrome finish, broken. Sawdust odorizes air. There is screaming, struggle. Miraculously, I still stand. Daddy two feet across me. A line of tiles between us, waiting.

A woman screams, a police officer shows his face around the corner of the entrance, shouting, holding back the crowd. I tune them out, listening to Daddy. I realize I hear his breathing but no soul.

"It can't be."

"Do it, Ailen," he licks his lips, "show me."

What I wish is to scream, Why did you marry Mommy, did you even love her? Did you ever? What I do is squeak something unintelligible, "Um..."

He smiles with terrible knowledge.

What I wish is 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 say tentatively, "Um, what do you mean, show..." Shame cooks my face, and I hate it. What I wish is to smash him with the back of my palm, scream in his ear, yell and holler and sing. What I do is, nothing.

The room temperature drops a few degrees. Thick fog coils around us, and it's not me who's singing, it's Canosa. I know what she is doing.

"Hunter!" I swerve, but Daddy snaps my arm in a violent arc and wheels me back into position, the weapon pressed to my chest, into the ribcage. Freshly brewed expensive coffee breath puffs over me through whitened teeth, at six hundred dollars per visit. Not covered by insurance.

"Show me what you can do, Ailen, sweetie. Prove yourself to Daddy." Then with power, "DO IT!"

I obey.

My paraspinal muscles groan at his push, right into a monger from the fish stand, the one who said 'call 911', mid-stride to enter, clad in a beanie and an apron, shouting, "There

she is, officer!" We collide, bludgeoned into a roll. His thirty something young soul chants at me, Seahawks super bowl cheer, barking dogs, lonely strums of a guitar, capriccio. I dig deeper and hear a thought, a fleeing presence of a girl, tucked behind his eyes but not quite by his heart. Faker. It makes me angry, and then hungry, ravenous, famished.

I'm a smoker with twenty years experience, my first week after quitting, clean and sober, offered a cigarette at a party, already smoldering with that impossible aroma, acrid, musty. Acetic acid of addiction. Irresistible.

If I don't feed right now, I will die.

My pinhole vision excludes all light, my refractive index goes bonkers, focal length shortens, focus sharpens. Zoom. There is but one object of desire. The nicotine fix, the perfect joint, the monger. I squat over his chest like a vulture, scavenging for a concerto.

His apron is the zigzag rolling paper. His face all hemp fiber, plump, ashen from terror. His sweat overpowers that distinct after-shave lotion that single men wear thinking it will make them more attractive. His hair is grinded buds, fluffy and flaky on the scrunched forehead. His hamster of a face emits a groan. I press down with both thumbs to minimize air pockets. On my back the skin crawls with Daddy watching. He will hear me this time, that's all that matters. I'm happy to perform.

But I don't know how to feed, nobody taught me. I failed to kill Hunter for that reason. Something went wrong. Before this thought hits me with full force, before the panic kicks in, the siren instinct takes over.

This time my eyes are open, and that's key.

I lick my lips, strike my eyes with glow at a ninety degree angle, careful not to burn. Eye contact, that's my lighter. It's why Hunter is still alive. That explains it, 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. Dying.

I'm a Dupont lighter, the fancy kind.

Flick open, ping.

The monger's cheeks are stained with tears, eyes forever open. His soul makes its first tentative appearance out of his mouth, a trail of smoke, a shadow. I inhale slowly in case I'm sensitive. A buzz, a drowsiness, and then a sharp euphoria enter my ribcage, all of those sounds, Seahawks and dogs and guitar, in one bubbly tumble. I hold it in and I float. One second, two, three. On ten seconds I exhale, but instead of saying, *Man, this the best shit ever*, I sing. On some siren reflex. A capella.

"You float like a feather..."

It's Radiohead, of course. My favorite song. A roll of fog waterfalls through pores in my skin, like I'm a freezer opened

on a hot summer day. While I sing, that first part of the monger's soul inches into my bloodstream. Burrows in it until ingested. So that's how it works. I inhale another whiff.

"In a beautiful world..."

I Inhale. The monger's face loses color. It's mine now, it's buzzing inside me. The room temperature cools down to about fifty degrees Fahrenheit. I feel a first pang of fever. Hold my breath, let go.

"I wish I was special..."

"You're so fucking special..."

Another inhale. Vapor slinks out of the 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. I wonder if different souls have different taste, pass the tongue over my lips. I can faintly register a commotion going on behind me.

"But I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo..."

"What the hell am I doing here?"

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 except food. Half of the monger's soul gone, I'm ravenous. Void rumbles through my chest so loud, I think the entire market will hear.

I inhale.

"I don't belong here..."

"Got you!" Daddy's voice breaks my trance.

I flip my head to the left. It all happens at the end of some faraway tunnel. Insignificant. Daddy's is on top of Canosa, her writhing body in agony, Ligeia and Teles at his feet, his shoes off, they pull at him, hissing. The plastic weapon is on the floor under the sink, a few inches from his grasp. Hunter wrestles with Pisinoe, turns to look at me, his whip in his right hand, useless in this small restroom. The tunnel closes. This is not important right now.

The monger groans, so does my stomach, and I'm back into my feeding frenzy. I have to finish it, I have to. I push his eyelids apart to make him look at me, to establish eye contact again. Hunger twists me inside out, and I inhale.

"I don't care if it hurts..."

"I want to have control..."

"I want a perfect body..."

"I want a perfect soul..."

On the word soul the last of the monger slips out and settles into my mouth.

Pop!

Our gaze breaks, his eyes glass over the ceiling. He's gone. I'm afire. I'm so warm like I'm back to being human with

hot blood rushing through veins, late to some weed-smoking party.

"I said, do her now, idiot. Move it!" Daddy flicks his gaze at me. It's a command. I suppose sirens are at their most vulnerable when feeding, that's what it is. A trap. Daddy catching me like a fish.

Hunter rolls with Pisinoe into another stall, breaking the door in the process. She is on top of him, his head next to the toilet bowl, his eyes roll like that of an animal before slaughter. Should he be afraid, is it real? Should he not?

My feet feel the body heat drain from the monger. I look down. He is dead. It downs on me. He is dead, and it was me who killed him.

My stomach drops. What was I thinking? I try to retch it all back out. A bile of ethereal soul in one cloud of his thirty years something essence. But it's in me, in my blood, ingested. It's part of me now. It's over.

"How could I. How..." My mouth is stuffed with cotton, I can't finish and tumble down on my butt, off his body, into the receding fog like a layer of tracing paper over the chessboard.

"Turn around, 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 Daddy finally reaches his weapon and pulls the trigger.

KA-BLAM!

A focused beam of sound misses me by a foot and sends air into visible waves. Its sonic blast shakes the ground and every little tile piece in the walls, every mirror, every lamp. Toilet water shoots up, pipes break into a shower, faucets uproot and spray us all in that fine drizzle of chlorinated water.

My eardrums erupt with pain, I clutch my head and fold into a fetus. The sirens shriek a terrible whale call then fall silent. I prop myself on knees and hands, sliding on wet tiles, lift my head and look at him.

"What you don't understand, Ailen, this is not a game. This is real." Daddy says in the momentary silence and in the fizzing of the erupting water, his pink polo shirt turning wet and reddish.

Remorse floods me with such force, I stand and stumble. I'm on a roll.

"I want you to notice...

"When I'm not around...

"You're so fucking special...

"I wish I was special...

"Where do you think you're going?" Daddy asks. I realize I made a step towards the exit, where a breathless crowd is

transfixed. I catch myself in the mirror. The 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. A grimace of a sea monster. Ghostly beastie. How is this supposed to be charming?

"But I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo..."

"What the hell am I doing here?"

"I don't belong here..."

"Ohhhh, Ohhhh..."

"This is the fourth time today, Ailen. And I don't think you're going anywhere. I think we're going home." He aims at me, standing amidst incapacitated sirens. They're breathing but not moving. Hunter crawls from under the stall ramble, dust stuck in his hair.

"Hunter!" I lean forward.

He stands on shaking legs, raises his arm.

"Think about your mother, boy."

Hunter's arm drops. "I'm sorry..." His Vivaldi Summer season blends into Fall, the violinists play a couple wrong notes, virtuosos turn amateurish. Boos come from the gallery.

This hurts worse than a thousand sonic blasts. "I can't remember if it's my turn or not, but I'll ask this time. Have you ever betrayed a friend, Hunter? Have you?"

He studies at his feet.

"I have no choice."

"Bullshit!"

The fog recedes enough for the mob to break onto the scene.

I decided I was going to leave him, then why is this so hard? I know I have seconds left. I want to finish my song before I go.

"She's running out the door..."

KA-BLAM!

I drop on the floor, ignore the ringing pain.

"She's running..."

BAM!

I slide across the wet tiles leaving a trail with my butt.

BOOM!

"She run, run, run, run..."

"Ruuuuuun."

BANG!

I glide behind the partition of the restroom, towards the open frame of the tall window, ajar. The sweetness of the rain greets me. I pull myself up on the windowsill.

"RUUUUUUN!"

I hoist myself, slink into the opening and drop twelve feet down.

## 9. Seattle Downtown.

Rain slaps me in the face, mad that I called it stupid. I slide down the wall in apology, hit the concrete, shame-hang my head. This is the water I needed. Not the chlorinated spray from the public restroom, but all seventy five percent humidity at ground level complete with barometric air pressure change that causes joints to ache. The ten percent of sulfur dioxides and nitrogen oxides that traveled here all the way from the mountain forests. The atmospheric water vapor precipitating on my head, fresh moisture. Ailen Bright, it seems to whisper, get in the water, quickly. Escape. Before you get locked up in a trunk of despair, forever.

I say, "Thank you."

It must be close to noon by now. Several lunch goers stop to measure me and decide if I pose any kind of threat. I know what I look like, they don't need to show me. Full from the monger, I turn my back on their triple time waltz of souls, on the jeering from two stories above, on Daddy, Hunter, and the sirens. Water is all that matters, my gills agree. Water will lead me out, I trust it with every timbre. My only friend. It spreads a Puget Sound smile over the Aurora highway, past layers

of buildings, riding a wave of seagull shrieks and salty smell. I'd grow wings and leap over the entire thousand feet of stone in a dive of a century, six times the height of Aurora bridge, but the pests are coming. Left and left I dash, into a maze of back windows and garbage-bin stink, by the pipes hissing liquid, the lonely janitor emptying a bucket of brine onto the cobblestones of the Post Alley. The hidden capillary across Seattle's downtown. I think I know where I'm going. I push people apart, scare a flock of tourists posing in front of the Gum Wall. One thousandth of a second photographic flash stars against the background of chewed up resin. Disgusting. Spit out, I am, skidding on damp stones, gaping into garage openings and metal mesh fences, thrown into the open.

There, water glistens under the drone of the rain.

Down the streets I bolt, south, over the metal steps, skimming another level, under the grim columns of the rumbling highway ninety nine, across the Alaskan way, almost made it. A thousand or so of my gill folds, lamellae, are screaming. Water, water! Enthralled by its slur I miss the danger. Some people have tunnel vision, I have tunnel hearing. It's too late to wrestle and there are too many witnesses. A homeless mushroom of a man holds my arm above elbow. His brown bundle of clothes soaked through, reeking.

"Hang on there, little birdie. Where do you think you're going? Eh? Spare some change for this poor man, will ya? Will ya?"

I swear people come at me in a musical sequence. A la rondo. Everywhere I go, someone is thirsty, someone wants to bite, to taste me on their tooth, press down hard, wondering if it's true gold or fake. If I'm worth their bother.

"What is it this time? You like my jacket? My dirty feet? My hair style, as in, haven't been washed a whole week and crawled out of bed not too long ago? What?" I know I need to go, but I want an answer. I want all of them to answer. NOW. Droplets trace my face, fall off my chin.

Plop-plop.

"Will you look at those blue eyes. How pretty. Your mama gave you those, little birdie? Was she pretty too? I bet she was, I bet. Give an old man for a drink. I'll dream of you when I sleep, I'll drink to ya, my pretty." His voice trembles, so does his soul, surprisingly serene, like a calm of an overgrown garden, earthy. There it comes, the flashes. Directly over the concrete fence, on the wooden platform, oblivious to the rain, or, perhaps, eager to catch the legendary Seattle weather on camera, Japanese tourists take pictures. I'd have to make it through them and across the wooden pier into the water. I don't dare. Not after the monger's death, I can't.

There comes the inevitable, a police officer. Black, grey-haired, with a protruding belly and a cap leaking precipitation. A gospel handclap of a soul, bred on Mardi Gras, old jazz and alabaster ghetto shootings. I must be a magnet.

"Excuse me. Is there any trouble?" He straightens his cap. The homeless soul shrivels and darts.

"She took my money, officer, I swear on my life, that her right there took all my change. I'm just an honest man, trying to make a living here. An honest man, officer, trying to—" He winks at me.

"Miss, is it true, what he's saying?"

I yank my arm out of the homeless man's grasp and flee.

"Miss, stop and identify yourself!"

But I'm off, through the honking afternoon traffic, back under the Aurora bridge. Running south, between the rows of the ever-present forest-green Subarus, metallic Volkswagens, unidentifiable maroon color vans, occasional trucks and bright green hybrids. Ugly. I decide to run where it's quiet and jump into water there, without attracting too much attention.

What I'm looking for is a clear side street, a pier devoid of souls, my head turned right, my feet going forward. What I hear is a glimpse of terror in the form of a tire screech twenty feet ahead of me. Daddy's car whips around the corner and shimmies in the damp air, the bronze golden 1969 Ford Mustang

Fastback, polished shiny, rims updated, new engine. I have one minute at the most to make myself invisible, to disappear.

I sprint left, scatter a handful of pigeons into the drizzle, hop onto side street, towards Harbor steps, take them in huge gallops like salmon leaping against the raging current to its spawning ground, led by some olfactory memory. My feet caudal fins, my hiding place a redd, the bed of gravel. Spotted. I hear Daddy's car behind me, and he's not alone. There hangs a hint of Vivaldi's summer gone wrong. Turned from presto to sour. No applause.

They can't drive up the steps after me. I stoop on indecision. One flight of stairs above the forty eight feet tall Art Museum man hammers his mechanized arm, and more people mingle. To the left and right is an alley. That's where I go. I'll hide, I think, wait it out, and then dive.

Splash-splash.

Across the puddles.

I have no sense of direction, get lost. *You're a geographical retard*, Daddy would tell me, *can't you tell north from south?* I simply keep going somewhere. Out into the open, then under some side bridge, under the concrete staircase walled off by a chain link fence, crisscrossed with rails and tension bars. I break the metal mesh door and crawl into the rubble in the corner, pieces of industrial junk mixed with rotten smell,

rustling chip-bags, damp cardboard and plain dirt. Or sand. Something crunchy on my bare feet. There, I'm covered. Nose through the rubbish, peeking out, like a hermit crab from its broken gastropod shell. Partial crustacea.

Intermezzo.

I breathe in rapid gasps, talk to myself.

"Ailen Bight, stop freaking out. You're safe, you're good."

I begin to relax.

"Ailen, breathe! It's over with. Now breathe."

I do.

There is an instant recognition of that sound, the pony car ramble, all eight cylinders enveloped in a fume of the dual exhaust that contrasts with any other smell by virtue of its in-your-face ego. Daddy's car rolls in. Never mind the interlude, enter the second part of the main composition.

He parks the car and slams the driver door shut, marches to the broken door, walks under the stairs. I get a whiff of his determination, shrink into the pile, burrow myself in it like a mole blind from fear.

*How the hell did he find me?*

This question makes me lose all confidence. The dear in the headlights tremble wins. Never mind getting lost in the city, I'm lost inside myself. Head swaps with feet, heart somersaults to knees, kidneys fly upward. A slash of putrid apprehension

sears my vocal cords. Daddy rules, he's a siren hunter and he knows how to do his job. This makes me his fresh catch of the day. I don't stand a chance.

"Come on, sweetie, we both know I know you're there. Let's be civil and do it quietly. I'll give you one minute to come out. You know Daddy doesn't like to wait. You remember, don't you?"

He pushes a knob on his golden Rolex.

Tick. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The timer starts.

Panic sets behind my ears, gills consumed. Dread morphs into paralysis. He shuffles car keys, takes another step.

"Fifty seconds, sweetie."

There is no time to think. I burst through the shower of debris, hit the fence to my left, break it, scale it, scramble to stand. Eyeballs swivel in my sockets, upward, upward. I have to know.

"How did you find me?" Jeans catch on a sharp end of a chain link, I fall butt first, try to yank it free without breaking eye contact, the terrible bridge into a mind of the one who spawned me. Daddy.

"Would you please get in the car, sweetie?"

Behind me, the passenger door opens, Hunter climbs out on heavy legs, his Vivaldi's summer now barely a high school

orchestra rehearsal. I flip my head. Hunter is engrossed in the door handle, knuckle bones miniature snow capped mountains on the ridge of his hand, dancing with adrenaline.

"I thought we were friends." I say.

"Stop it. It's hard without you, stop it!" He shrieks, whacks the door with a fist. Air thickens with resentment, I can almost taste it.

"Watch your voice, Hunter." Daddy says.

I use the moment and edge backwards like an inverted crab, away from the car and the broken fence, into the street. Out of the bubble of being caught, towards the water. My hands miss the curb and I fold down, digging into asphalt with my elbows. A few people pause their afternoon strolls, point and stare, the professional street witness choir at your disposal.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I turn my head a second too late.

Whssssssss. CRACK!

The whip moves faster than the speed of sound. A half-wave throw completed, Daddy slaps it on his left palm, energico, eager. His silhouette accordions against the bridge's underbelly with pulsing regularity. I blink. A gigantic bronze-bell tolls in my ears, rung to signify the hour of my funeral. Nerves assaulted by the sonic boom detach for a fraction of a second. My strength evaporates into a groan. I'm an escapee caught red-

handed and awaiting corporal punishment. I don't see the street, I don't see the buildings. There is no bridge, no people, no cars. Nothing. All gone, replaced by Daddy's eyes. Large, round, dark. They burrow a hole through me, and I flatten.

"I'm not coming home." I whisper.

"What did you say?" His shadow is above me. He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Daddy—" I can't finish. His face blocks the world. His eyes consume my vision.

I'm blank except for the constant ringing.

"Why don't you understand, sweetie. 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." I whisper.

He cracks the whip. Again.

This time I see it.

It snakes up high into the air, pauses, for a moment nothing more than a curled black hair stuck to the inverted sky's bathtub, then crashes down in one hard line. It's as long as Daddy's boat and it explodes with the sound so deafening that I vibrate to a bursting point. I'm a sheet of glass turning to liquid. I'm a balloon filled up with too much water. I'm a drop of rain on my way to the ground.

SNAP!

My chest blasts.

Everything goes quiet and dark.

I can't see, I can't hear, but I can feel. Pavement meets my head in one angry slap. Skull compresses then rebounds with a shock of a bright pain. I can't tell if it's cracked, but I'm still alive. I feel Daddy's hands on my neck, his fingers feeling for pulse. This is dead heart pumping water through veins. It belongs to Ailen Bright, a siren, freshly caught, wrapped and ready for personal delivery. At thousand dollars a pound, it's a steal.

Six hours since my fake death.

Six hours since my fake birth.

I'm a newborn curled into a ball. Fetal position, back curved, head bowed, limbs drawn up to the torso. Delusion addict withdrawal. This is my dream. My one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, worth every second, paid for with death.

Daddy is rough, but to me his is gentle touch. He lifts me off the ground, but I think he gives me a hug. He jerks me up and over his shoulder, but I feel like he cradles my body. He stuffs me into the trunk of the car, struggling for the perfect fit, but I imagine it's a car seat a wee bit too dark. He ties my hands, tapes my mouth. I imagine 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.

He shuts the lid with a loud clunk. Presses on top to make sure it's closed, walks around the car. There is a struggle, voices. Daddy and Hunter argue. I can make out only the tone of their squabble, thick with emotions. Suppressed anger, open hatred, thin fear, induced terror. Silence. Daddy walks around again, throws his weight inside and slams the driver door. The car shakes like a boat on shallow water. Hunter sits, closes the passenger door.

*That's it, I think, I've been caught. Prepare for the final execution. Isn't that I wanted?*

Daddy starts the car.

## 10. Daddy's Trunk.

I'm back in Mommy's womb. It's dreamy. The motor revolutions are her heartbeats, darkness her amniotic fluid soaked into the lining of the trunk; her endometrium. Sweetly scented, plushy. The tape around my wrists, my face, it's the misplaced placenta. Every road-bump shakes me, the embryo, the gestating fetus. My righting reflex jilts off kilter. I can't tell up from down, left from right, in from out. It doesn't matter, not in a case of a C-section. Ailen Bright, oxygenating normally, ten fingers, ten toes, two lungs, one heart. No soul. Ready for expulsion.

Daddy's car speeds through the rain, but I think it's him and Mommy in a theme park, on a boat, going down a fun water-slide, the one they never took. I'm in her belly, swaying. They jeer, they laugh, they're sopping wet, they clutch their hands together. Mommy pretends she's not scared. Her heart goes crazy like a revving motor. I know, I can feel it. *I'm a brave little girl, Mommy, I won't tell Daddy, promise.* She turns her gaze inward, a stream of warmth and endless admiration. *There is my baby, she says, my baby girl.* Feels her tummy. *Do me a favor, Tali, stop it, says Daddy, stop talking nonsense, all right? You*

*will jinx it. Remember, I want a son. You'll give me a son. Hear me, sweetie?* I recoil, float into a corner. I search Mommy's eyes, so round and blue and dreamy, to see if she knows where my tiny heart belongs, to see if she approves.

I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry.

But I do.

They're cold siren tears, excess seawater excreted through the lacrimal ducts at the rate of ten microliters per minute, five times the norm. I'll be swimming in this cryfest soon, hot and swollen, gills arched to a snapping point, air humid, suffocating.

The minute of fantasy over, I have nothing.

Forget the womb, this is a coffin.

I'm going home, slated for slaughter.

Tires pull at the gravel at eighty miles per hour, spinning, wheezing. Traffic hums a chord progression over a highway sheet music, the road that carries souls to their graves, every minute closer, closer, a constant human drama and dilemma. How to escape, how to pretend it's not there. How. It's all one big spoiled cacophony if not for Hunter's soul. A breaking note, so warm, like home, warm like hands can be, warm like someone who knows what being *warm* means.

Warm. Like I'll never be.

Ailen Bright, chilled fish provencale, market price, our chef's special of the day. Served a la carte. Choose side dishes separately, way down on the menu. Mashed hopes, a salad of marinated innocence, baked wishes in the sauce of misery. Each ingredient freshly harvested from chef's own garden.

I try to be mad at Hunter and I can't. Instead, I want to satisfy my hunger. I want to gobble him up, skin and bones and all the memories of the games we used to play. Stoned out of our minds. Happy for one minute.

Have you ever been so hungry, Hunter, I want to ask.

Hunter.

Was it all pre-planned? No, it can't be. He wouldn't. I don't want to think anything. I hope I'm wrong. I worm towards the back of the trunk and press my ear into the scratchy lining. A muffled echo of a conversation trickles through the buzz. My ear tickles, but I stay put.

They argue.

"She's my friend." Hunter's voice catches at the end.

"A siren. Your friend. Great." Daddy talks in that calm manner that I know too well. Listening to him is like breathing stiff air, waiting for sky to open on your head into one downward gash. Pouring anger.

"Not just any siren. It's Ailen. Ailen, your daughter!"

I hold my breath.

"I'm going to say one more time. One time only. Let's be clear about a few things, Hunter. I'm your boss. You listen to me. You do as I say. That thing back there is *not* Ailen. It's a siren, a clever whore, worst of its kind. I pay you to kill them, all right? End of discussion."

I can't draw a breath. His words punch me in the gut like a fist.

"She's not a whore. How can you. Your daughter. Not Ailen, no... She's..."

The car comes to a sudden halt.

SCREECH!

I wince, jerk my hands up involuntarily and break the tape.

"Excuse me, 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 stupid adolescent brain. Daughter, all right."

Heavy breathing. I rip the tape off my mouth. A few cars honk impatiently.

"But—"

"Did I say you could talk?"

Silence. Another honk. Daddy's car softly idles.

"Well, do you want me to send you home so you could tell your mother she can't have her drugs?"

Silence thickens.

"Are we clear on who's the boss?" Pause. "Good. Two more things. Never interrupt me unless it's an emergency. Answer my questions when asked. I would hope your mother taught you basic manners. I suppose she didn't. Pity. So, tell me. What do you think women were made for?"

"Oh. What do you mean, made—"

"Answer the damn question."

I curl my fingernails into the lining, ready to rip it out. The driver behind us seems to have lost patience, honks repeatedly then lets out one long irritated blare.

The soft purr of rolling window follows.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Window rolls back into position. The car rushes around us and off into the distance, upset and hurried.

"Well?"

I know what Daddy is doing, his favorite game. He's setting Hunter up to trip, to guess wrong, to stumble on an answer so Daddy can wait one dramatic pause and be right. About everything. Always. Nothing in this world exists without him having an expert opinion on it. How to cook a lobster? He's never touched one in his life, but he'll give you a lecture. What to do when pipes burst? The closest I saw him to touching pipes was suffering an icy exchange with the plumber who came to fix our bathroom when it flooded. But no, Daddy will tell you

exactly what to do and prove you wrong in case you try to argue. The image of spit flying from his mouth startles me. 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 shut my eyes and squeeze them. Hard. Go away, thought, go away!

"I don't... I don't know, Mr. Bright."

"Listen to me."

I cover my head. I don't want to see those eyes anymore.

"Listen and learn."

I wish I had an off button, to make it easier.

"Women were made to haul water. Work them. Work them hard, or they'll swing their lusty eye at you, charm off your pants and wrap your little dick around their fingers before you know it."

"What's this got to do with anything?"

"Did I say you could talk?" Daddy says.

Long silence.

More honks. My fingers hurt from being curled too hard. Synthetic stink is overwhelming. Mixed with gasoline. I hyperventilate into my knuckles. Dizzy. Drowning in hot air like a boiling crayfish, turning red by the second.

"I tell you what. Whore DNA. Know what that means? You can detect it in girls as young as five. It's in their gaze. The way

they look at you with those 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. Every man wants to hear her song, a song to die for. Those are the ones that turn into sirens. Got it?"

I hear Hunter's soul flitter in panic. Sickened virtuoso, toneless.

"Well? I'm waiting."

"Yes. Yes, I got it." Pause. "Um, can I ask a question?"

More honks.

"I don't fucking believe it. The drivers in this city drive me fucking nuts. Idiots. Can't they see a man is busy?" Daddy rolls the car off to the right, turns it off, cranks up the parking break.

"All right. Let's hear it."

"Well, I was wondering. How? How do they turn? Into sirens, I mean."

*Idiot!* I want to scream. This is typical Hunter, talks before he thinks. Blanks under pressure and says stupid shit. I bite into my fist so as not to let them know that I'm awake and eavesdropping.

"Would you humor me, just this once. May I?" I feel the anticipation shift to terror on Hunter's side. "Are you another

local idiot or do you just pretend to be one? I was under the impression that we talked about this last week."

"Did we?" Hunter scratches his head. "Ah, yeah. I think we did. Man, I'm sorry, my memory is shit, you know." Hunter swallows. "Anyway, what was it. Puberty?"

"All right. What else."

"Sex. First time they have sex."

"Good. Anything you're forgetting?"

*Suicide by drowning, I think. You're forgetting suicide.  
Tell him.*

I feel Hunter's body shaking.

"Suicide, um, by drowning?" It's like he heard me. I exhale.

"Precisely." The strain in Daddy's voice gives way to a lighter tone. "You see, they're weak. Women. If it was only about the flesh, but no. They corrupt our very spirit. Steal our very souls. It's men's duty to root them out, clean up the filth. Let our spirit shine unvarnished. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Um..."

"Yes or no?"

"Yes, Mr. Bright."

"You think I like my job. You think I enjoy doing it, is that what you think?"

*Liar.* I bite into my fingers.

"I didn't say nothing."

"Sure you did, you thought it. What you don't understand is the subtle difference here. Listen and learn. It's not a question of want. It's a question of must."

Pause.

"May I ask another question, Mr. Bright?"

"Yes."

"What if I won't be able to?"

"Then why the fuck did you agree to take this job?"

"You said it's be easy. You said it'd be like shooting beer cans. No one told me I'd have to knick my friend!"

"Well, no one told me I'd have a daughter when all I wanted was to have a son! How is that to you for a disappointment, tell me?"

"As opposed to what?"

The rest drowns in my humiliation. I shrink into a fleck of dust. Shame for my own gender burns me to embers. I'm nothing. I hate my body. My breasts, I want to cut them off and throw them into bushes, have raccoons eats them. My uterus, I want to cut it out, feed it to the sharks, a bloody garland that's responsible for procreation. Nasty. Whatever is left of me, the gutted fish, I want it cease to exist. Where is that button. If I could simply press it.

Out.

Out of this triangle. Out of this never-ending race. This idiophone, hand percussion type that's so repetitive and annoying. Me wanting Daddy's love, Daddy wanting Hunter's, Hunter wanting mine. I think I can make it a two-way highway, turn it into a straight line. The grand staff. The combination of both treble and bass clefs. Wouldn't it be harmonic?

Hunter doesn't have a dad. I do. Daddy wants a son. Hunter would be perfect. Hunter wants a dad. Daddy is better than nothing, right? Right. Me? I need to get out of the picture. The only way out is down, and the only way down is death.

I've come full circle.

Tune back into the conversation.

Daddy boils, his blood pulse makes my empty stomach churn. Hunter hurts.

"...all four at your disposal. All of them, and what did you do? Nothing. But I'm a nice guy. I'll give you a chance to redeem yourself. No failure permitted. And I'm not your maid, I'm not going to take out your trash. You start the job. You finish it. You get paid."

I hear something like a yes from Hunter.

That's it then, my fate is sealed.

Car speeds in a straight line, slows down. I recognize the turns and the sound of asphalt under the tires. Inside the car

fake hush reeks of depression. Inside the trunk humidity fades me into dizziness. I'm close to fainting, rasping for oxygen, gills ablaze. Drowning in heated air.

We turn up Raye street, so familiar. I know where we stop, a couple yards east off the sign with the number 411. The garage door creaks as it rolls up.

"Fine then. If all women are whores, what does this make your mother?" Hunter whispers under his breath. I feel him holding back something. Tears of anger.

Daddy yanks on the parking break. I roll into the back of the trunk with a thump.

"What was that you said?" It comes out as a hiss.

"I -- Nothing."

A sense of anger rises in a tsunami wave. Now it hits Daddy, now Hunter, now me. Anger everywhere. It tears at my chest. I want to cry out, so I do.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

"Damn it, she's awake. I thought I taped here pretty well." Daddy steps on gas, shifts in reverse, takes off the brake. The car jolts backwards. The garage door closes shut.

Hunter's soul is so close I can almost taste it. His hand presses in the back of his seat, towards me. I press my hand back, from the trunk. *I'm here, I want to say, and I'll get out of your way. I'll get out of everybody's way, I promise.*

Soft resin of Lacoste loafers gently hug the concrete. Keys jingle. Latch clicks and turns. Car trunk flies open. Bright fluorescent light hits me in the eyes. I flinch.

"Too bright for you, sweetie? Sorry, no dimmer here. My bad." Daddy walks off towards the back of the garage and unlocks another door. I can tell from the gush of air it's large and empty.

"Hunter. Take her out."

## 11. Bright's Garage.

It's how newborns feel when delivered. Projected from dimness into light, from complete protection into a glowing dazzling world, so rich with sights and smells and noises that it's painful. Harsh, dry, multiple falsetto. Five and a half pounds squeezed through a drain hole, covered in vernix caseosa of the waxy rainproof jacket, misshapen. I sit and gasp for air. My alveoli open and I holler. Out of the hot water nightmare, breathing. The amniotic fluid rushes past me. Adrenal glands awash with hormones, blueprint of my genomes useless. No Mommy to nurse me, no Daddy to hold me. Only soundproof walls. Cold floor. White door. Unbreakable ceiling. The stage for my Apgar test. Morendo.

Hunter gives me a hand. I squeeze it. A temporary crutch, not to get attached to; a hospital nurse gesture meaning to comfort by being professionally loving.

His face is a quiet mask, torn and crumpled over the conflict inside. I want to tell him, *I'll make it easy for you, don't you worry, you'll do just fine. You'll keep your job. I promise.* But grief chokes my throat and stops the words. I mumble.

"Are you all right?" He says.

"Oh, just a heat stroke, no biggie."

We both pretend like everything is normal, like we're late for a family summer picnic.

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. My eyes adjust, reflection wanders. Never once did I give a single thought as to why the walls of our garage were covered in acoustic panels. Daddy claimed his hate for noises my entire life. I never questioned it until now. Never stuck my nose into what happened behind the door in the back of the garage. It was his sacred place, his private sealed off office, a man-cave not to be trampled by women. The door stand ajar into its toothless mouth. One by two dozen feet garage gapes into his lunatic asylum. The siren killing ground complete with an expensive ventilation system to evaporate the moisture, whizzing. Now I get it.

I make myself step forward.

Daddy is in front of me, Hunter behind me. I'm trapped in the middle.

"Well, Ailen, how do you like it?"

Daddy's toothy smile and his soft demeanor match the interior. He spreads his arms like a showman on the stage, welcoming the audience. I look around, my mouth hangs open.

I've always imagined Daddy's place literally like a cave, small, dark, closed off. Wrong. It's an brightly illuminated chamber hall, the size of our house, only underground and almost empty save for a desk and a few soft chairs in the far corner. Everything about it is soft. Filtered fluorescent lighting, foam pillows covering the walls, air-conditioned smell reeking of fake ocean fragrance. I'm about to join it, vaporized. Scream all I want. The walls are super-thick. There is no echo.

Daddy clicks a remote, and the door behind us shifts to close.

*That's right, Daddy, seal me off from the world of the living. Shelter your neighbors from the horror, yes. Give them no reason for insomnia. I think, but I say something else, something stupid, as always.*

"Is this your man-cave then?"

"Precisely, sweetie. I couldn't have said it better. Like it?"

"It's big." I say. Mesmerized. He heard me, he's talking to me. He actually responded. I'm elated.

I notice pegs on the walls by his desk. A collection of bullwhips, coiled and oiled and hung in a neat pattern, breaking up the monotony of the wall's whiteness. Next to it hang plastic guns similar to the one Daddy blasted me with in Pike Place market restroom.

He is holding one right now.

Our gazes cross. In a split-second, I think of all the movies I've seen with the bad guys giving a pep-talk 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 that can make all the difference. Genius. But that's not how things work out in real life. In real life, things happen without a warning.

And so, without a warning, he aims at me and pulls the trigger. This is my father, my only family, my bloodline. I make no attempt to escape, frozen.

KA-BLAM!

My ears explode with brilliant pain. I roll into a heap of fabric with a soft thud that doesn't travel through the air, dying instantly.

"Ailen!" Hunter's voice hushes the second he's done yelling it. His soul still sings Vivaldi, barely audible, 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." Daddy says, but again there is no echo. Hunter steps back. "Hard, isn't it? So hard to resist the temptation. Your job is to silence her, not to comfort."

"Oh, yeah. Right."

Hunter takes out his whip with clumsy fingers, rolls it out, shaking.

"Notice the dissonance. Striking, isn't it? How could a vessel of such beauty house that much evil. Women." The tip of his Lacoste 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, you know? To make men stronger, more resilient, to prove our worth of existence. It pains me to do this, oh, if you only knew how much it pains me."

Hunter swallows.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm a busy man. You know what you're doing. I trust you won't err this time. Please, hurry."

I'm on the floor, looking up at Daddy. I search his eyes for something, some indication that there is a feeling, maybe even a hint of pity. Sophistication, underneath it frustration, underneath it anger. I wait. But there is nothing else. And I'm done waiting, done hoping.

I open my mouth. Terror darkens his face for a split second, enough for me to notice.

"Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Remember? Today is my birthday. And today I'm going to die. All I want for you is to hear me sing, just once. Please?"

I begin on one whole note, mi, break off.

He clasps his ears, turns to Hunter like I don't exist.

"My head. Terrible headache." Each word spelled out slowly, deliberately. "I'll go get some Advil. You have five minutes." I hear him click the timer on his Rolex. "Call me when done here, all right? Your mother will be proud. Hurry."

He turns on his heel and saunters for the door, locks it with a soft metal clang, leaves us in silence. The back of his head is the last I see of him. I feel empty.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter's words scatter and die in a low whiz of the ventilation system. He shakes, a torn leaf on the wind, twirling, falling.

This is it. I close my eyes, ready to die. I don't know what else to do to help with the waiting, so I count.

One. Two. Three.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

"All right, Hunter Crossby, mister fucking chickenshit, do it already! Do it! DO IT!" Heart rams at my chest, I don't breathe for fear of hyperventilating. I wait, but nothing happens. Instead, Hunter pulls me up. Yanks me under the armpits and leans me against the wall, panting.

"Can you stand on your own?" He asks.

I peer at him. He looks strangely delicate and fragile against the vastness of the space. We're tourists who stuck around too long after the opera singers, the spectators, and the orchestra deserted the hall, even the janitors left together

with all the furniture and the stage and the instruments and locked us up for the night, unknowingly.

"What the hell are you doing? What in the world—"

He ignores me. "Remember the game we play?"

I blink.

"You're kidding, right? Now? Out of all things, you want to talk about our fucking game?"

"I never answered your question. Um, if I remember correctly. You know my memory is shit, so - It's only fair I do now."

"Before you blow me up. Is that what you mean? Really? Jeez, what's wrong with you, what the hell are you doing?" I'm numb. I pushed all my feelings down, ready to die, ready to be a piece of meat to him, ready not to care. I want to smack him across the face.

"I - I don't - You asked me if I ever betrayed a friend."

"And?"

He hangs his head. "Well, I did."

"Fantastic. Good for you. Now, can we move on already?"

"You're not mad at me?" 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, ok? It's fucking hard." I swallow. "Plus the time. You've got what, four minutes left? So, can we move on already? Pretty please?"

His soul so close, I want to suck it out in one big gulp. He takes my hand.

"You're not helping, you know."

"I don't care." He cradles my face.

"Dude, let's be real here." I pat the wall behind me for support. There is nowhere else to retreat. "Your mother is dying. I'm dead already. Well, almost. So finish me. What's so difficult about cracking that thing? It's not even a gun, it's like a leather rope or like a—"

Our noses touch. "Can you just shut up for a minute?"

If there was an audience, they'd stop clapping. Waiting. Feeling this one second of momentary hush in the anticipation of a miracle. First violin on stage, the bow in mid-air, a twenty nine inch long ribbon of horsehair about to strike four strings of sheep gut, allegro non molto. It's how divine music is born, from animal hair and intestines. What a joke.

I'm bitter. Horrified at a sudden urge to fall apart and cry. Holding it, holding it, holding it.

Hunter's irises shimmer in fiddling frenzy. I don't move, don't talk. I just stand there and let him pull me closer. Why not, I'll be dead soon anyway.

His eyes release the blue like water. Water calms me down. I'm a pebble thrown in with an expert twist, flat, skipping. I hop, hop, hop, make little round waves, then finally give in to gravity and sink.

He kisses me.

And I swim in it, gulp it in my haste. Perform an underwater dolphin kick to stay afloat. Or maybe not. Maybe I want it to last forever. Hide here, float deep down to the bottom, burrow my head in the sand, pretend I'm gone, pretend I'm not here. Wouldn't it be nice?

I won't cry, I won't! I stomp my foot to believe it.

Hunter breaks away. "What's wrong?"

"What? What do you mean, what's wrong? You're - I'm..." I stumble, bewildered at his momentary idiocy.

He brushes my cheek.

"Why are you crying? Did I do something wrong? Talk to me."

I take a deep breath and explode.

"FUCKING KILL ME ALREADY!"

The wall panels shimmer then settle back to their position. Hunter cups his ears for a moment, shaken.

"I can't, you know that." He studies the floor, arms hanging aimlessly again down his sides.

"No I don't! How would I know?" I wipe my nose. "You're such a liar sometimes, it's disgusting. You need the money. Your

mom needs the money. So be a man and fucking do it already, finish what you started, all right? Daddy will be back any minute now."

"I can't, Ailen. I just can't."

"So what, you'll be standing here like this? Just like this?" I grab his arm and let it drop.

"Dunno. I guess."

"Then you're a fucking loser! Kill me, you idiot! Get rid of this!" I stick my hands under his nose. "See this? Feel it." I fold his hand over mine. "What does it feel like?"

"Um, your hand..."

"Jeez, Hunter, I hate it when you act like an idiot. You know exactly what I mean. How does my hand feel to you, temperature-wise?"

"Cold."

I press his hand on my chest.

"How about here?"

He blinks.

"Answer me. Do you feel my heart?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You know what it pumps?"

"Not really." He stammers.

"Not really? Stop lying. You know. 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 Hunter steps back.

"I get it. Honest."

"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. And 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? Tell me now!"

I glare, unmoving.

"You." He says under his breath.

"LIAR!" I cry. "You're one fucking liar, you." I feel tears roll down my cheeks, but make no effort to hide them or wipe them. 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. Never." Tears collect on my chin and I hear them soak into the carpet. "It's not a game anymore, Hunter. This is real. Your job is to kill me, my job is to die. So just do it already. Why do you always have to make everything so difficult?"

I sob.

He just stands there, looking helpless. He wrings his hands, as if unsure what to do next. It makes me furious.

"What do you want, Hunter, tell me, what? You want to be in love with a siren, is that it? That what you want? For me to constantly fight the urge to snuff you out, for you to walk every day on the precipice of danger?"

"Sorry, I can't help it. I just love you." His mouth 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 pocket, knowing he can't afford it.

"Why? Why do you love me?"

"Cause - I just do. You're just awesome."

"That's such a stupid reason. I don't believe you. I'm not worth it. I'm a monster. You can't love a monster, can you?" I shake my head. It makes no sense. I hate him, I hate the day we met, throwing rocks into the lake, being all innocent and happy.

"Try me." He says.

And everything that I've been bottling up erupts in one powerful gush. I pour my pain out and sing. One note, sol, then up to la, climb to si. It's more like a wounded howl.

We lock eyes.

Like a flick of the lighter, I ignite him.

INSERT SONG LYRICS

Hunter falls to his knees, opens his arms and lets his soul escape. A thin ribbon of his precious sixteen years, a silky strand of his essence. I taste it on the tip of my tongue and suddenly I'm hungry. Simply ravenous. This is the best weed ever. I suck in his soul with a whoosh, wolf it down. 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. Double-dose. Right in the vein. I want more. Won't stop until he's all mine. Never mind me wanting to dive inside his eyes. Reserve that for stupid romantics. He'll be swimming round my ribcage soon, for real. Much better.

Hunter's soul strings between us in a ribbon of smoke, lingers, like that herb smell of marijuana. Pungent.

It gives me power.

I inhale and holler.

INSERT SONG LYRICS

Walls shake, ground shifts, door gets jammed in the frame. I feel the lake splash onto the shore and creep towards me. I command the water. Command it to come. Lights flicker, Hunter's soul illuminates the air between us. The ceiling vibrates, splits in several places, water begins to seep in through the cracks. Fog rolls in like a cascade of waves from the freezer, coiling.

I focus on Hunter, ready to finish him.

The last of his soul wisps up in a barely visible curl. His eyes well up. It's the first time I see him cry. His face grey, arms limp, he loses balance, falls and rolls to his side.

He's dying.

Fear pierces me and I gag. I can't do it. The song breaks. Part of Hunter's soul oozes back into his mouth, greedy to reconnect with the rightful owner. He gasps and arches in a spasm. Groans.

I kneel next to him. "Hunter, are you ok? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Will you ever forgive me? Please? Will you?"

Daddy's fists rain on the door that's jammed between walls and the sunken ceiling-ground. I flip my head to look.

"Ailen, open the door please, sweetie." Comes through, muffled.

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, plastered and sweaty.

"Are you all right?"

He moves his lips, dry and cracked. "Wooo, 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?"

"What? Fuck off! You're one sicko junkie." I push him and feel my anger evaporate. I try really hard not to smile.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder. The door rattles but it's jammed pretty well and doesn't give.

A sense of temporary freedom flashes between me and Hunter as we glance towards the door and then back at each other.

Hunter 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. We kiss. He burns me with his warmth like with high fever. And I let go. I exhale the rest of his soul back, 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 a dead girl's fantasy. I'm a thief simply returning what was stolen. It hurts.

"Awwwww, how sweet. Ailen Bright. The girl who thinks she knows it all. It's time you paid, we made a deal, silly girl. Remember?"

I break away, look around. Nothing.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Hunter props himself up on elbows.

I hear a crack, then another. Daddy seems to be kicking at the door with something heavy.

Then there is the voice again.

"Ailen Bright, the girl with no memory. Nothing is free, remember that. You have to pay. I'm proud of you. You're doing good! You've got a boy with that sweet voice of yours. Not bad, not bad for a newborn. Not bad at all. Now, finish him."

I recoil. I look at Hunter, at his eyes, half-closed. And I get it. It's not me that he loves. I mesmerized him with my voice just like a siren is supposed to. It's fake, all of it, the love, the kisses, everything. I slowly raise my head.

There, as if flickering through several feet of water, up above me, in the far corner Canosa pushes out one of the ventilation vents and hangs down through the hole in the ceiling, peeking through her matted hair like that bathroom faucet, forever grinning.

## 12. Ship Canal.

Love is a shiny lure at the end of a fishing line, iridescent, sparkly. The resplendent idea in the everyday murk that I bit without thinking. This one is equipped with a treble hook. One for Mommy who left me, one for Daddy who never loved me, one for Hunter who pretended. All three hopeless, thrown in by a skilled angler. Never mind me being stuck under the layer of self-pity, she knows how to pull. *What's it gonna be*, I want to ask, *catch and release or deep fry?* But I know she will only giggle, together with her sirens. They will laugh in my face. Poor Ailen Bright, they will say, you still believe in love? You naïve little girl, grow up already. How stupid of you, how pathetic. Silly.

I stand, determined.

"Where are you going?" Hunter asks, alarmed.

"You picked the wrong girl, ok? Find somebody else." I throw out each word through shallow breathing, choking, gagging on self-hatred.

"What do you mean, picked - I didn't want somebody else. I didn't—"

"You're so full of shit." I clasp my forehead. "I want out of these walls, I want out of this skin, I want out! OUT! Now..." I wail. "Please, now... I can't stand this anymore, I don't want to kill, it hurts, I don't want to--"

"Ailen Bright—" A voice begins, and I yell,

"SHUT UP!"

Canosa whispers her threats.

Hunter calls my name, says something.

Daddy pounds on the door.

"Leave me alone, all of you!" I holler, back away from Hunter who comes at me with outstretched arms, wipe my face and suddenly break into hysteric sobs.

"Mommy, why did you leave me, Mommy? Did you love me? Tell me, did you love me?" I wait, but there is no answer. Not even an echo. And I weep uncontrollably. I regret I never asked her, now I'll never know. I don't believe what Daddy told me yesterday, I know he was lying. I wasn't an accident, Mommy wanted me, she did. Or did she? Was I simply another inconvenience? An unwanted purple stripe on the cheap drugstore pregnancy test?

"Was I, Mommy?"

In that moment pain blinds me and I jump toward the concrete ceiling, head first. Acciacatura. I propel upwards, a hard line of muscle and disgust. Sforzando. I'm not good enough.

Not good enough for Mommy, not good enough for Daddy, not good enough for Hunter, even not good enough for Canosa. A half-dead girl? A half-alive siren? Whoever I am, I don't want to be me anymore.

Midair, arms stretched, at quarter note, dolore.

I want to smash to pieces. I imagine myself as a slimy mess, which is exactly what I am. Can't even die properly, can't seem to be able to find a way to do it for sure. Maybe this will work.

Level with fifth line, top of grand staff, at full note, rapido.

I hit the ceiling with my head. It hits me back with a fist of a flat packed sound. I hope for the best, but it parts like clay. It takes me a second and I get it. Whatever water there was in the ground got condensed in one spot and softened the cement into mush at my wailing. Is that even possible?

I curse. My body is oblivious to mind, to throbbing skull. It worms through the mass of broken acoustic paneling, rubber sealant, plastic, foam board, bent roof trusses, and several feet of concrete. A spectacular exit into the next layer, dirt thick with roots, covered by grass and flanked by feeble bamboo shoots, Daddy's attempt at beautifying our front yard and paying an exorbitant amount of money to the gardener. Designer

landscaping at its best, Seattle style, natural and ecologically sound. Now ruined.

I cough and sputter soil and mud, clawing my way out of the hole, a blind mole staggering into the aggregate mass of an afternoon sky. Dark clouds, no rain, no sun. Eight hours into my birthday.

My jeans and Hunter's rain jacket are torn, covered in brown muck, smeared with madness and dirt. I dust myself off, standing by the wet spot of the stone womb, out of it instead of in it. Moist air fills my lungs together with that earthy smell. So grimy, it's crunchy on my teeth.

"I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!" I yell. "How can I make myself cease to exist?"

"Walk back to Daddy, why don't you? He is a siren killer, love, he will make you disappear, will he not?"

I spin to the sound. "Will you leave me alone!" I retort, but immediately Canosa's idea gives me shivers. I buckle. She winks at me from the bushes, her lovely face framed by the greenery, her curled finger beckoning, pointing down the street, towards the Aurora bridge. She pouts her lips, and I feel guilty for yelling.

"I'm afraid if it's somebody else - I want to do it myself." I say.

"But it's not your turn yet, Ailen Bright, won't you listen? Silly girl. Now, come here, I'll show you something. Something very special." She half-sings the last line.

My heart aflutter, I ask, "Is this about Mommy? Will you show me where she lays?"

"That you haven't earned yet. No, something you will like, I promise."

And I wonder. "Wait, where are the others? Teles, Ligeia, and, what's her name, Pisinoe? Did you guys all make it out together or--"

I hear garage door open and that's my cue. Like a frightened bunny, I dash in between the bamboo shoots, across the neighbor's yard. Mister Thompson himself agape from his porch at me, watches me trampling his blooming azaleas, breaking his rhododendrons, hopping over his fence into Missis Elliott's yard, then finally shouting.

"What's this racket about? How dare you - She's damaging my garden! Roger, your daughter is damaging my garden! This is it, I'm calling the police. That's right, I am. I am going to right this second--"

But I'm already several yards away, following Canosa's white hair.

Missis Elliott's poodle barks at me, again, like this morning, only now through the open window. I ignore him. I have

one goal in mind and this time I'll make my escape. Up the right leg of the street, forty one familiar stone steps down, across the hill, onto the left leg of Raye street, across the pedestrian zebra. Not on the Aurora bridge this time, but under it.

Canosa flicks between the supporting anchors, broad and solid, I follow, forever curious. Through the rumble of the trucks overhead, I follow. Slipping on sandy ground, past frightened cars, between the boats, I follow, dive into the lake, the concrete dust out of my hair at its first lick, soothing, quieting, velvety. My gills say 'thank you.'

Water hugs me. We're both cold. I float. This is my gigantic bathtub, my therapy, my home. My gills extract dissolved oxygen. I twist and turn and speed towards the bottom of the lake, Canosa's matted mane my anchor. Seldom fish squirt by, kelp stalks shimmer in a forest, yield to darkness. 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 Daddy's attack at the Pike Place market. If they are ok.

"This is where I belong." I say and hear them answer.

The sound pulls me in. It bounds through layers of water in one turbid stream. I want to join. I miss their tepid faces, cold arms, long hair. My sisters in death. You can't love a siren, you're lured by her voice to believe you're in love. That's how we kill. How perverted is that. I shudder.

Never again.

The song expands into a choral. It rears from the bottom, up and up, a wake of crescendo and bliss. Glittering tutti.

"I'm coming!" I shout.

I detect a separate current behind me a second too late. A hand clasps my mouth. Canosa. On instinct I kick back with elbows but she pulls me into a headlock. I thrash my legs but her legs hold me still like curling cannabis. We sink. No matter what I do, I can't move. She's stronger.

"Shhhhh." She hisses into my ear. We drift. I try to twist free, but she tightens her grip. Our feet kick up a cloud of sand, its silica grains toss silver in the siren-glow. The song fizzles out to a distant murmur.

"Don't talk." She breathes into my ear and turns me around to face her, forefinger on her lips. I spread my arms "why". Her hands on my shoulders, she shakes her head "no, don't ask, no."

We face each other like two anglerfish, glowing.

Silence rings its cymbals.

For the first time since this morning, I'm truly tranquil. Quiet. At peace. Seeing Canosa the way she is supposed to be, the way sirens are supposed to be, the way they are portrayed in books. Devious femme fatales who lured sailors with their enchanting songs and stunning looks to shipwrecks. Magical deities. Maidens.

Water ripples Canosa's hair away from her body, a museum goddess carved by a Greek sculptor who happened to dream of Marilyn Monroe some three thousand years ago. Her face perfect marble. Straight nose, slightly upturned nostrils, soft mouth with just enough of a curl to make every man's heart skip a beat, large oval eyes made to drown inside. She floats suspended in water.

Can I trust her? Do I have a choice?

"Come." Say her lips as she pulls at my hand, her fingers felt-covered piano hammers pressing on strings.

I touch my short hair, look down at my hands framed by torn rain jacket, my feet stuck out from ripped jeans. Ailen Bright a femme fatale? Yeah, like that's going to happen.

Canosa pulls, oblivious to my trepidation. I could let her do whatever she wants. What's left to lose? Everything I had or pretended I had is gone. Hunter's face swims up in my memory but I quickly push it down. It needs to be blocked, torn out, burned.

I nod.

Canosa smiles.

We hold hands and swim, down into Lake Union, further east under the highway into ship canal, retracing mine and Hunter's journey this morning. I dog-shake my head at this thought and try to focus on what I see. The bloom of Canosa's hair, murky water, flecks of rare fish, broken rocks on the bottom, a passing harbor seal, his soul a crooked snort of an animal. Can I eat him instead? I'm afraid to ask out loud. My thoughts dampen by afternoon traffic hum.

The Montlake bridge.

Canosa darts to surface.

I lift my head to overwhelming noise.

HOOOOOOM! Eeeeeeeek... Chata-chata-chata...

Tires swish the road full of cars, full of people, full of souls in constant murmurs and tinkles and whistles and snores, their gasps and croons jamming the afternoon air. The difference is so striking, I want back underwater, but Canosa grabs me by the hood.

I squint.

"Do we have to—"

"Shhhhh!" That finger again.

I glance up. Sedans and pickups and trucks shuffle their metal frames across the steel net of the bridge. They look like

toys from underneath, as if sent to skitter across by two giant boys playing a racing game. I can almost hear them squeal in delight, then get bored, then chatter to decide whether or not they want to stomp and wreck and squish it all, then move on to the next game. The net of the bridge is our gameboard and we are the pieces. Seven of us left, without Raidne. Forget time control or ethics. There is no time control, no conduct or ethics. It's the same game we all play. The rules are simple. If you lose, you die. And I want it to be my turn.

Hunger plays tap with my ribs. I realize I'm starving. I can eat just about anything to silence the growing agony. All it takes is to flex, jump over the bridge, pry open the nearest car and sing.

But Canosa pulls me to the shore. We wait a few minutes for souls to clear off the walking path, then quickly scale the bank, slink over the metal railing and up the trunnion abutments, over the cornice, into the bridge's underbelly covered by a latticework of trusses, box girders, chords and ties. Dark green. We squeeze inside a half-cave between the beams and sit, two prisoners. The thunder of rattling above shakes me to the bones, I wince.

Canosa's lips touch my ear. "You can talk now. Quietly. Your voice carries too well, love."

"What's with the secrecy? Where are the other sirens? Was that them singing down there?"

"They're fine, silly girl, don't you worry."

"But how did you manage to get out? And why are we here? What's going on?" I whisper questions that burned me for the last twenty minutes.

"Ailen Bright, always so impatient. Don't you--"

"Wait, you promised you'll explain to me why it's not my turn yet. And when can I see my Mommy?"

"Whoa, girl, slow down! First thing first. You pay." There is such finality to her words, it makes me ache.

"Right. I wish it was easy." I say, thinking of Daddy, his eyes, his overwhelming reach into my guts, my fears, my being. Me freezing at the tone of his voice like a trained animal on command. "I don't know if I can do it. I'm sorry. Every time I try, it's just--" I trail off.

She sneers, all beauty gone. I pull up and hug my knees, wondering what she will do. Finish me now, here? Good, so be it, it's what I wanted, right? Then why am I so afraid? I hardly hear her quick hushed sentences in this deafening noise.

"Well, to answer your question about the sirens, they're being punished for not catching the siren hunters. Especially Ligeia - she promised to help you. I dug them into the sand up to their heads and made them sing for three hours straight till

their throats go hoarse!" She snickers, I open my mouth in terror. "Scared for them, are you? They deserve it. But enough of that. To answer your other question, I will teach you how to feed. I'll show you how."

My terror gets punctured by a momentary feeling of surprise. She cares? She wants to teach me how to do it? I fight the urge to touch her hand. No use, it won't be warm like Mommy's, it's cold as mine.

The traffic slows down just enough to create a momentary pocket or silence. Canosa looks down. I hear it too. A young couple strolls along the pedestrian walkway on the canal bank, both in hooded rain jackets. We can see them, but they can't see us, concealed in darkness like eagles over the prey, hidden in a place where no human would ever think to venture.

Two distinct piano solos waft up, overlap into a medley reminiscent of Beethoven's moonlight sonata, tremolo. We both swallow, hungry.

"I think they're in love, hear how their souls are all over each other? Like two radio stations or something, falling in sync. It's beautiful..." I say.

"Well observed, Ailen Bright. Now I want you to watch and learn."

"What are you going—"

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

She hums a low droning belly-sound. The couple stops. They turn their heads, puzzled, look at each other then up. Other people pass, unaware. The hum is directed only at the couple beneath us. A column of fog quickly obscures them.

"Why them? They didn't do anything wrong!" I whisper and cringe, remembering my first accidental kill, that monger guy in the public restroom. I touch Canosa's shoulder, she shakes me off. Snarls. I shrink away.

Her song begins with a few quiet notes.

"This way, oh turn your bows

"Akhaia's glory

"As all the world allows-

"Moor and be merry..."

Now it pours down in one misty shaft. I find myself listening wit my mouth open.

"Sweet coupled airs we sing

"No lonely seafarer

"Holds clear of entering

"Our green mirror."

The fog thickens, the temperature drops ten degrees, fifteen. The guy and the girl open their lips, their eyes glassy, their souls strung up, whooshing towards Canosa in two intertwined ribbons.

"Pleased by each purling note

"Like honey twining

"From her throat and my throat

"Who lies a-pining?"

PLOP!

Both souls gone, Canosa slurps them up and the couple drops to the ground. The girl's knee-long jacket spreads in a dusty cloud, her face framed by blonde hair. She's gone. He's gone too, his green jacket crumpled, his hand over hers even in death.

"It took you, what, a minute?" I gasp. "Why them? Why the hell did you do it?"

"Shhhh! Why not?" She says. "It's what sirens do. About time you learned, Ailen Bright."

Below us a woman passes the spread-eagles couple, shrieks.

"You killed them."

"I did."

"You're not even sorry!"

"I'm not." Canosa shrugs. "I savor it. You will too."

"No, I won't." I dash to escape, but she pins me down with a knee to my chest, her hands on my wrists.

"Oh, yes, you will. You will kill. And you'll do your part of the deal. Then, after you pay, it will be your turn." She smiles, her beauty melting from delicate to terrible.

"What if I don't want to," I pant.

"Oh, yes you do." She sits on top of me, her thighs holding me in a cocoon. There is a shuffle underneath us, a scuffle above us. Police cars, a fire truck, onlookers' buzz. I tense as I hear Daddy boat motor. He's looking for me, once again. Canosa reads my fear, jeering.

"Thinking about your boyfriend, love?"

"Leave Hunter out of this." I grind my teeth.

Traffic slows down to a trickle and my voice carries all the way across the canal. I don't care if Daddy hears.

"Be quiet."

"All right, Canosa. How about we stop playing this stupid game. How about you tell me what it is you want, huh? What is it?"

"I thought you'd figure it out by now, silly girl." She taps my forehead. "I want your father dead."

"Oh yeah? Then why don't you do it yourself? He's right there, in his boat, hear it? And why didn't you finish him in the restroom, huh? What, you scared of him or something?" I don't know where my defiance came from, but I cling to it before it evaporates.

"Because I make the rules, and you take turns, that's why. It's my game. You are playing my game, but you just won't do what you're told!" For the first time, I think I glimpse a hint of fear cross her face. "I told you it's not your turn! Ailen

Bright, the girl who never listens! The stubborn girl! So stubborn, she deserves to be tortured by 'sitting in the tub'--" She bristles.

"What tub?"

"--with milk and honey on your face, silly girl, to be devoured by flies, by maggots, by worms, eaten alive, swimming in your own excrements, that's what you deserve." Her breath washes over me and I'm back in the gallery of snapshots, single images burned into my memory and then gone.

Flash. The grey expanse of Canosa's eyes. Flash. The chokeful of her hair like bubble foam. Flash. Her white arms sleek as bathtub rims. Flash. The brilliant blue of Hunter's rain jacket zipped over my chest. The knock-knock who-is-there call of my heart. Thump. Thump. Thump.

My body says, *get her off you*. My body says, *don't listen to the bitch, get out!* I tell it to stop yelling at me, but it tries to wiggle out. Canosa pins me with her practiced innocent gaze, rotten under the cover of pretty pouty lips.

"Who are you?"

"The Siren of Canosa. The real one. The killer kind. Can't you see?" She waves down to her kill. A sugar stick in the green of the bridge's latticework, her breath gone wrong. Stinky. She laughs. It's a fake cackle, pitched two stimuli too high. A whole octave off, because she has no soul.

She points at me with her forefinger. "I transport you, the dead, to the other side. You are playing my game, you've got to play by my rules."

"I'm sorry, ok? Sorry I didn't time it properly, I seem to have a knack for messing things up. I should've consulted with you, of course." I motion west, in the direction of the Aurora bridge. "I apologize. Would you elaborate as to how I've disturbed your game? Cause I hate being left in the dark."

She exhales a chill that crawls up my spine and leaves a sense of imminent dread.

She leans closer, so cold, I shiver. "Your turn will be when I tell it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean." Her breath washes over me, and it's cold, so very cold.

"No, I don't." I say defiantly.

"Ailen Bright. One stubborn little girl."

"I don't know what you mean!" I say.

"I said, I make up the rules, you take turns. And I said, it's not your turn yet. What part of 'not your turn' do you not understand?"

"I don't think I want to play your game anymore."

"You already are, you have no choice."

"How old are you?" I ask.

"Why don't you guess?" Her dark eyes shimmer. There is nothing there. I'm cold, but she's colder. I'm strong, but she's stronger.

"Three thousand years?" I ask.

"Wrong. I have no age."

"When did you turn into a siren?"

"I didn't. I'm not."

I stare. "This doesn't make any sense."

"It does, if you think."

I pause, think really hard, think back to the bathtub. A sense of dread wafts through my gut. I freeze.

"You're Death?" I say.

Canosa laughs, giggles like a little girl, rolls off me and onto the concrete floor. "Close enough, but no. I'm merely her best girlfriend." Darkness oozes out of her eyes and spills terror over me.

Suddenly it's not funny anymore.

"I didn't want to die." I whisper. "I wish I could turn it all back." I glance into distance, into nothing in particular. A car crosses above us, and I feel sugar syrup trickling down the bridge grate, a baby's soul. I understand in disgust that I want to suck it out, right this second, until the baby is dead.

"Why can't you kill Daddy yourself?" As soon as say it, I recoil at the idea. This is my father I am talking about, not some animal slated for slaughter, yet that's how it comes out.

"There is nothing for me to sing to. He is a siren hunter. He has no soul." Canosa looks away, chewing on her lock.

I sit up and clasp my knees, sway from side to side to silence the pain. "I don't understand. How can I kill Daddy if he has no soul?"

"Because it's your turn."

A terrible realization seeps inside me. "You're not the one calling the rules. You're not the one saying whose turn it is, are you?" I wait.

Canosa looks through me. "Took you a while, Ailen Bright."

"It's Death, right? She is the player, right? I got it back in the restroom, at Pike Place market, I got it when--"

"Are you hungry?" She asks and giggles theatrically. "Oh, my tummy hurts, I want some desert. Want to join me?"

"Um, sure." I manage.

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

I give her my hand. It's so easy to trust her, so easy to let go and just fall into her words, to stop thinking, to be led, to rely on somebody else.

It's quiet. Eerie quiet.

"Why does Hunter have a soul then?"

Canosa takes a second before answering. "There is only one siren hunter, one master and one trainee. The master siren hunter gives up his soul to be invisible to us, to be so quiet that we don't hear him approach, that's why."

"Ok." I make myself say it. "If I kill Daddy, will you show me where Mommy is?"

"If, Ailen Bright, if. I promised, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you promised. So is that a yes?"

No response, just a nod.

I look at my palms. "Say, Canosa, do you know how a siren can kill herself?"

"A siren dies if her song has no effect." She looks out over the setting sun breaking through the typical clouds, her hair golden in its rays, smelling of sea salt and wind. It's evening.

And I know what I'm going to do. I know how I will die at my own hands. I know who won't hear my song, who never heard me, who will never hear me.

"Ok, I will. I'll pay, I mean." I say. "You did that once too, didn't you?"

She doesn't answer. Our eyes lock and for a moment a fleeting understanding hangs between us in a stroke of a lifesaver. She nods like she knows, I nod like I found a friend.

We join hands, step to the edge of the latticework and leap into the air.

Twelve hours into my birthday.

Twelve hours into the day that I die.

Mist fills my lungs. I think I have the best friend I could ever have, the one who understands. We scale up the bank, past control towers under the glimmering street lights into the Washington Arboretum park; two lucid ghosts hopping from bushes to ponds to Azalea way, scaring into oblivion rare hobby-botanists and accidental hikers. Pretend we're part of the herbarium.

"It's party time. I give you the feast of the year. Happy Birthday, Ailen," Canosa says, and I jeer.

## 13. Chop Suey Club.

Fear is my drug. I'm high. High on adrenalin wrapped in anxiety, encapsulated by insane giddiness that's supposed to dissolve ten seconds after I swallow. I swallow a lot. When Canosa snuffs out and strips a hiker, saying, 'gotta look decent for the party, right'; when she kills another and makes me change into her garments; when she scares off witnesses by screaming 'BOO!' at them and laughing. That's siren mirth for you. Morbid. My saliva is acid syrup. My blood is concentrated sea water pumped through the veins by a mechanical heart. My power is my voice, but I think I've lost it. Forgot how to scream. Tagging along for dinner. Humans served live, ikizukuri style, sashimi draped over a garnish of spirit. Shredded. Siren food, pick your wasabi. And I accept it, I'm hungry.

We stand across the street, in the parking lot, shadowed by an oak, watching people snake into the nightclub by the name of Chop Suey. A squat brick building the color of dirty pond with a knack for looking alarmed through its huge black eye-windows. Ground ripples under our feet with loud music and buoyant souls. It's not dark yet for our faces to diffuse brilliance, the fancy

non-electric glow-in-the-dark kind typically reserved for saints. Fake siren halo.

Terror floods me.

"Looks like we're just in time for the show," Canosa whispers. "Juicy." She smacks her lips, straightens in the borrowed frock, a snow Patagonia torrents shell trench coat she took off her victim, together with a cotton top, match-stick jeans, and rain boots. Checkered, Seattle style fancy. I remember the girl's dying face and I shudder.

"Hunter was supposed to take me tonight - Siren Suicides concert - for my birthday." Cross-armed, I hug myself, dip my chin deep into the creases of a brand-new rain jacket still smelling of synthetic coating, brilliant blue. Canosa made sure I got one sporting my favorite color, one unlucky soul's choice, now bare-skinned under Japanese maples. It's supposed to cheer me up, but it chills me silly.

She presses into the small of my back, nudges me forward. I stumble, feet stuck in the wrong size Converse sneakers, resinous and squeaky. September dusk throws a tint of periwinkle over passing cars, oblivious to the impending massacre. A cop shrills past, perhaps on the way to the Arboretum park to retrieve the bodies. My knees lock then buckle.

"I can't do this."

"He's waiting for you. He's here, I can feel him." She says.

"I'm not going." I dog-shake my head, my breathing shallow and tepid.

"Oh, but you have to. You have to! Why, I insist, Ailen Bright, I promise you, you'll enjoy it. Trust me." The glint in her eyes is part street lights, part curiosity as to how long I will last, when will I break down, can I feed at will and not due to extreme hunger or anger, cornered and pressed like I was at the Pike Place Market restroom.

"I don't want Hunter to see. Can't we go somewhere else?" I whisper.

"Why? A night club is a perfect siren feeding ground. Loud music. People are mostly drunk or high, so someone sliding to the ground is no big deal, especially if it happens in the restrooms. But even on the dance floor - general chaos plays to our advantage. This is siren fun. You see what I mean, Ailen Bright?" She giggles.

I understand what she does. She's having a ball, I'm her new entertainment.

"But those girls in the park—"

"What about them?"

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

"Of course I did. And I want you to get it. You're a siren, so better learn to enjoy it. Understand?"

My stomach rumbles, empty, and I nod.

"Yeah."

"All right, then. Don't back off now, come on, let's go!"

She tugs me at the sleeve.

"What if I won't be able to?" I retort one last time.

"Then I'll watch you squirm for years and years, tethering on the brink of dying but not letting you die for good. I'll make sure to talk to my girlfriend to arrange that. Would you like to know how that feels? Would you like me to take your dear Hunter with me? Do you think he'll look good in a coffin with an open lid, or should I have fishies eat off his face first?"

She pokes me with her finger, to top off a hideous laugh.

"No, not Hunter. Please."

"Want to know what he did? He got drunk and then he got high. All because of you."

"No he didn't."

"Oh, yes, he did. Perhaps he even picked up a new girl. Want to go see?"

"He didn't, he couldn't--" I wring my hands.

"Well, he'd hate a perfectly good ticket to go to waste, wouldn't he? You know him better than I do. So, go on then. Run along and play your part." She says. "Or would you rather me

send him to the bottom of the lake? That will make the girls happy, a delectable surprise at the end of punishment."

I become aware of the stares from a couple security guys across the street, sucking on their smokes by the club's entrance, a disjointed duo of cheap guitars. Pesante. They saunter inside and shut the door.

I tremble from indecision. Canosa looks at me strange, cocking her head to the side. "So attached to him, are you. Want to know something about siren hunters?"

"What?"

"Their job is to hunt sirens. Hunt. Sirens. You know what that means? Killing them. Killing them even before they turn. Sniffing them out while they're still human." She pauses. "I didn't want to tell you. Your mother didn't jump. They had an argument on the bridge. Your beloved Daddy pushed her. I saw it."

I forget how to breathe. Reality turns inside out and I die some more. I'm double-dead, yet somehow still existing.

"No, no, no, no." Each 'no' drips with regret. I study Canosa for a hint of lie, something. But she just looks at me, sad. And I learn like millions learned before me, what happens when they cross that line, when they take that step, when they still breathe, but know it won't last much longer. A trip with no ticket back. A sinking awareness that you know you won't be

able to share. A time you want to shed your skin, to withdraw, but you know you can't. This is the moment of no return. Like a fraction of a second before hitting water, mid-air, under the Aurora bridge. Doomed.

"Well? Which one will it be?"

I don't answer.

I grab Canosa's hand, pull her across the street to honks and curses, stop by club's entrance, raise my leg and kick the glass door off its hinges.

BAM! Craaaaack... tinkle-tinkle..

It lands into a dusty cloud roused from the floor, wood frame covered in shattered crystal. A waft of blasting music mixed with sweaty bodies stench and thick soul-soup hits me in the face.

"QUIET!" I silence shrieks from the guards. Mist rolls from my lips, dropping the temperature down and obscuring the entrance.

"Who would have thought, such passion. Ailen Bright, a girl full of surprises. I'm impressed. Shall we continue?" I barely hear Canosa over the thump-thump-bang of the band's performance. She measures me in a new light through her snowflake eyelashes, steps into the stench of dilated pupils, arrested screams, standing hair and other typical symptoms of the fight-or-flight response. On pause. She wrinkles her nose.

"Life is disgusting, wouldn't you agree?" We lock eyes like we're allies, game players on the same team.

"Yes, it is. Let's do some squander," I say.

And for the first time in my life, instead of directing my anger inward, I let it out. It tries to poke holes in my gut, I send it rallying the clubs drawn curtains. Uptempo. It worms under my skin, I squeeze it out towards pulsing music, liquid trance in the air, dark, loud. Mimicking underwater. I chase it towards ultimate possession, because killing others will help me ease my pain. Watching their faces drain of emotions, waiting for bliss, for that one minute of happiness attained through my singing. Divine in its splendor.

Hunger drives me mad. From malnutrition to starvation in a single step, from fasting to famine, I dash inside the corridor.

Two security guys, both dressed in black, stand stupefied by the fallen door, their faces green from the disco lights, silenced by a hush of a toddler before sucking in the air to utter a wail. Grand pause.

I'm upon them. Anger opens my throat and I sing, in sync with the band, matching their lyrics.

"You never do anything right

"You keep falling out of good dreams in a bad night

"I'm crumbling away

"This is the last time you'll ever see my face..."

Fog consumes us. Separated by the narrow entrance strip, the dancing crowd is oblivious, thinking perhaps that this is a club trick, a dense rolling vapor from a fog machine devised for their entertainment.

I lock eyes with the biggest guard, closest to me, dark-skinned and heavy. My voice penetrates each droplet of water. Shiny, thrilling, thick with high-pitched and throaty notes.

"You can wash away my sand

"But please remember my name..."

I mix it into a rhythm, a choppy staccato. One, two. One, two. It commands movement.

"Cause there's so much more

"There is so much more

"There is so much more that I could ever say..."

He falls to his knees and creeps towards me, his boots tangled in oversize jeans, long locks brushing the floor, eyes grazing my face, flattened nose meeting lips open in a wide 'o'. His whimpering soul hangs between us like a pendulum of delicate energy. I know he's done for and I don't feel sorry. He's food.

"Bon appetite. I'm off to my symposium." Canosa says in my ear and slinks into the shadows.

I swig the last of him and lick my lips. His soul reeks of cheap fried fish, burned and soggy. I burp. One done, one more to go.

I thicken the fog.

The other guard's mouth falls open under an upturned boyish nose. His soul a mismatched trombone solo pierced by an occasional whistle against guitar background. He folds to his knees, edges away from the first guard's body, like from poisonous puddle. What a prick. He deserves to die.

The song weaves out of my mouth, strong and beautiful. I pour out my pain.

"Softer now I'm talking but nothing comes out..."

"Man, you've got beautiful eyes", he mumbles. And I know it's a lie, it all is. He's mesmerized by my voice, to him I'm the ultimate dream.

"Gotta save your breath, kid, those words won't help you now..."

His soul escapes through his lips into mine, warm, not very tasty, rather bland, but it fills me in. It will do. He sprawls down on the floor, gone. I finish the song together with Siren Suicides blaring from the stage.

"And you think you do, but you have no fucking clue

"What I would give to trade these shoes for something new

"What I would give to ever fucking die like you

"Cause there's so much more

"There is so much more

"There is so much more than I could never say

"To your face."

I think I'm satisfied. Wrong. My appetite has barely awoken. I want desert now. That whipped heavenly sweetness on a warm crust, topped with the sound of birds and slippers on the parquet floor and the clanking of the dishes in preparation of the family dinner on a warm summer night.

The crowd erupts with applause, and when the lead singer draws a breath to shout the next song into the microphone, I use the break to listen.

There he is.

A single clear note blocks out the rest of the racket.

Ravenous and exalted, I kick the bodies apart in my stroll.

"Fucking appetizers, get out of my way. I want the cream of the crop."

I step out of the fog and dive into the middle of the wet mass of bodies, music, and smell boiling under the kitsch Chinese lanterns hung from the black ceiling. The perfect siren feeding ground, people so high, they can't tell if they're killed.

About a hundred souls converge one over another in the dim red light from the stage interspersed with shafts of green, for accent. Glimmering bodies remind me of a can of sardines, packed so tightly that you have to fish them out with a fork, one by one, carefully, so as not to break off heads or fracture spines.

Forget the fork. I want to sink my teeth and eat them all in one guzzle. Devour the oil and the brine, lick the tin clean, and throw it into a trashcan to hear the satisfying clink of empty metal.

I'm in the ticket of blaring music. Black light flickers on and off grabbing stills of dancing people in grotesque forms, white teeth and t-shirts sprinkled through the crowd. People turn to size me up, wave, continue dancing.

I ignore them, listening intently for one note only. Solfeggio. It sinks in the noise then resurfaces again. I close my eyes to hear it better. Among rhythmic holes, high-pitched scratches and out of tune woodwinds, it's close to perfection.

Hunter's soul.

I open my eyes and wedge ahead through the tangle of bodies. Faces jump to the beat, sweaty limbs surround me like scores of jellyfish in shallow water. Two girls give me thumbs up as the black light hits my face. I press forward, to that beautiful pulsing sound. There he is.

Hunter. His face young and happy. Hair curled in sweat, nose-bridge covered with freckles, eyes closed. Simple t-shirt over wired muscles, legs stuck in the usual jeans, every rump-shake dreadfully wrong. He's a horrible dancer. A drink in his hand, a girl on his arm with a glass of something frothy. She

lifts her head and waves at me, I push her aside. She spills her drink.

"Bitch!"

"Shut the fuck up and get out of my way!" I yell, and she obediently stumbles into the crowd, her face back at me, gaping, shocked into a doll that can't close her plastic mouth.

"I see Daddy let you out. Not wasting any time, are you. Nice girlfriend. That was fast." I yell over the chaos at Hunter.

"Huh?" Drunk, he opens his eyes for a moment, blinks at me, and without a hint of recognition, resumes his dance, eyes swiveling up and shutting close again. I want to slap his face, make him see me, a drowned walking corpse, bleached and flat and slimy. I tremble with disgust. Disgust with him, disgust with myself. So be it. Hunter first, me second. We'll both die.

"I'm going for the kill." I whisper, pass tongue over my lips, inhale and breathe out.

Dense mist descends onto the crowd like a giant tongue, licking people into oblivion. I breathe out some more, it thickened, drowns out everybody except Hunter who still dances in front of me.

The thumping rhythm dies to an echo.

I tried this twice before, better not fail now. They say three times is a charm. I snap my fingers in front of his face

to look at me. His eyes flutter open, unseeing. Our gazes lock. This is my ignition point.

A single low note trembles, weaves around his head and into his ears. I catch myself inhaling his scent, pine with musk undertones underneath the vapor of hard liquor, like some exquisite weed exported from overseas. Musty. He smiles and sighs, still dancing on autopilot. I add a couple more notes and join the song coming from the stage.

"No more stupid words

"I'm still on your side

"This was supposed to hurt

"Then why do I feel fine..."

My song streams effortlessly and strikes upon him with hypnotic force. He moans. I inch closer, infuse lethal mezzo-soprano, aim at awakening his soul. There comes the first coil of smoke, I lurch at it, greedy.

"Don't leave me where I always am

"Watching and waiting for the end

"I'll keep you safe and warm

"Just please come down to my arms..."

He hums to the tune, two breaths away, his eyes dark and drowsy, pupils dilated.

"Ailen?" He says, suddenly recognizing me. "Your dad said you'd come for me. Cause I taste good. I'm food for you, now, am

I? Perfect. Go ahead, finish me. I'm pathetic, see? Normal people fall in love with normal girls, not me. No-no-no. I picked a monster." His blue eyes turn greenish in the disco light, menacing. There is no promise of warmth in them anymore. I coax more of his soul out, inhaling to start another verse, when the girl I sent away shows up with another drink.

I get a better look at her, the perfect blonde with a silky cascade of hair, flawless make-up, and a skin-tight dress over two things I never had - size 34C bra and size medium thong balanced precariously on both ends of a tiny waist. A living dumbbell.

"Is that bitch bothering you, baby?" She says.

On the word baby I hiccup.

"Yeah, can't get rid of her." He belches.

"Fuck off, will ya? Come here, baby." She says and pulls Hunter into a greedy kiss which he not only accepts but answers with his typical theatrics, glancing sideways to make sure I see.

I retch. My song breaks as abruptly as if someone crushed my chest and forced air out of my lungs.

I bit the fishing lure again. It's not live, it's plastic. Gut-hooked, too late to wriggle free. I can only hope for release by a single flick of the fliers. "You didn't - How could you - I can't believe you're so wasted!"

"Go away." He mumbles through busy lips, swats at me like at a fly.

I feel my head lose touch with the body, stupefied. The answer dies on my lips. The fog disassembles. Music and chatter seep through. People look in our direction, hazy, still dancing.

He breaks away. "Whasss wrong? Want me to repeat?" He slurs loudly. "Leave it. Leave me alone. Will you go already?" The girl plants herself over his mouth again.

Disbelief doesn't let me move.

I flush with jealousy, then shame, then hate, then anger, all mixed up. My stomach dives a thousand feet, rises up as bitter bile stuffed with cotton. The lead singer shouts a new song into the microphone, still not on the news of dead guards by the door. (DESCRIBE THE LEAD SINGER - AILEN IS A FAN!!!)

"Are you having a good time?"

People shout back, jeer.

"This next song I dedicate with love to my parents. Thanks mum and dad."

At the word parents I cringe and notice Hunter's hand travel down the girl's waist, and push him away from her before I can stop myself.

"What, you're jealous for once?" Hunter tires to look funny, but there is a mean face behind it, hurt and small and even angry. He raises his voice over the uproar. "You came back

for this poor schmuck, is that it?" He pouts his lips and slaps his chest. "But it's different now. You like me as food. I taste good, right? Well, sack me. Go ahead!" His voice a shriek now, this is not Hunter I know. This is someone else, someone revolting and bitter and angry.

Bewildered, I turn and dive through watching people. Is this real? It feels like a dream stuffed under water, arms and legs moving through feet of resistance, slow, at lower stride cadence. Atrophied.

"Ailen, wait!" I hear him stumble.

The pressure on my eardrums drives me to barotrauma, migraine, split skull syndrome gone bananas. I don't want to hear his shouts, I want out of this constant noise and into a complete silence, at least once in my siren life. Through the crowd I go, past the stage, by the bar, towards the restrooms, to the left into a narrow corridor behind a steel door, elbowing running club guards aside who must have caught on to the fact of two dead bodies by now, out the back door and 'THUMP!' smack into the chest of a man who's about to enter.

"Daddy?" I gasp for fresh air as if coming up from underwater, rescued.

"Will you look who is here. I missed you, sweetie." Steam escapes his lips as he speaks, languid over a trail of expensive

perfume, his signature #10 Aqua Pour Homme Marine Cologne for men by Bulgari.

He's dressed meticulously, in a casual yet sophisticated attire compete with shiny Italian oxfords, a dark wool jacket and a scarf as if carelessly tucked in, woven from the finest cashmere. Burberry's. His legs stout and springy, second position, a la seconde in ballet speak. Ready for a pirouette. Our eyes meet, and I feel a tug in my gut, a sudden horror. I know this time he wouldn't simply let me go. He is my menacing nightmare, forever stalking. And I, like in a proper nightmare, am always running. That seems to be our game.

"It's you. You killed her." I whisper.

He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Look what you make me do, Ailen. You made me waste a whole day. Not good, not good at all. I have no choice, sweetie."

He reaches behind his back and pulls out his whip. The last I see of him this time is his right arm stretched out into an arc above me.

I dive between his legs and run.

## 14. Lake Washington.

I run for life, whatever a siren's life is worth. A focused sonic boom hits the air behind me, travelling at 1.4 times the speed of sound. Craaack! That's death on my heels, her whisper in my mind. Pain pricks my ears with a thousand needles, shatters my cochleae. This is no game, no joke; this is real. Darkness shimmers with shock waves, ready to explode. I know that if I stop to even catch my breath, I'm toast. More distant cracks. My legs quavers connected by the beam of terror, my running rhythm grouping of notes. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. Oppose gravity, battle chase myopathy, absorb knee-shock at landing, repeat. Half a breath per step, oxygen, deliver me. Two hundred steps per minute, water, rescue me. Prestissimo.

I hop over fences, dash through backyards, race past astounded rain jackets playing balance scales, leashed dog on one end, a cup of coffee on the other. Rain is my friend this time, puddles my arrows. Forward. Across evening roads, through sleepy suburban alleys, all the way to Lake Washington guided only by its vibration felt on my skin, its sulfurous smell. I can hardly hear, ears still ringing with an angry echo.

Up the hill, down the slope, past flickering lampposts,  
through a tangle of Madrona trees, onto the wooden pier jutting  
into the lake. Made it.

Dark water greets me.

This is no bathtub. It's my Olympic-size swimming pool,  
thirty four square miles big, excavated by a glacier. Two  
garlands of passing lights on each side, floating highway  
bridges my lane ropes. The siren of Canosa my bronze medal, if I  
can earn it.

I tighten into a string, arms pressed to the sides, two  
legs as one. A memory of Daddy's my starting signal. I dive head  
first, inhale the water, shiver, glad to get soaked. Swallow.  
The lake hushes me. Muddy, stagnant, quiet.

"Thank you." I say. "Really, thank you."

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

Rare fish rush aside to avoid collision as I burrow through  
the lake's underbelly leaving a trail of woken sand behind.  
Crunchy. Slosh-slosh in my pinna. Noise gone. Darkness cold,  
complete. Icy. I swim and dream of a place with no sound, a  
place where the very absence of noise will make my ears  
malfunction. No good. I'd still hear myself, my own breathing,  
my dead heart beating, my eyelashes brushing against each other.  
Maybe I could find a desolate cave at the base of the ocean, an

anechoic chamber. Starve myself, hibernate. No, my soulless chest will ring with void. Only one place can give me complete silence.

Death.

I blew my chance. Coward. Hypocrite. Always running. Pretending I'm dead, but not quite. Playing the game of this stupid one minute fantasy better than nothing bullshit.

I touch the bottom of the lake, hover. Lean against the terrace of self-loathing, self-hatred, agony directed inward.

An icepick of a thought strikes me. This is what Daddy wanted, complete silence. For the first time, I think maybe I understand him. I wonder what it's like to be a siren hunter. Was Mommy's singing driving him mad, was he acutely aware of every single sound, amplified by his brain, is that it? Is that why he pushed her? And what about Hunter? What's in it for him? We could still be together if not for this whole siren hunting business. Well, if I didn't jump. If I didn't turn. Hindsight twenty-twenty. He hates me now, he called me a monster. And that girl, so Marilyn-Monroe-perfect, warm, alive. I'll never be that, forget it. Can't even manage to be a proper siren.

I'm just a killer. Ugly, like Daddy. How am I any better?

I float, wondering. A few crabs zigzag between the rocks, their tiny souls a clickety-clack of claws. How many would it take to match one human soul, thousands? Revolting, but

possible. Horror floods me. I *am* a predator, food is the only thing I can think about. Disgusting.

Here is my tally. The monger from the market restroom and two guards from Chop Suey club. Their souls raised my body temperature back to ninety eight degrees, but it's borrowed warmth, because I don't have any of my own. It seeps out already, leaving my body gutted, empty.

Three victims in eighteen hours.

I don't want to kill anymore.

This pain is too much. I follow a stream up to the surface, hit open water. The vastness of it makes me feel free, fitting in its loneliness, its soft rain patter. I push past coldness so deep, it touches my bones, and I ache to hear it one more time.

This is what I'm running from. Hunter's soul. The only lullaby to which I can sleep, the only rhythm that makes me pulse and forget and dissolve. I try to chase it away, but it just won't go. Like a stubborn bug it whizzes inside my head, bumping around the skull, making circles in my consciousness, forever restless. The flawless summer, violin concerto No. 2 in G minor, Opus 8, by Antonio Vivaldi. Set against the texture of all things warm, chirping birds, slippers on the parquet floor, the clanking of the dinner dishes.

Hunter.

I left him. Canosa probably snuffed him out like sweet melodic pudding. All because I didn't have enough strength to do it myself. My needy selfish me got so scared; my poor little me wanted so badly to run away; my sorry egotistic me was so afraid to face Daddy. It's my fault, Hunter is probably dead and I'm stuck to live on.

Suddenly I want to scream. The wind is my current of need, I'm inside it, wanting out, heading towards the sky.

"Breathe, Ailen, breathe."

I inhale the night. A few stars twinkle into the velvet of the dome over the lake, the city sleeps. I'm alone.

What is this pain and why can't I push it away?

"Ailen Bright. The girl who pretends too much."

I startle, spin.

"Canosa?"

"You took your turn. Lost it. Now I roll the dice."

"What did you do to him?"

"Hmm?"

"Hunter! What did you do to him?"

"Oh, your boyfriend. Well--"

"It wasn't his time!" Silence. "Where are you? I can't see you." I peer into darkness, but there is nothing there. I know she is watching. "Canosa, please. You didn't eat his soul, did you? Tell me, did you?" I join the rain and begin to cry.

"You failed to kill Daddy. You left me no choice."

Guilt surges through me like a focused jet of scalding hot water, sears my intestines, sets my face on fire.

"Please! Don't make your move. I'll make up the courage and go back and finish the job. I promise!" I don't know why I say it, it's no use.

"Too late. You've had your chance, you blew it. My turn now."

"But I want to see Mommy! You said you'd show me!" The sky weeps because it knows my weeping is not enough. I wish I could drown in its tears, lose myself and disappear. If I could only listen to Hunter's soul one more time.

"I'm not done with my turn yet, it's not fair!"

I kick up a foam.

"Back off, I'm not done with my turn! Do you hear me? Back off. Come on, give me a break, I got scared!"

I wait for the answer, there is none. Canosa is gone. I strain to discern her voice, anything, to follow. A brook of a whisper and I trail behind it. There. I kick into a dolphin stride, under the floating bridge, into the north apex of the lake. Another minute, and I'll catch her. Not yet, but she's ahead of me, I'm sure. Another hour, another lifetime. I swim until I hit the shore and come out amidst the logs, floating giant's fingers, unbending, turgid. Nothing. Dark woods grin at

me, bushes bristle, pre-dawn fog parades to my soaked sneakers, all fancy and stratus.

"Laugh all you want, you stupid trees. So what I got lost, I will find her!"

A surf of cold water hits my head as I dive. Idiot, I should have swam south, to Seward park, that's where she is. Decided. I speed in that direction, imagine Olympic referee yell at me, *Wrong! You can't cut across the lines, you have to go along them. Your chances of winning are null. Disqualified. Out of the water, out, OUT!*

"Eat my WHAT?!?" I yell. "What did I just say? I'm going crazy. Jesus. Focus, Ailen, Focus. Where do you need to go..."

Waterline breaks my world in two, above and below. Which will it be? The solid, living air that rips through moods like a chopping knife, the perpetual up-and-down of extreme emotions? Or the slippery, numbing liquid that calms feelings and its fluctuations in endless amnesia? Retrograde or anterograde, take your pick. Indecision sobs within me, her toes strike a precarious balance act on the surface, the plastic wrap of existence, the cling film that's my game board. It forgot what it's preserving, life or death or maybe nothing. Doesn't matter.

Fucking doesn't matter.

Then what does? WHAT? I wait for some answer, buoyant, anxious, prone to fleeing. Rest in my a capella.

Rain stops. Sky turns pink. Lake's turquoise water stands still like paint in a giant stone bucket. Fog clings to distant mountains, patches of snow rest untouched. First sunrays burn my skin and I scowl. My instinct is to run.

"Stop it!" I yell at myself. "Stop running away all the time, you chicken! At least once in your stupid little life, stop... fucking... running!"

It's the only thing I know how to do well.

"I need... to stop... running away... from myself." It's a whisper, because there is not enough air. Breathing hurts. Oxygen deserts me. It's not a panic attack, no, I'm just disoriented. I don't suffer from a mental disorder, no, I'm extra sensitive. I don't need help, thank you, I'm fine on my own. Debilitated suicidal teenager, moronic siren, femme fatale gone crazy. What else am I good for? I know the answer.

"Women were not made to haul water, Daddy." Stage one. My basic cry serves each word on a short high-pitched respiratory whistle. "You got it all wrong. We're not evil!" Stage two. My angry cry forces excess air through vocal cords, coughing up each word with phlegm. "It's love that you see in our gaze. The way we look at you, the way we talk, the way we walk. Of course every man wants a piece of that!" Stage three. My pain cry has no preliminary moaning. My pain cry is very loud, with brief periods of breath holding that allows words to follow a steep-

rising pitch contour. "Yes, men want to hear our song, a song to die for, because love is the only thing worth dying for, Daddy! Have you ever loved in your life? Have you? TELL ME, HAVE YOU?"

There is no stage four, I simply scream. My voice echoes off the sky arch, magnified tenfold.

And I'm done running.

Calm settles inside me, pushing the rest of emotions askance. The retreating game is over. I think of a plan to clean up my mess. Simple. Change the egotistical a cappella into a symphony. An elimination spree in four movements. Number one, Daddy, an opening sonata, allegro. Number two, Canosa, a slow movement, adagio. Number three, Hunter, a minuet with trio, scherzo. Number four, me, rondo, a deathly sonata.

"Sorry, Canosa, that's three turns in a row."

An idea wiggles into my thoughts.

"You need me, don't you. You'd finish me off a long time ago if you didn't. Well then, I'm game. I'm on my way. You're not the player, after all. Death is the player. Girlfriend my ass, you're just her pawn."

My thinking is, she'd be hiding Hunter some place loud.

"You think I'll fall for your trap? Not that stupid. You think I'll go to Seward park. Nope, I know where you're hiding."

I dive and speed towards the city, make it to the ship canal, turn right. First commuter souls make a racket on their

way to work, in cars, on bikes, on foot. The hustle intensifies as I close in on the main city artery - Aurora bridge, the bridge that I loved so much to gaze down from, thinking about Mommy. About what she felt, why she jumped.

Now I gaze up, drifting unconsciously towards the Fremont side, trying to decide if I should continue around the hilly peninsula of Magnolia to reach the market by water or to check Hunter's house first when I hear something. A song. And hysterical barking. A siren is feeding on someone under the bridge.

I follow the sound. Straight ahead, directly over the Burke-Gilman trail, hangs a single pocket of mist, its right side rests on the bank, its left side dips into the water. A couple bikers point at it, pedaling, passing, mesmerized by the echo seeping out of the cloud mixed with dog's yelps. A man with a cane walks by, never lifts his head, continuing on his trek, wherever it is he is going at six in the morning on a Tuesday. You'd have to be dead and bleeding profusely for anyone to notice, which only happens in this neck of the woods when a suicide jumper lands on the ground instead of in the water.

Human ignorance is a convenient cover-up for sirens. Still. Whoever is doing it, is either bold or stupid, and I decide I want to see. Could it be Canosa?

I plunge and dare to surface right inside the farther lip of the fog, on its very edge, careful not to make the siren notice me.

Her petite body shivers in tune to the song, up to her waist in the water; her arms two colorless insect-sticks, her hair cascades down in long waves, floating on the surface.

Pisinoe.

"... Wealth,

"and the flourishing of sweet melodic music.

"On the yellow flames of the decorated altars

"bovine and thick-haired lambs' members

"are burned for gods..."

I stand, wince at the barking, barely making out shapes in the shifting fog. A white poodle thrashes on a taut leash, puffs steam into the cloud. The owner, an elderly lady, slumps on the rocks, her comfortable walking shoes dipped in the lake, her eyes transfixed, her hair a crown of dandelion fuzz about to blown away into oblivion.

I stifle a cry, *Missis Elliott!*

No matter the weather, my neighbor always went on her early morning walks with Daisy the poodle, huffing and puffing up the steps back to Raye street, claiming it was her solution to long life any time she saw me, shaking her finger and demanding I do

the same. This walk is killing her now, as if life itself said to her, *You thought you could predict me? Eat this!*

I'm on the fence, do I want to save her? Last time I checked, I hated her guts. Last time she saw Daddy slap me on the porch, she conveniently averted her eyes. Last time she said anything nice to me was, never. Always scolding, always bitter and disappointed. Old bitch. Her soul strings across the mist, leaves her body, and oozes into Pisinoe's mouth with an audible pop. In that moment, she looks straight at me, with pleading in her eyes, and I should've known better. I'm probably the last person she sees who could help her. How am I different from Daddy? What did I just do with my little pitiful hate? I instinctively raise my arm to reach out. Too late. Her life is gone, she folds down into a heap of pastel cotton.

I unfreeze. "Pisinoe!" I tower over her.

"Huh? Ailen!" Pisinoe smiles broadly as she sways to the shore and seizes the dog in one mad dash. The dog is hysterical, so is Pisinoe.

"Shhh, quiet now. Pisinoe got you. You're one strange lamb. Daisy. Is it ok if I call you like your lady shepherd, Daisy?"

She kisses the dog.

"Pisinoe! Jesus, your name is long. You can't feed in plain sight, are you out of your mind?"

"I got Daisy, look. My first sacrificial lamb. So exciting!" She stretches her arms out. The poodle twists madly, its eyes roll in terror. It stopped yelping and only whimpers now.

"It's not a lamb, it's a dog. What about others, where is Canosa?"

"Canosa let us go, the punishment is over! But Ligeia wouldn't hunt with me, she is with Teles. I hate her. Stupid cow." Her face clears as she shifts attention. "But isn't he cute? He's so soft and warm." She buries her face in the poodle's mane when I hear the boat. There is no mistaking of the engine purring.

"Daddy." I grab Pisinoe by the elbow. "We need to get you out of here, now. Please, put the dog back on the ground. Let's go."

Without Pisinoe's singing, the fog disintegrates. A biker stops, uncertain.

"But I just got it!" Pisinoe wiggles out of my grip, her voice a stockade of bells. Daisy barks. Fog lifts completely to the pleasure of two more onlookers.

The boat comes closer. I tell myself, *I'm done running, remember? I have to face him.* Daddy's voice interjects, *Women were made to haul water, Ailen.* It comes in like this morning,

muffled by two feet of water, *Ailen*, open the door! Fear jumps my throat, but this time I choose to ignore it.

"I will, Daddy, I promise." I whisper.

"Pisinoe, please, leave the dog, and let's go."

"But! It's my Daisy! You can't just take him away from me. I just got him. Always wanted a pet. You have your boyfriend, and I have nothing. Don't tell Canosa, she wouldn't let me. Have you ever wanted something really really bad?" She pleads. She reminds me of me, the night before Mommy left, when I begged her to sing me one more song, knowing that it will anger Daddy, and still demanding until I made her do it. It was my fault he pushed her. My fault.

"I did -- still do." I say.

"What is it? A pet? What kind?"

"I want my Mommy back."

"Oh." Her mouth forms a perfect 'O' of surprise.

The boat turns into the canal. Several people run towards us to investigate. Another few yards, and they'll be upon us. I use Pisinoe's distraction and yank the poodle out of her hands, but as I lift my arms to toss it back on solid ground, she shrieks, jumps out of the water, and lands on top of both of us. We sink under into the lake. Her hands close in on the dog's neck, I hear it suffocating, manage to stand back up, surface, dog-shake my head.

"You're killing it, let go!" I scream. A man shouts something, his hand on Missis Elliott's body, he points at us, flips open his phone. Two more people run up, one takes off shoes, ready to enter the lake. The boat is visible now, complete with its engine-whirr and ethanol stink.

We struggle above the water, then below it. I'm stronger, but Pisinoe holds on to the dog for dear life. The dog gulps for air, water slushes down its throat. Great. Now I have to get it back out and revive it too.

The boat is near. I hear the motor revolutions. Faster. Too late to do anything.

"Thank God you're small." Dog firmly in Pisinoe's arms, Pisinoe firmly in mine, I kick off and dive, away from the boat, across the canal, deeper into the lake. Daisy's soul escape its little body. Pisinoe bites me. I'm so surprised, I let her go.

"Daisy! My Daisy!" Pisinoe shakes the dog. Its mane swirls underwater in slow motion, its eyes open, its tongue out, lifeless, bobbing to the rhythm of the shaking.

"He's dead, it's no use." I try to stop her.

"It's all your fault!" Pisinoe kicks me in the ribs. "You killed it, you did, you did!"

I press my hand over her mouth, but she keeps trying to scream, so some mumbling escapes through my fingers. Slippery

little thing, she twists out of my grip just as the boat stops a few feet over our heads.

The dog forgotten, there is a momentary pause. We both look up, then at each other, in a split second of understanding.

BOOM.

## 15. Daddy's Boat.

This is blast fishing, siren grade, perfectly legal and admirable. Me and Pisinoe, we're fish that's supposed to float belly up, to be collected as easy catch; our swim bladders ruptured, eyes popped, gills swollen. Who cares about our habitat getting damaged or destroyed, it's the sport that matters. Hey siren, dare to sing prettily to me? Whack you on the head, shut your mouth and die. Want to suck out my soul? Come closer, girly, closer, I'll rupture your vocal cords with a homemade bomb, a glass bottle filled with layers of powdered woman-hate and rage. Innocent bystanders, step aside. Clear out an eighty foot radius. On one, two, three..

BOOM!

My ears explode with brilliant pain. It shatters me from head to toe and I go limp. I flex my fingers, one by one. Good, they move.

"Pisinoe!"

Dog floats out of her hands. She got it worse. Her eyes two question marks, her mouth a silent 'why' as she drifts upward, eyelids aflutter. There is that look again, that last cry for help. Her face is my mirror, my looking-glass, magnified and

distorted. Pisinoe, the girly flirty me that never happened. The long-haired figured me that didn't dare to exist. The little woman I'll never become, stuck forever at sixteen. Obliterated. Eradicated. Like an endangered species at high risk of becoming extinct. A femme-disease that threatens to spoil a man's very spirit. Deadly.

If that's my job, I won't fail this time. *I will not give you the satisfaction, Daddy.* My hands on Pisinoe's ankles, yanking her down. My scream arrested by sordid concentration, straining in effort. She is not blinking, mouth open. We're face to face, and I'm no better than a child, shaking her like she shook Daisy not too long ago, knowing that it won't make her any more alive.

"Don't you dare dying on me." I croak.

BOOM!

The explosion moves through murky water in one focused jet at the speed of a mile per second. It hits her head, ripples along her body and exits at her feet, leaving me holding a piece of Jell-O, in berry blue. It jiggles once then simply bursts into a thousand bubbles. Bubbles pop. Pisinoe's gone.

Gone, like Mommy.

I'm one minute too late, again, grasping at empty water.

"No!"

My scream penetrates every bone in my body, shakes the water around me, and the lake answers. It swirls and rushes into a mad undercurrent, a fugue without any structure. I forget who I am, become one with the movement. High on the rush, crazed with grief, exalted.

Time comes to a standstill.

"It's the sixteenth hour, Daddy, didn't see it coming? Sorry my mind is gone, but rest assured, the body will take over." I watch bubbles float up.

Nothing matters except oval shape above, the bottom of his boat. A sharp pang singes my throat, eager to exit. Something dark and sinister has woken up inside me, and it's mad. Mad for being disturbed. It seeps into my mind, fills me with hatred. Irrational, consuming, blind.

My vision rolls into a focused tunnel. A perfect joint, I draw on it, inhale with my stomach, hold it, then let out the smoke with grim satisfaction. Knowing it can be deadly.

Another boom brushes past. I merely flinch.

"I SAID, NO!!!"

One powerful stroke is all it takes to leap out of the water.

Lake Union shines at me with its Tuesday morning splendor, downtown my proscenium arch, Gas Works park my audience. Mid-air, I holler a guttural animal moan, radiating mean energy.

"YOU!"

All living souls vanish into holes to hide, reverberating to my accord, terrified. Only Daddy stays in his pilothouse, his leather-gloved hands on the steering wheel, cleanly shaved mouth open, eyes big and vacant. Unbelieving.

His boat's deck is my landing target.

I continue upward, bellowing, oblivious to anything or anyone in my path, living or dead. My mouth opens wide in a poisoning agony, spitting a terrible cry all over the lake's basin, echoing off the boats, buildings and any other flat surfaces it can find. You'd run for life if you heard me. But the boat can't run. It shakes together with the waves. They play with it, a dull plastic toy in an enormous bathtub.

I land on the deck, glass pane between me and Daddy.

"YOU!"

My cry resonates with the entire lake. It shakes every molecule of water, makes wood crack and splinter. First note established, I instinctively dive into Waking World, one of my favorite Siren Suicides song. Very fitting.

"You...

"Will never find...

"What you're looking for,

"What you're looking for."

We stare at each other, Daddy and me.

"YOU!"

Only a thin layer of crystal between us. Now it explodes into a shower of shiny reflections. Now it's gone. Daddy shields his face, cups his ears. He doesn't want to hear me, he never hears me. This time he will.

A predator ready for attack, I lift my head and howl.

"You will NEVER find what you're looking for!"

The sky amplifies my rage like an enormous loud speaker, slams it into the lake with immense power, hits water like a boulder, forces vertical waves to splash the banks and then converge upon themselves. High. Higher.

I'm a landslide, glacier calving, and meteorite impact, all in one; a musical medley. Trio. Reuniting after sixteen years for one-time-concert only. Tickets are sold out, sorry. Daddy paid for the entire hall, grabbed himself a VIP seat, right by the stage. Lucky loaded bastard.

Water sweeps over the deck. The boat groans under my feet, about to split in half. Good. I want to destroy it. I inhale to let out another cry.

"YOU!"

We're about a thousand feet away from the shore. Waves roll and crash onto lakeside roads. Traffic comes to a stand-still. Some people scream, others open car doors and stumble out, either out of curiosity or fear.

"What you're looking for?"

Suddenly, distance doesn't matter. I make eye contact in a flash and suck out people's souls before they have time to utter a scream or a moan. Fugues, minuets, solos, I'm not picky. A network of ribbons hangs in misty contrails as if a few airplanes decided to play doodle too low to the ground.

"What you're looking for?"

I slurp a few more. This is siren binge-eating. Compulsive, uncontrollable. Excessive. I want to fill myself to the brim, to be full, to gorge up on this sweetness. To feel warm again? Yes. Impossible to stop. One more, a biker blown off by the wave, her face turned to me. I only register it's a woman, before shifting my focus to a car that's about to sink. There's a baby on board, her soul hopelessly delicious, pure sugar.

I holler more. Holler as loud as I can. Inhale the odor of destruction dust and panic. My arms spread-eagled over the chaos. Godlike.

Daddy climbs out of the rubble that was his pilothouse not too long ago, trips. The boat is bobbing madly, sinking. His gloved hands and suited knees meet the deck in a hope of being able to hold on.

Loud enough. He heard me.

So did she.

Canosa propels over us in a wide arc, sneering, not in a good way. In a "bronze faucet has come alive" kind of way, and I know she's about to eat my breakfast.

"Ailen Bright! I told you it's my turn!" She yells, as she flings the weight of her body spear-like and scoops Daddy off the deck. My song breaks. I see Daddy flair his arms and legs mid-air, open his mouth and reach for me. Pleadingly. "Sweetie..." Was that a hint of worry on his face? He heard me. He talked to me. He needs me! Suddenly I'm aware of my own breathing and have to think about it.

They plunge into the lake. I follow.

Daddy floats away like a shot pigeon, wings askew, in the gesture of that welcoming hug, backwards. Canosa behind him, spooning him, her arms his belt of doom. They struggle. "No!" I screech, "Get off him, you stupid creature. Get off him, now!"

I kick and catch on, grab her arms, try to wiggle her embrace apart, but she's stronger. The boat sinks fast behind us. Police cars blare through layers of water, amidst the cacophony of human screams, children's wails and car honks, hushed as we sink deeper.

"You're hurting him! You'll kill him like this! Let - Him - Go!" Daddy blinks me directly in the face, his cheeks inflated, holding air. His arms pound everywhere he can reach.

We're face to face, a foot apart. He scoops a handful of my rain jacket and pulls me closer.

I recoil and pull free.

"Hurting him?" Canosa laughs. Her cackle makes me bristle.

"He's suffocating!" I grab Canosa's arms again. She bumps her head into my forehead and I let go.

"Good, that he should. And you should get out of this game. You nearly ruined my trap and caused a huge racket. Ailen Bright, an annoying girl, impulsive, flaky, weak. Oh, you're being so mean to me, so irresponsible and forgetful. I can't stand it."

"Oh, that was a trap? You used Pisinoe as a bait or something? How could you..." I desperately try to think up a plan, something to make Canosa let Daddy go.

"Not bad for a first try, I'm impressed." Her lips move slowly, chewing on each word. "Maybe there is hope for you, after all. Tell me, were you planning to finish your Daddy? Like we agreed, were you? Or was this just another scare to show off what you can do, to get a compliment for your performance?"

Daddy lets out a bubble of air. It's getting darker and colder as we keep sinking. I see him concentrated on working his hands back against the current.

"I don't want you to die! Daddy, hold on!" I bite, Canosa kicks me in the face with her foot and I let go, furious. It's

been almost a minute, Daddy let out the last of his air bubbles. In desperation, I pull at Canosa's hair, to which she sneers and kicks me with both of her legs in the stomach. I float away.

"Ailen Bright, what a pest. You're playing my game, by my rules. And you're breaking them right now."

In her eyes there is a terrible absence of any compassion, a coldness so deep that I think my heart will stop. I dip in and out of her gaze, in a clench of this final fear, knowing that in a few seconds this will be over, crying into the water, feeling my promises vanish, when Daddy swiftly reaches behind Canosa's neck and with a yelp she lets him go.

He glances at me with his typical disapproval, then kicks off to swim up, as if swimming fully clothes in a suit is the latest fashion. I don't know what he did to Canosa, but I reach for her ankles and pull her down, under the rain of her curses, struggles and kicks.

"I won't let go. I won't let go." I whisper.

Canosa thrashes around, screams, bumps me against lake's bottom, picks up a rock and smashes it at my arms, I still hold on. I hold on to her for dear life like Pisinoe was holding on to Daisy, never letting go, hoping Daddy will make it to the surface all right, hoping he will be ok.

"Oh, I'm not done with you yet. Ailen Bright, the girl who thinks only about herself." More kicks. I squeeze my eyes shut

and dial the pain down a notch, then another, make myself numb and, finally, feel nothing. How long I hold on like this, I don't know, but after a while my knuckles threaten to burst through skin and my muscles ache from constant strain, fingers curled in a deadly grip that will take minutes to unravel.

Canosa pulls me along with her, up, up.

We surface to chaos. A helicopter clicks to life with the distinct "chop-chop-chop" of its blades cutting through other noises. Police cars whiz by on their way to the scene. The lake is calm as if it never erupted. I look around, we drifted a good distance away, close to Union bay that opens up into Lake Washington.

I watch my sleeves float in ultramarine silence. Daze sweeps over my eyes after being so long underwater, I spread my limbs and inhale.

"You've had your fun, now will you let me go?" Canosa asks. I barely hear her, searching for Daddy's head, anything. It's nowhere in sight. Only a few boats and commuters cars whizzing by on the floating highway bridge. Of course, we're too far away from where we sank. Still, I fear for the worst. My heart sinks and I let Canosa go.

"I'm sorry." I say to nobody in particular, or maybe to all those people whom I killed, then notice Canosa bobbing next to me, a perfect marble-statue waist-deep in the sea of water

lilies and their lightly lemony aroma. She sweeps her innocent gaze over me, through a tangle of matted hair. The morning sun reflects in her eyes, almost bronze in color.

I have a feeling of déjà vu.

"Apology not accepted. It will take something more than that. Naughty, naughty girl. You promised me to kill the siren hunter, then you didn't, then you blew my chance to kill him. All that, after I granted you your wish, turned you into a siren, was helpful every step of the way. No wonder you have no manners, your mother obviously didn't teach you." She pouts her lips.

And I snap. "You! You started this. It's all your fault!" I pound on her chest with my fists. "Why me? Why didn't you let me die, back in the bathtub, why wouldn't you just leave me alone?"

"Oh, I was bored. We've played every possible game already and girls were running out of ideas. So I went for a swim, that's when you showed up. You spiced up my game. Now you're my new favorite moving piece." She smiles, but there is no warmth in her face at all.

"I'm your moving piece?"

Disgust tugs at my gut. I want to claw out her pretty eyes, smash her pretty teeth into a gaping hole, kick her until she begs me to stop.

"I hate you." I try to scream it into her face, but it comes out in a wobbled croak, because at the last moment my own fury terrifies me.

"Well, I hate you too. What does that change? Nothing. So, it's time to make your next move." She tugs me with her towards the shore.

"But I don't want to! What move? Where are you taking me?"

"To see your favorite friend, of course. Because you have conveniently forgotten, as always."

"Hunter?"

"Do you really have to ask?" Her right arm splashes arcs of drops, her left holds me close to her torso.

"He's alive. Thank God! Where is he?"

"Come along with me, now. I'll show you."

We float away from the noise, and dive. It's not water we swim in, it's pea soup. Debris floats up and around us after being disturbed from the bottom of the lake, mixed with clouds of plankton, clumps of kelp and dead fish. The aftermath of my yelling.

We near the shore. I recognize it. Seward park, the one that conveniently houses the siren lair. So my first instinct was right, I should have headed here straight instead of going into the city.

"He's alive, is he?" I ask. "You didn't kill him then?"

"Oh, I wouldn't deprive you of the pleasure, would I?"

We near the shore and come out of the lake, lucky not to scare any early morning joggers. A sure recipe for a heart attack, one wet female clothed in her own hair, rising stone-faced out of the water, and another one, clad in stolen jeans and a rain jacket, on her heels, looking as deadly. Certainly not your typical northwestern workout swimmers. Rather two washed out candidates for a nut house.

I'm irritated at pebbles. They crunch under my sneakers and interrupt the divine melody of all things summer, the soft warm tune I was seeking with my eating binge, the sound I'll never find in another human. All Seattle babies combined, in one heavenly soul-cake, not enough. Every lover in every single city, doesn't come close. How about the entire planet, people, creatures, plants, heck, even stones with their utter absence of life, would that make me satisfied? Never. I know the answer is never. This knowledge rises in me like a curse, obliterating coherent thought, logic, all reasoning. Makes me stumble.

"Hunter, I'm coming," I breathe, trot after Canosa, into the woods, across the hiking trail and up, towards the amphitheater. Pine needles stick to my white rubber soles with every step in a disarrayed criss-cross pattern. As if they show me, right in my face, how confused are my feelings, overlapping,

without any sense of direction, meager. Yellowing, because the summer is over.

Bushes part like a toothless mouth. There it is, the stage with its gigantic Pi's made out of wooden beams, as if two bird perches, ahead of them rows of benches. The siren meadow. It's drizzling. Grey light hangs in shafts of dust over the stage that smells of rotten wood and decay. I follow the noise, feeling its hatred.

"Siren hunter," rings through the air, deep in the pocket of fog. "Kill the siren hunter. Suck out his soul. Tear at his flesh. Feed him to the crabs." It's the sirens. I step closer to one of the Pi's so I can see in the mist, look up and shudder.

Gleeful, hungry, two writhing bodies hold something down. Two squirming maggots on top of their catch.

"Ligeia, Teles?"

They turn their faces, sneer at me, get back to their chanting, swinging on the top beam, two drunken albino crows, no feathers but plenty of hair. This no longer feels like a game, rather like a massacre. My heart surges, then sinks, as I make out the shape in the middle. That something, his feet tied to the beam, his hands tied behind his back, hanging upside down, is Hunter.

## 16. Siren Meadow.

Wisps of fog make up for his missing blanket, overlapping haze for crinkles in cotton sheets, full of sleepiness and lacking a pillow. A mad daze spread across his face must be a bad dream, nothing more than a nightmare. His lips are blue, haggard and tired. I want to collect the leftover summer from the air and tuck him in it, warm him up, sing him a lullaby, the one that is never-ending. But I can't. If I sing to him, I will destroy him. If I don't sing to him, I'll be the one destroyed. It's a matter of a simple choice, really. A choice I already made, then why all this doubt? Why do I want to slide in between the sheets, cuddle close and lie like this, forever?

I flinch at Canosa's voice.

"I told you not to touch the boy. Off! Get off him, both of you. Go!" She shoos the sirens away. They scowl and hiss, but obey. Their long hair brushes the moss off the beam as they scramble down, deprived of a treat yet obedient, shouting back their displeasure, shaking fists in the air. Canosa hushes them with a cry, they flee through gaps between the trees and are gone.

I gape upward, at several feet of endless distance separating me from Hunter.

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

I lick my lips. "Hunter!" I wait. "Hunter, it's me. Are you ok?" He doesn't respond, but opens his eyes. Traces of dark circles make his irises bluer than I remember. I forget I'm a siren, forget I'm dead. I rush to him, reach up, grasp empty air. He hangs too high. His soul's faint murmur overpowers my swearing.

Canosa hovers behind, as silent as sleep, points at Hunter with a conductor's gesture. "My dear boy, your last wish has been granted." She looks to me. "Don't disappoint me this time. Please. I don't like being disappointed."

"What? What last wish?" I say, and I understand. "You wanted to die from my song, not from Canosa's?"

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

"Can I take him down? Please?"

"You want me to do it? I'll take him down, all right, when he is dead. Can't make up your mind, Ailen Bright?"

I swallow words of defiance. "No. I mean, yes. Yes, I can."

"Ailen?" I hear from above. Hunter's cracked lips open.

"Nice to see you, girl. Hey, I'm sorry. For shouting and stuff."

I look up. "No, no, it's ok. *I'm* sorry for leaving you. For getting mad. I'm - I don't know what happened. Something made me so angry, and then--" I trail off, not sure what exactly happened *then* and how to explain it.

"I just wanted to hear your voice one more time." Hunter says.

"My voice? Why?"

"Cause it's awesome. I love it."

"I understand. It's because I'm a siren. Everybody loves a siren's voice. That means my deadly magic is working. I wonder, though, why mine. I mean, does it sound especially charming or something?"

"Yeah, totally. For real, I swear. I tried telling you, but you wouldn't listen." A shiver takes over him, he coughs.

"No, you don't get it. What I'm trying to say is, it's not me that you want, it's her. She. The siren inside me, not me, Ailen. Anyway... Forget it, I'm rambling--" I hang my head, furious at myself for not being able to explain what seemed to clear a second ago in my mind.

"That's simply not true. You know that, so stop fishing for a compliment. You is you is you, voice or not, siren or not or whatever freak you decide to be, I don't care. Like when we met

at the lake, remember? Skipping stones? You tinkled like a thousand bells. You kept asking me questions, and I kept answering them in such a way, to make you ask some more. So I could hear you talk." A series of coughs interrupt him.

My neck hurts from looking up, but I ignore it. An urgent need to cry threatens to spill from my throat and it takes an enormous effort to hold it.

"Hunter, why are you doing this to me?"

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

I want to say something. No, I know what I want to say, but it gets stuck on the tip of my tongue, scared because it doesn't believe itself to be true. Because it can't be true. You can't love food, can you? I mean, would you proclaim your love to an exceptionally juicy rare steak whist on the plate? I shake my head, feeling ridiculous.

We form a column of anticipation, that one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, trapped in the freezing fog up to our wits, Hunter's head down, my head up. Several feet apart. Clouds lounge above, sending filtered light through the gaps in the drizzle. Lazy humming of distant traffic trickles through wafts of hydrogen sulphide.

Canosa claps. That's our metronome mark.

"Oh, how splendid! Please, spice it up, children, not enough emotion for me. More genuine feelings. I beg you, indulge me. Make it exciting, this advent of imminent death, this exploding game finale. Hunter, tell her how you planned to kill her with a single crack of your whip. Go on."

Shame flushes my face, I forgot Canosa is here.

"Is that true? You did?" I say.

Hunter doesn't look at me, coughing.

Canosa interjects. "Lovely, lovely, this is so much fun to watch. I'm delighted. Not boring at all! Of course he did, darling. He is a siren hunter, what did you expect? Please, continue." She sits on the front bench and cups her head like a little girl ready for the spectacle of a lifetime.

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

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

He moves his lips, struggling to say something. I block out the discord of the noises to hear only Hunter. I watch his lips to make sure I don't leave out a single detail of what he's saying.

"I did. It's not what you think though--" He begins.

"I don't think anything." I interrupt. "I get it. I'm a siren, you're a siren hunter. What else is there to expect?"

Pain flashes his face. I notice his eyes became bloodshot. He's wet and shivering from cold. His heart accelerates as he lifts himself with a grunt and folds over his legs.

I realize I don't know how long a person can hang upside down before dying. And I wonder if I stand a chance against three sirens. What will it take for me to wrestle them and free him, run away somewhere, and then let him go. Will I be able to resist the urge to feed?

"Just hear me out, ok? Then you beat me up later." He mumbles into his knees. I have a flicker of hope. I hope he really cares.

"I wanted to distract your dad, ok? Wanted to make him think I'll do my job. Mom is out of meds, so I had to get my first pay, all right? I had no choice."

My hope evaporates.

"I understand." I say and step back.

"Don't! Don't go!" He lets go and unravels down with a moan, swaying back and forth from falling inertia.

"I get it. It's fine."

Hunter looks at me.

"You remember the game we play?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever wanted to do anything it takes to save someone you love?"

There's not even a trace of my hope left. I don't need to make myself hate Hunter, it happens naturally. In fact, I hate everyone and everything. It's a quiet hate, something I felt all along.

"I wanted - yes." I say. "I know you love your mom. I wish I had a mother. But I don't. She left me. It's just me and, well, Canosa over here."

"You forgot about Daddy, sweetie." The voice from behind makes me jump. I didn't hear him approach, none of us did. "You always forget things, always wrapped up in that little head of yours."

I know I have to face Daddy. I don't know if I should be happy he survived or not, but I dare to turn and look.

Dark soot of his outline mars the drizzle over the meadow like graffiti on a clear shower curtain. Water drips from his hair, down his face. His clothes are soaked, covered with spider webs and pine needles. His grey eyes study me, powerful hands at his sides, a whip at the ready, legs spread apart in a military stance, his Lacoste loafers miraculously still on his feet.

His right hand twitches, long slender fingers curl tight. I remember being little, remember badly wanting those hands to hug me, hold me, make me feel safe and solid and warm, make me know

that nothing bad could ever happen to me, in those strong hands. He never hugged me. No use dreaming now.

In this half a second of a shock, as if sensing my desire, Canosa swiftly jumps behind me and wraps me in a headlock. Hooks her chin on my shoulder, her breath a fish purgatory in need of a thorough cleaning.

"There he is. I was beginning to worry. Well, don't just stand there, come closer. Come, I have something to tell you." She beckons him with her finger. "If you came for her, she's mine. Mine alone. Now, you may go away. You're interrupting a splendid performance."

"Get your hands off my daughter. Please." Daddy says, his voice calm.

"You can try taking her. But she's still mine. You all are. One day you'll die, whether you want it or not. And then we'll meet again, in the siren meadow. I'll take your hand and I'll guide you on your after-life journey. All the way, *all* the way." She cackles.

A raucous clucking, sick glee. Disgusting.

Her laughter makes me feel a strange alliance to my family, a new affection I haven't detected before. For a second I disregard what Canosa said, about Daddy pushing Mommy off the bridge. What if she's lying? I want to hear praise, I want to be a good girl, a girl who deserves a standing ovation. "Daddy!

Daddy, you made it!" I smile. He's alive, he didn't sink, he's here. He came for me, after all. Isn't it worth something?

"You and me, we'll have a little chat. Later." He says.

"Business first." He spits.

Familiar fear spreads across my chest. Of all times, why now? Why am I so pathetically needy? I clutch to the beam for balance. Canosa hisses, let's me go, shoots up into the air with a hideous cry. Daddy cracks his whip and tangles it around her hair. A decorative ribbon made of braided leather meets washed out locks in an intricate pattern, expensive, hand-made, reserved for special occasions only. The latest in siren hunting trends, performed with a mere flick of a wrist, done by a master. A coiling snake, it twists, snaps, and yanks Canosa down.

BOOM!

He doesn't look at her, he looks at me.

I stand face to face with my father, with a man who I know killed many and who came for me, not out of love but out of his obsession with purification. His desire to rid men of the siren corruption, the very underlying force of love, if love even exists in his vocabulary. I wonder. I wonder if his mother loved him, my grandmother whom I never knew.

Canosa slams on the ground and writhes under Daddy's boot, shrieking. He cracks his whip again, watching me the whole time, watching the effect it has on me. Smiling.

I shudder. This is a smile of a killer.

Canosa begins singing, "This way, oh turn your bows..." Daddy cracks his whip again, and again, until she gags on her song. Each time the whip snaps, an electric surge passes through my body, shattering all hope and longing and desire.

"This is what happens to women that don't listen." He says. My heart is broken to pieces.

"This is what will happen to you."

My soulless chest rings with horror.

"This is what women were made for, to haul water." He grabs a handful of Canosa's hair, wraps it around her head several times, stuffs the end in her mouth. She lies motionless, stripped of her mane, knocked out.

I shake like a freshly caught fish, trembling at the end of the line, silvery little thing, too small to be fried for dinner, fighting the urge to run, run for my life. "Is it true that you pushed Mommy?"

"Do me a favor, repeat what you said?" His jaw works slowly over each word, he wipes the rain out of his face.

I clear my throat. "Off the bridge. Canosa said - is it true you pushed Mommy? Because she didn't give you a son?" The

second I finish talking, I think I'll die from fear. How dare I contradict him, how dare I argue. I want to disappear, shrink to the size of a whirligig beetle, swim rapidly in circles, alarmed, until I find a gap to wiggle into, narrow and hidden and so deep that nobody could ever get me out.

Hunter moans, but before I can take a look at him, Daddy walks up to me and places a hand on my shoulder in that 'don't you think about running away' gesture, points the whip handle at Hunter.

"Nice confession, son. Good for me to know. You're fired."

I hear Hunter's mouth open to say something, but don't dare looking up, consumed with Daddy's stare, cold and merciless. I freeze into the ground under the weight of his hand.

"About your mother—" Daddy begins. A tugging sensation spreads through my chest. I don't like this feeling, I can't be weak right now. I have to be strong, and yet I seem to have forgotten how to breathe, let alone sing, let alone stand upright and not crumble.

Hunter's voice says from above, "But... Mr. Bright..."

"That's enough! Dismissed. I don't want to talk about this right now, not ever. Understood?" Daddy says to Hunter, never raising his head, looking directly at me.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter whispers.

"Now, get yourself off that comic perch and get out of here. I need to have a word with my daughter." He turns and blows his nose loudly into the grass.

Looking down at his snot flying, I want to throw up, make myself talk. "But how..."

"Ailen, get him down already, will you?"

Too happy to oblige, yearning to get away from his hand and his stare, I climb the slippery beam, pull myself up and balance on top of the letter Pi, tightrope-walk to the place where Hunter's feet are bound with what appears to be a thorny blackberry vine. I saddle the beam and begin untangling wet knots, stripping my skin in the process, sucking on the cuts out of habit. It's not blood that I taste, it's salty sea water. Cold, slimy. Revolting.

"Hurry up, now!" Daddy calls.

I hook the beam behind my knees and swing down, work Hunter's hands free, pull myself up and sit upright, both exhilarated and terrified by my agility and power.

Hunter moans as he pulls himself up, his fingers unbending. I grab his arm, untie the rest of the vine to free his feet, tearing his jeans a little in the process. He dangles down, nearly falls, my face smacks on the wood at the pressure of his body weight.

"I got ya, I got ya. Hang on, let's move you over there."

We scoot towards the side post, all the time Daddy is watching, silent. Hunter hugs the post, slides down it and collapses into a heap of soaked clothes on the ground. Gazes around. Dizzy. Wipes his face.

"Get out." Daddy says.

Hunter props himself up on all fours, tries to stand, stumbles, leans on the edge of the stage. Its wooden boards shiny brown from the rain.

"I said, get out. Now!"

"No, don't leave me alone with him! Please, don't!" I want to cry, but my throat dries out and I barely croak. I watch Hunter's silhouette skirt the stage, step by step, his sneakers slide in dirt. I hope for something, for a glance, a word, instead I hear his soul's warmth desert me. He doesn't make an effort to acknowledge me. We're miles of pain apart. Homophony broken. Morendo.

"Ailen, stop monkeying around. Get down please, sweetie."

I watch myself obey. My hands work their way down the post, my feet meet the ground, Daddy pins me into the soil, my muscles atrophy. I buckle.

He hoists me by the armpits and props me the spectator's bench.

"Sit."

My knees go to Jell-O and I slouch down. Daddy sits next to me. Canosa lies by our feet, motionless. We are all drenched. There is barely audible hissing in the woods. Ligeia and Teles must have heard the commotion. Not that any of that matters.

I face Daddy's stare, empty. There is no emotion in it, no love, no hate, nothing. He didn't say 'no'. He never answered my question, never recoiled at the thought, never protested. He pushed her then, he did. I feel like I'm staring into the eyes of death itself. I'm no longer Ailen I know, he's no longer Daddy I know. It all got corrupted somehow.

"Back to your question, about your mother. What you don't understand is that the mere act of you even asking this question leads me to believe that--"

I shrink, tune him out. It's easy to do, I'm used to it. Years of relentless practice. It turns out, I don't want to hear it. I cling to the hope of turning everything around, going back to the bathroom, having him knock on the door and me getting out of the water, out, before it's too late. Out. I want out.

"-I tried saving her, tried pulling her up, but she just wouldn't listen. Stubborn stupid woman, your mother. And here I was, after all these years, thinking that maybe once, just this once, she might--"

I attempt to turn my eyes inside out and look in. Listen to the patter of the rain and the crunching pine needles instead.

Ligeia and Teles are advancing quietly. Another minute and they'll be upon us.

Good.

## 17. Inside Ailen's Head.

I slide into my private la-la-land, the one that numbs all feelings. Except one. A growing hate that consumes me, forces me to imagine terrible pictures. Click. Daddy's throat ripped out, his vocal cords dangling in Canosa's hand, ripe grapes of his voice about to be squished between her fingers. Click. Every bone in his body broken into a jagged landscape of shards, with all five sirens sitting on top of him, giddy. Click. His neck caught in his own whip, Hunter pulling at it, hoisting him up and over the giant Pi, using it as gallows, leaving him hanging, dangling. Click. A beautiful song poisons Daddy's ears, grinds him into dirt, all the way till his head disappears, Mommy walking up to him and stomping on his head, laughing, laughing. Chortling. Giggling. Spit flies out of her mouth and I jerk upright, shudder at the horrors I have conjured.

I realize I forgot her face. Mommy, where are you, Mommy.

"—to tell me. Are you having fun?" Daddy's voice comes from the far end of the tunnel.

"What?" I say weakly, like an old feeble woman, shaking from anxiety. He's talking to me, he's actually talking to me. He asked me a question. There are so many things I want to say,

so many things to ask. My tongue has a mind of its own and it bloats itself up so thick I can't swallow, let alone move it to produce an articulate sound.

"I asked you a question, Ailen. Are you having fun?" He cocks his head to the right, his eyes so big, they're frightening. Steam rolls out of his mouth into the drizzle. He is wet and looks cold, but doesn't shiver. How is this humanly possible? I have to remind myself to breathe. In, out. Repeat.

"Yes. I mean, no. No, I'm not. Fun -- what?" I squeak in a small mouse-like voice.

"This is not very descriptive. Please elaborate on your behavior at the lake. It cost me my boat. Do you know how much I paid for my boat? Do you know what a pain in the ass it will be for me to replace it?" He sneezes, and it jolts me from my stupor.

My tongue unrolls. I think I can talk again. He means all those people, of course. All those innocents. Guilt floods me and makes me stutter. "I didn't want to, I swear. I know I killed people. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? About people?" He laughs. I can't remember the last time I've seen him laughing. Mouth open wide, he throws his head back and shakes in a silent spasm of a constricted larynx, as if a giant invisible hand is gagging him, rainy fist burrowed deep into his throat. Chest heaving, eyes watering,

arteries bulging, hands jumping over knees. Fantasia agitato. Except I can't hear his soul because he has none.

"Daddy, are you ok?"

He wipes his eyes, steadies his breath. "A siren. Sorry. For killing people. Didn't know you actually had a sense of humor, Ailen." He looks at me with a hint of new appreciation, and I think I'm supposed to be grateful.

"I do?"

His face falls. I'm so afraid to disturb the flow of our conversation, the first in years that I remember, that I choke on words and twist in agony. There, I screwed it up again, as always. His eyes fill with lead and dart to the sides, then down at Canosa's lifeless body. I strain to listen, but there is no sign of Ligeia or Teles.

"Look at what you did, you distracted me." He presses his lips into a thin line, cradles his whip. Rain drops roll from his bushy eyebrows over long curly eyelashes, almost girly, in stark contrast to the rest of this face.

Of course, it's all my fault. Daddy has to be on constant alert. There's no hiding or lying. He knows everything. Always knows where to find me. Sees right through me, to my liking it and loathing it at the same time.

"Sorry." I mumble.

"I don't want you to apologize. I want you to show me what you're made of, how did it make you feel. All right? Tell me, how did it *feel* wiping out a dozen lives for fun as opposed to simply satisfying your hunger. I must admit, I thoroughly enjoyed your show." There is an excited shine in his face, spreading rapidly from glistening eyes to a stretched mouth to the parade of meticulously brushed teeth and mint breath despite a recent dip into the lake.

I feel like I said something wrong again. "It wasn't a show, I swear!" But it was. It was to show him that I can. Can sing, can move an entire lake with my song. Can move anything I want, except him. He'd never listen, never hear, never tell me I was any good. Never good enough. I decide to try harder, sit up straight and clasp my knees for support. "Well, it was a warm-up." I deliver my line with the iciest tone I can muster, and stretched my lips into a grin.

"Oh?" Daddy unrolls his whip, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile. His chest muscles tighten under the wet film of his shirt, the virgin pink of brushed cotton, Hugo Boss, complete with pearl buttons and immaculate stitching on every seam. Peeking from under a wool jacket, sagging from the moisture. "Would you care to let me know in advance next time, Ailen? I wouldn't want to forego another performance, I hear there's some spectacular singing not to be missed." He smacks

the whip on the bench like a tiger would smash his tail before jumping at prey. And he cuts right into my wound.

"You never came to hear me sing in the choir. Never came to any of our school events, ever." It's too late to stop now, I try very hard not to cry, terrified at my own boldness but pressing forward.

Rain stops and awaits me to make my move with a bated breath. Nature sounds wither, pausing, eager.

"Guess what, Daddy?" I force myself to sound cheerful, because his eyes have gone from steel to brooding darkness. "No need to wait, I can demonstrate right here." I dare to stand and inhale, only to see Daddy uncoil his whip and curl it around my neck in one wrist movement.

CRACK!

It deafens me and knocks me off my feet. I land between the benches, face first. Dirt mashes into my nose, dried grass stalks tickle it. He pulls me by the neck all the way out of the kerkides, into overgrown diazoma, and I get to scrape crisscross pattern with my fingers on the way. Weakened, again, by my own stupidity. Daddy puts one of his soft-leather loafers on my back, my face pressed firmly into the meadow. I mistake earthy smell for a medical marijuana whiff, herbal with fruity undertones, sweet and pungent on the heels of the recent rain. I wish I could take a drag and float.

"Here's the deal." Daddy's voice says from above. "I've dealt with the likes of you my entire life so don't you try playing games with me. Is that understood?" He presses harder. I mumble back my agreement. "Good. An idea occurred to me, actually. You might be worthy something, after all. Too melodramatic, but we'll work out the kinks. So, here is what you will do."

I hold my breath. He isn't going to kill me. He's going to use me somehow, just like everyone else usually does. Like Canosa did until she got all tangled up in her own hair thanks to her grandiose believe of invincibility. Even Hunter.

The thought hurts.

I get angry, angry at myself. How did I end up on the ground, face first in the dirt, after splashing upward an entire lake? As in in answer, Daddy cracks his whip again right over my ears. I go limp.

He crouches down and whispers in my ear, pressing the end of the whip in between my shoulder blades so hard that it punctures my skin through the rain jacket. "You'll be my right hand. Of sorts. You'll help me catch other sirens."

I'm shocked at the idea and produce an involuntary "Uuhh."

"Good." Daddy continues. "Do me a favor, don't pull any of this singing shit of yours, all right? Let's make this easy on both of us. Do I hear your agreement?"

I produce another "Uhuh."

"Excellent. Tonight, between sunset and midnight, we'll have to catch two remaining ones. They'll be feeding at the park by the pier, the one below the market. They always do. I suppose because the homeless men there are exceptionally tasty." He rolls another one of his soundless laughs. "Oh my, what a hoot! Poor creatures. No taste at all. Where was I. Ah yes, you're to lure them further into the park, to the parking lot. I'll be waiting there in my car. Understood?"

He presses his foot into my gills, the pain shoots through my spine and makes me break out cold sweat. I struggle to respond.

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?"

I mumble into the ground.

"Can't hear you." Daddy's lips brush my ear slightly as he hisses into it. I twist my neck to the side with as much force as I can gather, still weakened.

"And what if I don't?" I say.

"Not a thought in your head, is there? Stupid and stubborn, just like your mother." He spits on the grass next to me. I watch his saliva rolls down the yellow stalk. "Always the need to be directed, always. Never appreciative of the help I give you, the advice. Is there nothing you can do on your own, Ailen? Peel your eyes open, look to your right." I look at Canosa's

hair. "Like what you see? Want to end up like her?" He abruptly stands up, and I catch sight of him, poking his whip at Canosa. She doesn't move. His eyes rolled up, whites showing through thick eyelashes, the womanly shape of her pristine body smeared with mud like a corpse of a recovered floater.

I forget it's Canosa, I only think of her as a girl who was once little and happy, had dreams, believed in love, and then something happened to her and turned her bitter. Something at a hand of a man, I'm sure of it. That's enough for me to gain back my voice. I look at Daddy and see him as a threat to all things 'girly', all things I could never be, because of him. Because of the likes of him. Anger rears its ugly head, adds to my hatred, fuels me, rattles the lid, until it flies off and I spill.

"You're not a father to me. You're one fucking asshole, that's who you are." I say into grass, shaking.

"What did you say?" He leans.

"I said, you're one revolting women-hating disgusting piece of shit!" It comes out as a scream and catches at the end.

"Watch your mouth, you little whore!"

"Oh yeah? Why? Do I need to? I don't think so. You need me. Just like Canosa needed me. I have talent, true siren talent, and you know it. You've seen it, you hear me sing, you witnessed me rousing an entire lake, did you not?" I prop myself up and watch Daddy take a tentative step back and raise his whip at me.

"Go ahead, crack it."

There is a moment of hesitation in his movement, but he flings his arm and cracks his whip. My muscles give out to the vibration of the air. I plop back on the ground, then raise my head back up.

"How does it feel, Daddy? You like it, don't you? Don't you, daddy? Did your mom ever hug you, did she ever kiss you, did she tell you she loved you? Ever?"

"Shut your mouth if you want to live!" His scream borders on the hysterical outburst.

"What if I don't, Daddy? What if I want to die? What if there is nothing for me to live for after you pushed Mommy off the bridge? Go ahead, kill me."

He raises his whip again, pauses.

"You think you know what you're doing, sweetie? You think you're smart, you think you've actually figured it all out." He makes himself smile, if a slight crack of his lips can be called anything remotely close to that.

"I don't. You're the one who knows everything. You tell me. Did your mother love you?"

A grimace of pain takes over Daddy's face, something I've never seen in my entire life. It looks like a face of a man after a heart attack, when one side goes slack and the other

scrunches to compensate for the tension. And I know I struck gold.

Loud hissing comes from the trees, and we both turn to look, startled. There stand Ligeia and Teles, jeering. They clamber over the edge of the stage and spill towards Daddy in one hairy blanket.

Daddy curses, takes a stance of a fighter, and begins a series of misdirected cracks. From the vantage point of the ground, I lift my head and watch them converge. He gives me a glance, shouts my name, asking for help, his usual confidence shaken. I pretend I watch a movie, prop my face with both hands. Ligeia and Teles circle-dance around Daddy, he groans with exertion. I shook something in him and his usual focus is gone, he finally gives in to the cold and shivers, wet from head to toe, exhausted. His lips blue, he shouts again at me.

"Sorry, I can't hear you." I say. And I don't. I can only see. His mouth gaping open in a scream, in a plea for help, the sirens singing their lethal song.

"This way, oh turn your bows

"Akhaia's glory

"As all the world allows-

"Moor and be merry..."

Fogs rolls in and obscures them in a new level of bone-chilling coldness.

"Sweet coupled airs we sing

"No lonely seafarer

"Holds clear of entering

"Our green mirror."

The temperature drops another twenty degrees down. Daddy shivers violently, but doesn't lose himself in the usual siren victim's daze. I remember suddenly, he has no soul. He can't be killed by simple singing, can he? Ligeia and Teles read my thoughts. I see them snake out their arms to his neck, their fingers circling it, choking him.

"Pleased by each purling note

"Like honey twining

"From her throat and my throat

"Who lies a-pining?"

I catch myself liking it. His agony, I can't stop watching it. I'm soothed by his cries. This earning for pain revolts me. I make myself look away. Like a coward, I start crawling away on all fours, smearing my borrowed jeans with more dirt, thinking. Maybe I don't want to kill myself anymore, maybe I want to survive. This thought fills me with strength. Maybe that's why I turned. To help catch and kill the likes of Daddy. Maybe that's why I'm a siren. Maybe it's truly my calling, my destiny to be a killer, to have this power. I want to tell Canosa, I know she'd appreciate it. I'd tell her, *Canosa, guess what. You were right.*

*And you know? I think I found myself, I found my place, I know what I need to do. Ailen Bright, a siren. That's me. I'm with you, all the way. Let's do it.*

And she'd smile at me and maybe even give me a hug. And I'd tell her more, I'd say, *it's not for Daddy, by the way, and not for Mommy, if that's what you're thinking. It's for me. And check it out, I helped trap Daddy, he's gone now. Can I please see Mommy this time?*

But Canosa lies on the ground, motionless. And Ligeia and Teles close in their fingers on Daddy's neck. Tighter, tighter. Later, I decide. I'll tell her later. For now, I need to go somewhere and just be alone. Think it all out. That's what I need to do.

I turn my head away, scramble to my feet and run.

Daddy's cries mix with hissing behind my back, I ignore it.

Through the spider-web infested woods, over the raccoon holes, skirting bushes, grabbing maple trunks for support, I find new strength in my escape and keep running. My mind pushed aside, my body keeps telling me, *Ailen, you promised yourself you won't run anymore. And my mind counters, I don't, I didn't. I stood up to him, see? I talked to him. This is not running, I just need to move my muscles a bit, need to be alone. My body says back, bullshit, Ailen, total bullshit, and you know it. I try to silence my thoughts, but they keep crawling in like*

annoying spiders that land on my face and shoulders as I make it through the park all the way and burst into open space.

Pine trees surround me and crawl close to the shore. Raindrops slink off the needles, but the sky is clear, the lake is clear of the traffic. I hear distant noise of the emergency vehicles making their way to and from the bridge, and something else. Something so warm it hurts my imagination. Impossible. I stumble step by step towards the water and almost have to catch myself from stumbling into Hunter.

He sits on the pebbles, his sneakers dipping into the lake, turns around and looks at me. A shrunken version of himself, his eyes vacant, distant. I shriek in surprise.

"Hunter! What the hell are you doing here?"

He shrugs me off, distaste written all over his face.

"I thought you were having a little chit-chat with your Daddy. What, it didn't go so well, so now you're back on the prowl? Look, see this?" He spread his arms. "It's called beach. Public property. You can go anywhere you want. But no, you're on my back again."

"No, I swear I didn't—" I begin, but he cuts me off.

"Why should I believe anything you say, Ailen, why? Leave me alone, already, will ya? Jesus!" He gets up.

"Sorry!"

"Fuck you! You're not sorry. You're a fucking monster, Ailen. Like your father. Both of you. Christ, what did I get myself into..." He cradles his temples. And then, under his breath, "Sometimes I wish I never met you."

Every one of his words nails me into a coffin. Except my coffin is a filled bathtub, the antique clawfoot iron concoction held up by enameled sirens, only two of them left, balancing precariously, threatening to spill me out of it. And I collapse inside, sink underwater, drown in disappointment. Dying.

## 18. Seward Beach.

Life has a tendency to play cruel games, games of choices that don't exist. Look at it. Watch it savoring, licking its fingers, leafing through hopes and dreams, pocking its nose through fantasies. Rolling the dice, pointing. Ailen Bright is your name? Let's see here. Your father is a siren hunter. Choose. Your mother is a weakling that decided to commit a suicide instead of fighting. Choose. Your best friend hates your guts. Choose! Ain't I full of choices? Life likes to parade around. Ain't I full of splendid colors? And I nod, defeated, because what else can I do? What choice do I have but to accept? There is no skipping squares, no rolling doubles. The gameboard of life is bleak and straightforward. I hang my head, a niente.

Hunter looks at me, fuming. I simply stand, looking down. He passes a hand through his wet hair. "All right, fine. Sorry I yelled. And I'm sorry it has to end like this. I really am. Truly. But it has to, you get it, right? It has to." He hugs himself. "And how the hell am I supposed to get dug for my mom now, huh? Can you answer that?"

I become engrossed in my sneakers. Six eyelets on the left, six eyelets on the right. Shoelaces dirty woven patterns of closure. I hear Hunter shuffle feet.

"Hey, don't be quiet. It's killing me, you know that. I'd feel better if you said something."

"Like what?" I manage.

"I don't care, anything!" He trembles.

"Sure. You don't have to apologize. It's ok, I get it."

Tears decide to grace me with their sudden appearance. I blink several times, vigorously, as if something got caught in my eye.

"No, it's not ok! It's fucking crazy! How am I supposed to show my face at home, huh?"

I shrug.

"What the fuck do you care, anyway. Your mom is dead, and I don't want mine to die, get it?"

"Leave my mother out of this."

"Oh yeah? Why so sentimental all of a sudden? My dear Ailen, I'm so sorry I hurt your feelings. But that's the only thing I'm sorry about, get it? The rest of the stuff, all this crazy siren shit -- Jesus, it's fucked up!" He waits for some response, I count the pebbles. "You're not even listening. You don't give a fuck, do you. I can't believe this. Whatever, girl." He digs his heel into the shore making pebbles clink and scatter.

I watch the indentation made by his sneaker suck in water with a slurp, fill like a tiny puddle, an eye into nothing, an inanimate object that reflects the sky in a drop of blue. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an average person to drown, I remember reading it somewhere.

I peer over the lake, trace the horizon curve, hop from ripple to ripple, weightless.

It's as if every organ I own decided to dangle from a wire, in preparation for a marionette opera. Bellissimo. The audience is breathless, the curtain opens, the puppeteer goes mad, cuts every string with sharp scissors. Chink-chink-chink, they tumble. Ivory dolls found in children's tombs.

Plop! I sit on the shore, every piece of me broken and packed off to my home address. Ailen Bright, lower abdomen, one heavy feeling. Hunter sits next to me, a few feet away. I want to touch him, want to take his hand but he yanks it away.

"Hunter? What's wrong? What did I do that made you turn against me all of a sudden?"

His face doesn't move, not a single muscle. His eyes lock with mine, and yet they don't. I'm afraid to open my mouth, when he speaks.

"What's wrong? After all this you're asking what's wrong?" He emits a chuckle of incredulity. "Nothing. You're just being

you. The fucking siren monster thing or whatever. I don't even know why I'm still here, to be honest. You're right, it must be your siren voice that holds me, I suppose." He kicks into the ground again.

"Why? I mean, why are you saying all of this now?"

Hunter jumps to his feet, agitated.

"I heard you!" He nearly shrieks. "I heard everything you said. You killed people, innocent people. For fun. You weren't even hungry. You're a fucking hypocrite, you know that? I don't care what you say, I should've known. Should've known it all along. They're just food for you, nothing else. I'm food for you. Always will be. Stinking siren, awesome my ass."

"Ah." I exhale. "I knew this was coming. I tried telling you to stay away from me, remember? But you wouldn't listen. So you finally saw it for yourself. By spying on—"

"What was I supposed to do, plug my ears with pine needles or something?"

"-me and Daddy. He asked you to leave, didn't he. He said he wanted a chat with me, one on one, didn't he?" At this thought my hands begin to tremble. I wonder if Daddy is still alive or not, and I wonder why I care. Isn't this what I always wanted, to get rid of him and be free?

"Ooooo, listen to that. So in love with her Daddy, sweet little pumpkin Ailen--"

"FUCK YOU!"

"Thanks, but no, thanks."

"Didn't think so. And congratulations. I'm glad you got it off your chest. Feeling better now?" I stand and Hunter inches away from me as if something disgusting is about to touch him. Breath coils in pockets of steam from his open mouth.

"Anything else you want to say? Go for it, monkey boy, I'm all ears."

"Sure, I got more to say. You wanna hear something interesting?" He squints at me. "Life's a zoo, Ailen, can you imagine? You don't get it, do you? Let me say in a more formal way, then. Ladies and gentlemen, I want your attention, please." He wipes his hands on his sweatshirt, flattens his hair and spreads his arms in a show announcer gesture. "Based on the latest scientific research, it appears we're all divided into two categories. Who would like to make an educated guess?"

"Stop it!" I want to slap him, but he steps back to avoid my blow, nearly stumbles on a mossy log.

"No guesses? Tsk-tsk. I don't dare to hold you in the throws of wonder forever. Here is the answer. Are you ready? DRUMROLL! It's people... and animals!"

"I said, stop it!"

"But, let me present to you a rare specimen, something so very special, something you paid your honestly earned wages to

see, today and today only. A siren, a crossbreed between an animal and a human. One of a kind. It is, what they call, a true living monster." His nostrils blare, eyes remain immobile.

Silence veils over us, flapped only by the last warmth of September wind.

I cradle my head.

If I thought I was dead already, I must've been wrong. This is worse than death, this is continuous torture of dying but not quite getting there. Never.

I've lost Mommy. I've potentially already lost Daddy. And I'm losing Hunter. No, I've lost him. I know it.

Familiar shakes creep down my spine, air becomes thick and difficult to swallow. "Yeah, you're right. I'm a monster. I was wrong to think that somehow I could be a siren and yet remain human, a goody two-shoes girl. Whom was I kidding. I was wrong. And you're right. You're right. Run away now, before it's too late. Go." I begin to hyperventilate, but make no effort to stop it. Life lost its colors, why bother injecting it with paint.

Pebbles crunch under Hunter's feet.

"Well, thank you for permission, much obliged." He bows theatrically. "Now you're trying to make me feel bad, aren't you." He says it with force, but I hear guilt undertones, over the beauty of his soul's concerto, the summer season, four violins, allegro non molto. Pastorale.

"I'm not trying anything. I just don't care anymore, ok? If you wanna go, go." I dismiss him with the flick of my hand. He scoffs. "You got fired, so what? You still have your mother. I might be a fucking orphan at this point."

"Thanks to you, I might be not too far from it myself!" He shouts.

"Oh yeah? Then why the fuck are you still here? Go run to Mommy, monkey boy!"

"FUCK YOU!"

"Boo-hoo, would you listen to that. Bad language. Your mum will have to wash out your mouth with soap and warm water."

"God, you're nuts, girl! Maybe you should've died! Think about it, evolution weeds out people for a reason. Some are born to die, some to shine." He spits.

"Oh, I get it. Shine. Right. I apologize for thwarting your ambitions. You were probably hoping to be on the cover of a magazine one day, right? I can see it, all glossy. In Arial bold, red. No, make that golden. *Hunter Crossby, the glorified siren hunter, reveled by society, sent on the quest to protect human population from the likes of Ailen Bright.* I thought you were my best friend. But never mind." I sit and lower my hand between my hands, elbows on my knees.

"You know what? I'm done listening to this shit!"

"Then don't! Go away. Why don't you?" And I begin crying in earnest, wailing like a little baby.

Hunter stops in his tracks, exhales sharply, watching me.

I weep rivers, bawling, sobbing, smearing snot and tears with my sleeves. All sixteen years of pain propel outward, every instance of ache, from a crushed skull at birth to Mommy's death to the latest insult out of Daddy's mouth. And something else, something terrible. It oozes upward, tracing the sky with impossible hurt, bleeding focus out of my eyesight.

Sweet apparition.

There it hangs, our stupid leftover teenage love, the perfect fantasy projected through rose-colored glasses, expiring. Vision by vision, dream by dream. Con amore no more. Now, an echo of desire. Now, nothing at all. Gone.

I listen to Hunter's soul. It changed. The warmth trickled out, left behind focused precision. Like that from a skilled violinist who can deliver but can't feel. Dispassionate yet forever pleasant.

Five feet of clear morning air is our wall.

"I guess that's it then." Hunter says, breaching it.

"I guess that's it." I join.

He takes a tentative step towards me, pauses, minces his jacket with shaking fingers. I swallow hard, afraid to stand up, lost in indecision. So we gaze at each other. Hold invisible

hands, blow nonexistent goodbye kisses. Dip in and out of numbness for several minutes. Or several hours. Or years. I can't feel the time anymore.

"You know, I've noticed..." Hunter says finally. "Everything beautiful dies. That's just the way of life. It starts out beautiful and for whatever reason ends up ugly. I don't know why."

"Yeah." I echo. "That's how it usually goes."

The wall between us is not a wall anymore, it's a bridge. Not to jump from, but to connect two opposite sides. North and South, cold and warm, in and out. A journey across the body of water, one minute big like the biggest ocean, another small like my bathtub. Easy.

Hunter shivers, dog-shakes his head. "Hey, can't you feel the cold at all? I mean, your butt is soaked, you're sitting right in the water."

"Do I?" I ask. "Oh." I scoot back. "No, I don't feel a thing."

"That's awesome, cause I'm freezing!"

"Well, I'm not offering, but I could try. It'll be hard, of course. I think I can turn you into the world's first male siren, complete with non-freezing benefits."

I'm waiting for laughter, but there is nothing except an attempt at a chuckle.

"Sorry, bad joke." I want to bury my head in the sand. Why did I say this? Why do I always say stupid shit like this, at the worst possible moments?

"No biggie. Hey, don't you wanna go check on your dad or something? What's he doing there, anyway?"

"Being killed by sirens." I say with strange satisfaction. But as soon as the words leave my lips, I revolt at the feeling, pull shame over my head and sulk, disgusted.

"What? When the hell did that happen? Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious." Dread fills my bone marrow. I stand and pick up a stone, squint, measure the distance, then throw. The pebble revolves itself in a blur, touches the lake's surface. Once, twice, three times. Each a gentle prod for suitable grave. Is it deep enough, is it greedy enough to swallow? I count till nine, then it disappears into the lake with a barely audible 'blup'.

"And you're not going to do anything about it?" Next to me Hunter's breath rolls out into transparent cotton candy. I catch myself on the thought of wanting to lick it, turn back to the lake. Hunger rears its ugly head. Wait, what? I've had a bunch of souls just a couple hours ago, is it time to feed again? How long do they last, anyway?

I kick myself in the chest to stop it, scoop a handful of stones and throw them with such force, they ricochet off the water in one staccato succession.

Plup. Plip-plup. Blup-blop-blip.

It's as if time reverted back, as if we're ten again, skipping stones, goofing off and running around without a care in the world. Except it's the opposite picture, looked at through a magnifying glass gone wrong. We're both grown, bitter and mad. I beat Hunter, as always, of course, ten to nine. Yet there is no joy, no jeering or celebrating, only draining pain and confusion.

We glare at each other, I'm triumphant, Hunter defeated, and for a moment childhood memories overpower me and I see its reflection in his eyes. It lingers there for one second, and then the moment is gone. The reality drones back in as a swift blow in the face.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

"I dunno. I'll have to get my way out of here to see mom. What about you?"

"Don't know."

I shut my eyes for a moment and an image of Daddy's face floats up, white, dead, with bluish marks on his neck from the siren's fingers. I shake my head to get rid of it.

"Let me help you get there faster. Is that ok?"

"What do you mean?"

"How about I give you a ride?" The second I say it, I hope he doesn't detect me being desperate. "Let's find a boat. I'm sure we can find one." He looks at me, strange.

"Can I ask you a question before we go?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you do it? Why did you jump?" It sounds like a final farewell, and I shrink at the idea.

"Well... I secretly believed in that story you told me, about sirens. I thought, if I turn, I'd create more love and beauty in the world. Being immortal, singing beautiful songs, helping people, you know? Shit, now that I say it out loud, it sounds so corny." I close my eyes and try to remember. "It didn't work out the way I imagined. All those people... gone. That fisherman guy, two guards at the club, a dozen dozen more on the lake..." I let my head hang. "And now I've lost you as a friend."

"No, you didn't." He says. "I'll always be your friend." But it sounds like he's lying.

"I don't believe you."

"Whatever." His voice breaks, he shrugs his shoulders. I feel instant regret for what I said.

"I'm sorry."

"No harm done. Let's start new, like we just met, ok?"

"What if I don't want to." I mumble.

"You're such a bad liar for a siren, you know that?" I hear a hint of joke and my heart leaps all the way up. "Hi, my name is Hunter Crossby. What's your name?"

"Ailen Bright." I say automatically.

"Hello, Ailen Bright, you look ridiculous."

I hide a smile and look down at myself. Torn dirty-blue rain jacket, soiled jeans, wet no-color Converse sneakers caked in pine needles and mud.

"I hate this outfit," I try really hard not to giggle.

It's the first time since yesterday morning that I feel good. Like we're on a backpacking trip. And somehow, amidst the craziness of it all, I feel normal. And then hunger leaps its ugly head into my chest again. I can't help but stare at Hunter. It would be too easy.

"Let's get moving." Hunter decides, suddenly nervous. We skirt the beach line and come across a boat tied to a wooden pier about a mile from where we started. It's a simple wooden rowboat. A few people that happen to walk this far along the Seward park road glance at us but none of them stop. I savor the cacophony of sounds, hungry.

Hunter jumps in and pulls at my sleeve.

"Hey, that's called stealing." I say under my breath.

"Listen to you, since when do you care? We're only borrowing it for a while." Hunter unties the rope, motioning to me. "Come on, get in."

I step inside, watch the shore, Hunter watches me. The sun breaks through grey clouds and I squint, blinded. It must be afternoon.

"Can you do that little trick of yours again? That humming?"

"Yeah, that's what I planned on." I say, and inhale. As I begin to hum, the boat moves, first feet, then yards away. I focus on Hunter. It gets harder not to think of how it would feel to inhale his soul, to feel the liquid of the summer violin concerto spreading behind my ribs.

Familiar calls interrupt my thoughts. I turn, and we both see them. Sirens. Three of them. That means Daddy is gone for sure. My heart sinks. They peer through pine trees and come out, startle a jogger, quickly cross the road and without any hesitation step into the water.

Canosa, Ligeia and Teles.

I stop humming. "Hunter," I say, "I think we're toast." What I don't say is that maybe I'm glad.

## 19. Puget Sound.

I'm split in half. Part of me wants to lodge underwater, complete with gills, songs, sirens, killings, and all things morbid that come with the package of being a predator. An illusion of divine existence however perverted that sounds. Defining Hunter as food, no more. Another part of me yearns for air, the dreamy uncertainty of living, loving, and feeling. The amateur audio of the orchestra called life. In it, Hunter is a star, the most skilled concertmaster subordinate only to the conductor, to be listened to and admired from a distance. My private apotheosis. I don't know which part of me will win.

There is a trajectory of eyes, like a violin's string beaded with dew; across me, Hunter's, blue; a few yards away, three pairs of sirens'; and, in my mind's eye, those closed in the meadow, Daddy's, alive or not, always huge, round, and demanding. I blink, chasing circles of this strange vision away. Be gone. There is no string, but sirens are very real, lunging into the lake in a burst of excitement, flapping their feet and vanishing. Funambulism. Submerged, performed with the goal of traversing from point A to point B. Point A being the siren lair, point B being the boat. Hunter and me.

The lake bristles, stretches its toothless smile into a series of waves. One, two, three. Swallowed.

"Took them a while." Hunter licks his lips. I detect nervous notes in his voice. "Looks like the hunt is on. That's good news, I suppose. Never a dull moment." He raises his eyebrows at me and waves his hand. "Do you mind?"

I don't really hear him. "Canosa's alive, which means Daddy's gone..." I say under the weight of comprehension. Guilt washes over me. "Hunter, what have I done? I shouldn't have left him like that. I should've fought for him. I could've saved him, but I ran away like a coward."

"Would you--?" He motions impatiently, revolving his hand.

"What?"

"Hum, please? They'll be here any minute, your femme fatale friends from the deep realm of the glorious Lake Washington. I, for one, have no interest in meeting them one more time. So, can you?" Forced pleasantness rips thin over his irritation.

"You're not listening. Did you hear what I said?"

"I did. I heard you."

"So? What do you think?"

"So! You're his daughter. But you know what? He'd kill you in a heartbeat. So why would you feel obligating to help him when he's been hating you your entire life? Look, I'm sorry, but

can we talk about this some other time?" He glances back over the boat and picks up the paddles.

"No, he didn't!" I'm angry and hurt, fighting tears. Damn it. I'm not going to cry, I'm not, I'm not.

"Dude, we'll be eaten alive in, like, a minute. Do you mind helping me out?" Hunter begins to row.

"Fine."

I inhale and hum. We jolt into speeding, but thoughts of Daddy lying dead in the middle of the siren meadow won't let me concentrate. I break again.

"I know it might not look like that, but I know he loves me. On some level, somewhere deep, he does. Or... did." I wipe my eyes and my nose with a sleeve. A large yacht passes and the boat shakes in its wake.

Hunter drops the paddles in exasperation. "Awesome. Let's see if I understand. What you're saying is, this is the rare occurrence of the mysterious beast called *familial love*. Ok. Are you referring to one of those twisted love-hate relationships that qualify as a norm nowadays? I hate your guts, but I won't show you. I'll display the image of the perfect parent, loaded and over-protective, worthy of admiration from neighbors, teachers, other parents, you name it. The classic passive-aggressive. Is that what you're talking about? Well, sorry to break it to you, Ailen, but that's *not* what love is."

"Oh yeah? How would you know. At least my father didn't leave me like yours. I mean, same day he found out your mum has cancer. Same day! What a jerk." The instant I close my mouth, I know I said too much. Blood drains from Hunter's face. He goes pale, darkness circles his eyes, his whole posture tilts and weathers with pain. Paddles hang aimlessly from the sides, rotating slowly in the rings. The boat drifts under the bridge onramp. Tuesday afternoon traffic rushes over our heads, oblivious to unfolding drama.

Bitter regret spills into my mouth from a pill that I bit into by accident. Gasping, I mumble. "Sorry. Sorry, I didn't mean that - It just came out like this, I swear."

"Don't ever mention my father leaving. Ever again. Got it? If you ever do, I'll fucking skin you alive." Veins bulge on his neck, he clenches the paddles so tight his knuckles turn white, then throws himself back and begins rowing like mad.

After this threat, I'm not sorry anymore. Blood pumps my face full of bitterness. "Go ahead, monkey boy, knock yourself out, why don't you?"

We glare at each other.

"Fuck you." He says under his breath.

"I thought we covered this topic already, didn't we? So don't you fucking tell me what I can or can't talk about. Besides, I'd like to hear what's so special about your father

that can't be said out loud. What are you, too chicken to say the truth?"

"Just keep your nose out of my life, will ya?" He fumes.

Whoosh-whoosh. The paddles dip into the lake with a steady rhythm of anger.

"Sure. Never mind me, then. Sorry to have bothered you. I think I'll go for a swim. See ya." I make a motion as if to tip over the edge of the boat.

Hunter's eyes open wide, but he says, "Go ahead. And stop reporting to me every single thing I do. What am I, your parent or something? I don't give a fuck."

"Oh, you don't? Really. Hear that." I say. Faint echoing of Canosa's voice pierces through several yards of water behind us.

"Hear what?"

"The sirens. Singing. They're close to the boat. Another minute, and they'll be here in all their, as you say, femme fatale splendor." I smile and cock my head to the side, knowing that for now I won.

"Oh, but I shouldn't be scared. Ailen here will use her magical humming thing or whatever you call it, and get us out of this. She always does, the glorious savior, the hero of the moment. Come on, prove me wrong."

"I get it. Now you need me all of a sudden. Good luck." I cross my arms in the gesture of make-me-or-else.

Ten seconds go by.

Canosa's voice is louder now, we both ignore it, like two stubborn drivers speeding towards one another in the same lane, thinking it's the other one that will yield, all the way till the imminent crash. The invisible tension between us is so thick, it can be sliced in two. A blanket of defiance, pulled from one side to the other until it rips and one of us falls flat on the face. I realize it's time to choose, underwater or air? Air or underwater?

"I thought you smarter than this." Hunter finally says and picks up the paddles.

Plop-swish, plop-swish.

Jaw muscles roll under his skin, I can almost hear his teeth grinding. The boat slides towards Union Bay. Not fast enough, nowhere near fast enough for us to escape.

"Ouch. That hurts. I'm so hurt I can't breathe." I say, but his gaze is stronger. Head down, I study my fingernails. Their bluish tint that of a corpse, their skin wet paper with traces of veins catering to my dead heart. Faint ugly pumping against the beautiful melody of Hunter's soul.

Another ten seconds pass.

I crash into the abyss of regret. From highs of fury deep into throes of vile and forlorn thoughts, in the matter of seconds. Exhausting, debilitating, paralyzing. My mood swings

tie me into a pretzel of self-hate. Aware of Hunter's stare, I don't dare to disturb the flow, lucky to be sitting next to him, savoring the moment, balancing on the edge of indecision, when the unthinkable happens.

He drops the paddles and takes my hand. I jolt with surprise. His skin is so hot, it almost burns me. I force myself to sit still, for fear of him taking it away.

"I just can't seem to be able to get you out of my system, no matter what I do. Sometimes it makes me so mad, it's like--" He falls quiet, perhaps trying to find the right words.

Now we both hear them.

Canosa, Ligeia and Teles. Their arms snake out of the water all around the boat. An octopus of lust, hell-bent on getting what they want.

For a second I see Canosa's face. "Ailen Bright, the girl who thought she could run away from it all. It's not as easy as you think, silly girl. Trust me, the game is only starting."

This is it. Forget underwater, air wins. I sit up straight, inhale as if I'm suffocating and hum.

In one powerful lurch, the boat propels forward. Canosa's hands close in empty fists over the memory of where we've been a second ago. One second too late and we'd turn into a rare occurrence of crawling maggots smack in the middle of open water.

Hunter holds my hands, silent. I hum more.

We skirt Madison beach and speed into the canal, towards the noise of the city, annoying and constant. Sadness takes over me in waves, sadness for not being good enough for Hunter. For not being alive. I can't show it, can't weep, so the sky weeps for me. It opens into a downpour.

One minute, and we're drenched.

Rain pummels the streets, a patchwork of doors, windows, and tall streetlights turned off for the day, their blind eyes oblivious to the mist. Rare passersby huddle in coats to hide from bone-chilling humidity in the air. But I love it. Rain makes me happy again. I watch the drops plummet through the sky and, on impulse, stick out my tongue to catch them.

In that moment, I'm back to being six, to the instance of wonder and tranquility when Mommy was with me, and, I mean, truly with me and not spacing out into her daydreaming or her songs. She walked me to the school bus. It was raining. I didn't like the rain and complained loudly, but Mommy said it's really sugar water because the clouds are really cotton candy. She said, if I didn't believe her, I should try catching one drop and tasting it for myself.

The ten minutes before the bus arrived flew by in a glow of happiness and laughter, my first dip into the exquisite drops of treasure, into the rare moments of love that transpired between

us, to be etched into my memory forever and then pushed deep inside. Whilst they decide to float up and bother me with their utter affection and beauty. Dreadful consonance.

Without my humming, the boat stops. We're a few yards past Aurora bridge, hovering in the narrow canal-sleeve that cuts through Fremont.

"Hey, what you doing?" Hunter glances back at the Burke-Gilman trail and beyond, to his street. "You want to lead them to my house? No way, no fucking way. You're crazy, right?"

"Got one!" I exclaim, clucking my tongue with delight, still in the daze of memory. The raindrop I caught tastes like sweet water. "Mmm."

"We're, like, being chased right now, and you're catching rain drops?" He drops my hands and slaps his knees.

I look at Hunter. It takes me a second to focus. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize. Must have gotten you here automatically." I blink, shaking off the vision that's dominating my brain. I'm not six but sixteen. Mommy is gone. Maybe Daddy is gone too. And I'm dead. And Hunter doesn't want me.

"Yes, please?"

I try humming, but my voice breaks. A new wave of pain threatens to overwhelm me. I force a cheer. "No worries, it'll take them a while, trust me. I just like rain, you know that."

Besides, I can outrun them, piece of cake, right? I'll hear them, before they even have a chance to see us. And stop being such a bore. Come on, you used to love it. We used to do it together, remember?"

He studies me quizzically, head to the side like that of a confused dog. I see a veil of understanding pass through him, in a flash of his eyes, and in his silence before talking.

"I see. Sure." He takes my hands again. "You want to play now?"

I nod enthusiastically, grateful that he didn't ask me anything, aware of a slight change to his soul's tune. A barely detectable glissando, half a pitch up. I arrest an involuntary moan, make myself smile.

"All right. I got two." Hunter shows me his tongue.

"Like I believe you." I say. "Watch this."

"What. Are you going to show me a new siren trick?"

His face lights up. I inhale, open my mouth wide, and sing a single note. Do. A capella. It shoots past cloud layers like a bar line up the grand staff, knocking them out one by one, nimbo, strato, cumulo, alto and, the highest, cirro. There, crystal by crystal, it gathers up the moisture like a mad shoplifter, scooping everything in sight into a big bag before making it for the exit. One step, two. Oh no! The foot slips, the hand lets go, the bag drops and opens. The crystals scatter

everywhere in a dazzling shower of diamonds, and fall. Fall and melt. Rush down in one orderly accolade, one thousand clef dots. Staccato.

I watch the spot in the sky above me darken and then my face gets splattered with droplets. I gulp.

"Two hundred. Can you beat that?"

"Holy cow! How the hell did you do that?" His mouth hangs open.

"Cause I can. Siren magic. That means, I win."

"Not fair!"

"Says who?"

"Hey! It doesn't count. You're not supposed to use siren powers or whatever you called it. Siren magic? That's, like, breaking the rules." Hunter theatrically sticks out his lower lip as if in defiance, and stomps feet for a good measure.

I laugh. He smiles at me laughing.

We seem to be drifting into the bliss of forgetfulness.

This is it. One minute of life as it's supposed to be. A boat trip. A girl and a boy, goofing off in the rain. They'll get wet and cold, they'll dock and have a hot drink. Then they'll get tired and go home, where dinner is waiting in the loving hands of someone who cares. And a pillow, and a blanket, and a long deep sleep.

Hunter pats me on the shoulder and I snap out of my thoughts.

"Hey, you think you're ok to, you know, keep us moving?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Where do you want me to go?"

"I don't care where, as long as it's far away and we go now." The smell of the wet city washes over me. I try to detect siren's singing. Glance over stale puddles, electric neon lights flickering in the gloom even during the day, a glistening distorted mosaic of office windows. Cars that spit out and collect hooded jackets, wool coats under umbrellas, rainproof parkas in yellow, blue, black, and grey. Always grey, to match the misery of the weather. How Seattle. I squint beyond the strip of asphalt, to thin trees, patches of grass. Sniff in the acrid air.

"I can't hear them, but that doesn't mean they're not close. Let's go."

Hunter drops the paddles. I hum.

I hum Radiohead's Creep (or, make her hum a song from Siren Suicides?) We glide double the cruising speed limit at twenty knots, parting water like melted butter, under the Ballard bridge, into Salmon bay, by Ballard locks and out of the city,

all the way into Puget Sound. Hunter's hair flips in the wind, in rhythm with the flaps of my jacket.

I get lost in the melody. It resonates through my skin, and I sing to the water in earnest, lay down, let my arms hang over the sides of the boat so they trace the waves, and look into the sky, watch air shimmer with my humming. The sky frowns, worried about me. Its eyebrows, thick furry shelf clouds, wrinkle in the middle. Is that supposed to reminisce the face of an overly concerned parent? That grey hovering type a nasty shade of genuine love's absence in place of total control?

One minute goes by, one hour, perhaps one lifetime.

A curtain of déjà vu swipes my vision back to the bathtub, head still underwater, but arms up and out of the tub, hugging the rims. Someone is shaking me by both shoulders, pulling, pulling. I gas for air and sit up.

The sky is dusky. Rain stopped. And Hunter continues shaking me, yelling in my ear.

"Shit, Ailen, snap out of it! Stop it! Look! We're in the middle of the ocean!"

## 20. Pacific Ocean.

I float. The shore is hours away. I'm in the world's largest water reservoir spread sixty million square miles over a third of the planet, thirty five thousand feet deep, now cerulean, now indigo, now blue. This is no Olympic pool, this is a cradle for life itself. But my life ended yesterday morning. Bathtub was my coffin, tiled floor my abyss, liquid my gloom. A magnifying glass my passage. I look through it now, blown away by sheer size of the vista. A gigantic lyre, concave and flooded, strings of waves stretched from yoke to yoke, linking trees like tuning pins. I want to tweak them, find the perfect pitch, play a song. Get lost. My dream is zero interruptions. Not today, it seems.

Hunter yells at me. Seagulls shriek at me. Crashing waves deafen me. Sea salt in the air burns my throat. The boat rocks my equilibrium, makes it hard to focus on the streak of dark horizon punctured with tiny lights, glistening in the dusk. On top of it, clouds rumble with displeasure, brewing a storm.

I moved a whole lake before, but a whole ocean?

With one last shake, Hunter lets go of me and sits opposite, rubbing his hands and blowing on them. I forget he

must feel cold, his sweatshirt clammy from the drizzle. I drift out of daydreaming, focus on his sleeve, stained and wet, the color of dirty rock. Count rib-knit stripes on his cuff.

One. Two. Ten.

"Did you hear what I said? You listening? *Far* doesn't mean open ocean, ok? That's taking it a bit to an extreme. You follow me? I mean, look at it. " Hunter turns his head left and right, as if there is an invisible hand stuck in his gut, operating the spine like a revolving neck attachment. "Let's get the fuck outta here before some shark swallows us—"

"There are no sharks—"

"--or some wave trips us over, or some other shit happens." Hunter licks his lips and rubs his face. "Man, I'd give anything for a drag right now."

"Are you done?" I ask, irritated at every instance of noise that penetrates my eardrums and starts dancing polka from skull bone to skull bone.

"What do you mean, I'm done. This is just wrong."

"What is?"

"Everything. You, a siren. Me, a siren hunter. Well, fired now. Us, sitting here in the middle of the ocean—"

"We're not in the middle—"

"Whatever! All of this. It's just wrong. Two days ago I was happy as a clam. My life was perfect. I had a job, I was going

to get paid, get mom her meds. I got you tickets to Siren Suicides concert. Everything was fucking fantastic. And now, this. We're stranded in the middle—"

"It's not the middle—" I raise my voice.

"I get it, all right? You know exactly what I mean, stop interrupting me. Jeez. How the hell did we get here? It's just - crazy." He finger-combs his hair and lets his hands rest there, frozen in the moment of thought. Eyes glazed, staring into nothing.

I exhale. "I don't know."

"Course you do. You know, you just don't want to tell me. Well, newsflash, it's fess up time. So come on, spill it. Looks like we're not going anywhere unless you decide to hum us all the way back before nightfall."

"Fess up what?"

"All of it. Why'd you do it. Jumped. Suicide. Not the bullshit you've been feeding me, sing beautiful songs, make the world a better place, blah blah blah. Tell me the real reason. Couldn't you just talk to your Dad? He is a real human being, after all. It's not *that* bad between you two, is it?"

"Weren't you the one advising me that he hated my guts since I was born?"

"Look, all I'm trying to say is—"

"FUCK YOU! What kind of a friend are you? You're supposed to support me, and here you are, giving me a lecture in the middle—"

"You said we're not in the middle—"

At this I scream. Hunter promptly shuts up.

"You have no idea, ok? Don't bother trying to understand, you won't get it! Nobody gets it. Nobody ever gets it. It's always 'poor Ailen', or 'we understand', or 'why don't you see the school counselor' or 'there are coping techniques' or 'it gets better with time' or 'find some friends, be more social, go out'. It's easy for you to say, isn't it? But try living in my shoes for a minute, why don't you!" I stand. Hunter shrinks back, raising his hands protectively in front of his face.

"Ok, ok, I understand. Honest."

"No, you fucking don't!" I shout. Sea foam sprays us with puffs of stinky wetness. "You're a guy!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When a guy fucks a girl-- No, when a guy fucks a ton of girls, he's a fucking rock star. And a girl? A girl is a bitch and a cunt and a whore. What if you were born with the looks that made people think all you want is to seduce, to corrupt, to steal, when none of it even crossed your mind? All because you happen to look sexy and scrumptious? I'm not talking pretty here, I'm talking desirable. Why is it bad all of a sudden? Can

you imagine living like this? Like a second sort? Being told that you're no good, no good for nothing except hauling water?" I catch my breath. The sky quickly darkens. Wind picks up and Hunter hugs himself.

"Um... I never thought of it this way."

"'Course you didn't. Nobody does. It's like a bicycle. I can tell you for hours how to ride one, but you won't get it until you actually ride it for real and feel the balance. You know where this is coming from?"

Hunter blinks at me with a confused look on his face.

"What?"

"All of it. The stuff you called *wrong*."

"Um..."

"You have no clue, do you? Well, I'll tell you. We used to be free of this shit, we used to be hunter-gatherers. We used to live in big piles of hundred to hundred and fifty people, and everyone fucked everyone, and it was all right. Until we settled. And then suddenly you had to pass your land to someone, and who would that be? A mother always knew her child, but what about a father? How could he tell? Why, own the woman, of course, and the child. Make her marry him, make her carry his name. You know what that's called? It's not marriage. No. It's ownership. OWNERSHIP."

"How do you know all this?"

"I read a book, all right? Many books. I lived it. We're like cattle to you, no good for nothing except to be fucked, give birth to children, cook meals and scrub your dirty pants while you suck on your smokes and discuss worldly matters with each other. Men." I spit. My chest heaves up and down, air whistles passing in and out of my lungs at top speed.

"Wow, girl. That's a bit drastic, don't you think?"

I'm on a roll and can't stop. "Think about it. What's a siren?"

"Well, in Greek mythology—"

"No! Remember, in the bathroom. You told me, not the mythical kind, the real siren, the girl next door?"

"Oh, that? I was kidding. Come one, I was stoned out of my mind..."

"Well, I'm not. Not kidding and not stoned." I pause, think back to Daddy's words, overheard in the car while being locked in the trunk. *You see, they're weak. Women. If it was only about the flesh, but no. They corrupt our very spirit. Steal our very souls. It's men's duty to root them out, clean up the filth. Let our spirit shine unvarnished.*

"Girls turn into sirens at puberty, when they get their first period, or the first time they have sex, or—

"—if they commit suicide by drowning."

We both finish at the same time.

"Do you get it now?"

"I think..." Hunter's teeth begin to chatter.

I both see him and don't, trying to imagine explaining my pain to Daddy, bit by bit. Imagine telling him, he got it all wrong. Describing how deeply this pain tore me apart, how I missed Mommy and how I hated him for driving her insane, for making her leave the house for weeks at a time, only to come home with a hanging head, patiently suffering his scolding, slapping, and, ultimately, behind the closed doors while he thought I was asleep and didn't hear, his abuse. I realize I've forgotten my resolve to kill him. And I realize, at this moment, I've found it again. How could I forget? I must not lose it. Under no circumstances. I can't afford do. No.

I hang my head in shame.

"I never really stopped to think about it before." I say quietly, drawing circles on the bottom of the boat with my toes. "It just seemed like the logical thing to do, you know. All led from one thing to another, from Mommy's suicide to Daddy controlling my every step, to him wanting a son and not a daughter. He never heard me sing, never even came to my choir practice." I fall silent, numb. "All I ever wanted was for him to hear me sing, if only once. For him to hear me."

Tears roll down my cheeks in a sudden cascade, I brush them off, infuriated at my own weakness. Stifling the sniffing.

Hunter's face softens, he reaches out, but I turn away. "So you thought he'd listen if you turn into a siren?"

"No. I wanted to die."

"Why?"

"'Cause there's nothing worth living for."

"Yes, there is." Hunter takes my hand. I jerk it out.

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I'm empty."

"No, you're not."

"Like you would know."

"I do."

"I'm a dead soulless creature, Hunter."

"So I heard."

"I kill people for food."

"Aha."

"And I wanted to kill you." Sharp hunger makes me cry this out. "I want to kill you now, for food!"

"No, you don't."

"Stop saying 'no' to me!" I yell. "I'm not the girl for you, Hunter, would you get that into that stupid brain of yours?" I tap on his temple. "Not worth the effort, get it? Screwed up, broken, and cold. How many times do I have to tell you?" I bend and rain my fists on him. It must hurt, because I'm strong. He lets me, until I stop. Until I get it all out, using his shoulders as support, leaning on him, breathing. The boat

shakes dangerously on a wave. I hear a fishing boat and see it trail closer to us out of the corner of my eye. A trawler of some sort, its net drum manned by fishermen in orange overalls, looking like fire ants from the distance. Sea gulls scatter away from it, screeching.

I want to turn my head to take a better look, but Hunter cups my face in his hands. I attempt to escape the burning sensation, my foot catches on the slippery bottom and I promptly fall on my butt.

Hunter scoots next to me. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah." I say.

"Good."

And before I can say anything else, he kisses me.

Just like that, in the middle of the ocean.

One second I strain against it, another give in. His fire sears my crying and spreads from my lips to the tips of my fingers, aglow and tingling. It's a hot soak after freezing outside for hours, the bubbly goodness that turns my skin all prune and peach and rosy. His soul sings the secret dream of my life. Vivaldi at his best, the magnificent virtuoso, four violins thunderstruck with affection. Second movement. Adagio e piano. Presto.

I glance up and see behind the outline of Hunter's head the trawler cruise towards us at a leisurely speed. It's easily four

times the length of our twelve-foot boat. Its many outriggers stick out this way and that, like legs of a giant insect that's gone belly up, holding its prey in a tangle of nets wrapped around the gallows on the deck.

*You can eat my what?* I think. *I'm not breaking the kiss for you, go around, damn it.* It bobs closer. Now a couple hundred yards away, now fifty or so. Its clunky engine revolutions and fishermen's souls interrupt the general buzz of the ocean. Mysteriously, I'm not annoyed. I decide, there is enough time to steer the boat away before they reach us.

I close my eyes. This is what I call a kiss, a general melting into each other without time or worry or memories of any kind. I'm enveloped in Hunter's melody and am tuning the rest of the noises out. I don't care if someone sees us from aboard or calls police. I'll deal with them later. Nothing exists right now except this overwhelming warmth. I want more. I don't want it to end.

We sway, glued to each other. I grab the sides of the boat on instinct, loving this motion, this rocking, this...

Several things happen in rapid succession.

Canosa materializes out of nowhere and, grinning, with words, "Ailen Bright, my favorite food kisser," grabs the oarlock blocks on the boat's rim like two pot handles and yanks up. The boat creaks with sodden wood and tilts to the left. Our

kiss breaks mid-breath. We tip and dunk into the freezing water. The boat follows, covering us with darkness.

All sound dampens, water gurgles in my ears, my gills unfold, grateful for the dip, but there is no time to dwell. Hunter's face looks at me through the murk, Canosa's hands on his neck, pulling him down. I kick towards them, grab under Hunter's armpits and twist him out of her grip, up and out of the water.

He gasps for air in quick short inhales and shivers. "What the hell?" His trembling hands clamps onto me like iron grips.

"That bitch!"

As I turn around to look for Canosa and yell, the trawler is upon us. An inverted creature, gliding on its hull like on a polished scaly back. Its eyes black tire fenders, its fake teeth a wire-pattern of rusted handrails that lost all enamel years ago. I open my mouth and a shot rings through me.

BAM!

It hits my right side, and I go limp. Searing pain traces my throat and my eyeballs threaten to pop, eyelids droop over them for protection. The world takes on a blurry quality as if viewed through a thin layer of clear water. Wobbly, unclear, discolored.

Two fishermen, both in knit caps and protective headphones, lean over the rail, one of them aiming a big plastic gun at me, like the one Daddy used. A sonic weapon.

And we sink. My grip loosens and Hunter drifts out of my arms. I splash in a tangle of surprise and fear, too slow, too chaotic. It's like being in a dream and trying to run through the water, trying to control muscles that are not listening as if they acquired a mind of their own and are in no particular hurry, no matter how loud you scream or yell.

My eyes fully closed, I can only hear the distorted noises through the sea, the grinding and revolving and metal crunching. I lift hands to my face and pull my eyelids apart, to force myself to see. It's dark, I'm under the trawler. I grope around and feel a rope, multiple ropes, criss-crossed.

A net! I'm inside a net.

The noise intensifies and the net digs into my flesh, pushes something towards my back. I reach and feel the warmth. Hunter. We're inside a trawl net being pulled up, a catch of the day. Another second, and we're lifted out of the water, squeezed like fresh cheese, me on top of Hunter. Noise of the machinery erupts and intensifies, as if a cloud of bees decides to descend on me, all at once, their buzzing magnified ten times. I clasp my ears. Think about Hunter. My ears don't matter. I cringe and take my hands away to feel for him. He's as cold as dead.

The drum turns, the net tightens. I have no strength to tear it open, to get out. I want to sing, I want to move the entire ocean like I moved the lake, inhale and..

BAM!

Another shot and I faint.

## 21. Stern Trawler.

Blackness is absolute. The slow throbbing in the back of my head is akin to dipping in and out of reality. An oscillating swing on a continuous pendulum. Pump forward, lean back. Lunge ahead, retreat. Forward again. Fly up, reach a window not fully closed, press nose towards the glass. What clever torture. The second I think I'm there, the swing pulls me back. Perhaps it's not a window at all, but a mirror without reflection. Suspended from ropes, I peer in, thinking that maybe, if I let go and stretch out my arms, the curtain will part and let me into another world, another life, one without pain or noise or interruptions, a complete bliss. Except it's missing something. The light. Happiness in the dark? Forget it. I'd rather suffer from overexposure, no matter how ugly. Decision made, I open my eyes and take a breath.

From darkness to light in under a second, a migraine hits me, prompted by saw-blade noise of the net drums, topped with the wind, the seagulls, and the shouting from the deck below. My arms ripple with gooseflesh, mouth tightens in the grimace of pain. Pain from sensory overload.

The strain and creaking of the gallows, as if suspending a hydra for an execution. The bright orange of the flotation worksuits reeking of mildew. The rotten egg smell and bitter taste of seawater. The rough twines cutting into my skin, a nylon and polypropylene wonder of modern fishing.

We're in the air, dangling from the gantry crane, about to be dropped on the deck. Two men, with big clunky headphones over their beanies, peer at us, their features sharp and sinister in the ocean mist. I sense lurking fear in their bones, souls afire with trepidation. It gives me immediate satisfaction, even a smile.

One of them, the tall haggard forty-something looking man with irregular stubble on his chin, points a flashlight at me. Blinded, I retract. My elbows dig into Hunter's stomach and he groans. The soft part of me wants to scream, *he's alive!* The sinister part says, *you knew it already, so stop being so melodramatic.* It's right. His melody never left me. Only retreated to an echo, now back at half the volume. The soothing concerto dwindling to an end. I feel his skin, it's cold. He's suffering from hypothermia. I need to get us out and warm him up before it's too late.

The drone of the rolling chain makes me twist in agony and cover my ears, as if it will help. Not now. Not this. *Focus, Ailen, Focus.* Find out who is manning this trawler, how many of

them are there, where did they get the sonic weapon and how did they know how to use it. Questions swirl one on top of another like a pile of restless maggots. Are there other siren hunters besides Daddy? Can there be? Does that mean there are also other sirens? Perhaps hundreds or even thousands? More? It strikes me that the ocean is vast and I have no idea how many there might be.

I take hands off my ears, dig fingers into the net, stretch out my neck in an effort to listen through this racket. Two, no, three human souls, an auditory version of mixing different colors of paint into one ghastly brown mess. The one on the bridge, probably the skipper, sounding more like stale fish. I stifle a gag reflex, wondering if they seem so rotten on purpose. Another siren hunter protective measure. If there are the ones without a soul, there must be those whose soul stinks. I wonder if there is a third kind. The one who sounds deliciously sweet but poisons you from inside as soon as you swallow it.

The tall man whistles.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, Jimmy? You never whistle on a boat, it's bad luck!" The squat man shouts.

"Sweet Jesus mother Mary the blessed virgin, save me. Would you look at that." The tall man's soul jumps in fear, as he

points with his index finger. "God almighty, it's just a couple of kids!"

The squat man jerks off the headphones askew on the tall man's head and yells into his ear. "You heard what the man said, he wants them alive. We get the cash and wash our hands. So stop being a sissy. Let's be done with it." He grins an unpleasant smile that cuts through the middle of his round face, scathed by winds into a red muzzle of a beer drinker.

Jimmy pushes back the headphones, kneads his pockets.

"You're worried about them, Jimmy? All right." He looks up and opens his mouth so wide, I can see rows of yellowing teeth framed around a purplish tongue and a trembling uvula.

"Hey kids, you all right?" He shouts. I attempt to pull myself up from Hunter, but my muscles give out, and all I do is shake fists in weak hate.

"See, they're fine."

The squat man slaps Jimmy on the back and waves to the skipper. The drums begin their rolling dance, cling-clang, cling-clang. We descend level with the fishermen. Jimmy nervously steps closer, the squat man waves the sonic gun around, pulling on the rope to set us free.

"Glen, I'm not sure about this..."

"I can't hear you, you idiot." He taps on his headphones, then shouts into the tall man's face. "You want your pay, you keep your mouth shut. Haul them in and be done. Split it!"

Jimmy glances at us, as if unsure, then pulls on the rope. I feel the codend of the net unzip like a loose thread of a sweater, loop by loop, and we fall out onto the slimy deck with a sickening crunch, Hunter on top of me, grabbing onto my hair, all the way through a round opening the size of a large manhole, into a square-sided metal chute, tumbling down on a conveyor belt in the wet lab lit with fluorescents, and, finally, into the corner on the floor next to a gigantic freezer bin for fish, stinking of spoiled herring and oozing condensed coldness.

We tumble into the rusty wall painted white a long time ago and now peeling and smelling of iron. Eroded and tarnished. I look at the ceiling, its lines jutted eyebrows, frowning. Its metal beams fold and creases of a face. Some Greek god that's been abandoned and will eat us for the lack of worship. A mythological creature turned from outside in and gone insane. I blink, the vision vanishes. I rub my temples, that sonic blast must have hit me really hard.

I can hear Glenn's soul walking across the deck up to the bridge, and Jimmy breathing down the hole, uncertain, muttering under his breath.

Then...

BAM!

...the lid over the opening slams shut, and the lights go out at once.

It's pitch black. Disoriented, I feel around for Hunter, call his name, but talking hurts. My words sound hollow in the hushed silence.

"Hunter, you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Never felt better, thanks for asking. What about you, you ok?" He groans, his breath rolls over me in a wave of warmth.

"Yeah, fine."

We perform mutual palpation, like in one of those kids games, playing doctor or hospital. Feeling each other. Face, neck. Exchanging observations. Did you see the gun? And those headphones? That's against my voice, right? Yeah. Shoulders, arms. Did they say some guy hired them? I wonder who. Yeah. Hands, fingers. That bitch Canosa, can you believe it? I thought I could trust her. Yeah. Shoulders, face again.

"Jeez, you're freezing! I wish I could warm you up somehow." I grit my teeth and rub his sleeves, he grabs my hands to stop me.

"You're not helping, Ailen. Relax and enjoy the scenery, all right?"

"How can you—" I pause. "What, what-- What's this? Do you hear?" I notice that my voice comes out dull. I sing a note. All

sharpness and thrill gets sucked out of it the second it leaves my lips.

"It's soundproof!"

"Course it is." Hunter says.

"How would you know?"

"Dunno. Just guessing. But it's one hell of a siren hunter's boat, I tell ya. Your Daddy's thing is a toy compared to this baby. This is how the big guys play."

There is a tone of admiration in his voice, badly covered up by deliberate sarcasm. On some deep level his comment pokes me in the wrong place, and I feel like defending Daddy's boat and his hunting legacy. I'm mad at the thought, but it already made me angry and formed the words before I could arrest them.

"I think my dad hired these guys. In fact, I'm positive. Perhaps this trawler was his all along, and he simply never told me."

"Look at you, Daddy's girl all over again, are you?" Badly covered contempt seeps through his remark.

Suddenly, fury pounds in my skull with blazing intensity. "It's got nothing to do with him. I hate him, and you know it!"

"Awesome. Point taken. Agree. Hey, I don't know about you, but I don't feel like arguing. I feel like a nice long joint on my favorite couch under a warm fuzzy blanket. So I'm outta of here." He drops my hands and scoots away.

"Oh yeah? So you're the smart one here? Ok. Explain to me how exactly you're planning to escape. I'm all ears." I cross my arms and wait. I can't believe I was actually kissing this guy not too long ago.

"I don't know. Out!" He bangs his fist on a wall to a childish thud. "We'll figure it out when we get there." He hits it again and again. Breathes hard.

"When we get where? Let's see here, I think I understand. We somehow manage to pry open the metal belly of this beast, quickly, too, before those guys are back. And then we'll swim out and fly off into the night sky, on magic wings, and then land on some fucking paradise island with a loud splat. Am I right?" It's not the time to be sarcastic, but I can't help it.

"What do you suggest?" Hunter says angrily, and then sneezes loudly, several times. I can hear him wipe off the snot with his sleeve.

"See, you're already sick. I can survive swimming in cold water forever, but you can't."

"What do you care?" His voice catches at the end. I immediately feel awful.

"Why are you so bitter all of a sudden? Everything was fine an hour ago." It comes out wrong, of course. I grope for him in the dark, but Hunter scoots farther away. "What's wrong? What did I say wrong?"

Heavy breathing.

"Nothing."

I wait. Sometimes silence is the best answer. Sometimes knowing when to shut up is better than knowing what to say. Sure enough, it works.

"I'm just scared is all." Hunter deflates, sniffs, shuffles his feet on the metal floor.

"So you're mad at me because you're scared? First, you're not scared, acting all brave and funny. Now you are scared. I'm confused. Scared of what? I don't understand."

"Scared of losing you. Again."

I don't know what to say. And I don't need to, because before I can say anything, a voice comes alive behind us, in the corner of the wet lab.

"Ailen Bright. What a catch. Let's see how long you can hold on to her, Hunter Crossby."

That's one leech I badly want to see wriggle to death at the moment.

"Canosa? You've been here the whole time? How did you get in here before us?" I turn around.

"Lovely, I must say. I'm tearing up. Frankly, I couldn't hope for more. Thank you, thank you. What a game. What a closing performance." She claps. Her palms make a sickening sound of wet flesh smacked as if to advertise its freshness at a butcher's

stand, at the market. Tiny hairs on my forearms stand up and I want to retch.

"You--" I start.

The door to our right busts open. A shaft of light scares away the darkness in one dusty triangle and Jimmy and Glen materialize on either side. A waft of sea air follows the light and breaks up the odor monotony. I smell the stink again, hear Jimmy's and Glen's souls, sandwiched into an noxious duo. Repulsive.

The soft in me rejects it, the sinister is grinning. It tells me, *it's show time, Ailen. You can do it.* It nags at me, *come on, eat them. Suck out their moisture, sing at one hundred thirty decibels to make them lose their minds, bend these walls with your voice, gut this baby, make its every screw pop out and sink.* And I know I want to. *Like at Lake Union, remember? Come on.* I know, I know, I want to answer, but I'm terrified that I can't do it at will.

The squat man reaches for Hunter, and that's my cue. I push Hunter aside and pull the man in, head down, hop on top of him, eagle-spread his arms and pin him to the floor. I squeeze his wrist until he lets go of the sonic gun, pick it up, at the same time knock him out with my forehead, twist around and fire into the direction of Canosa.

The gun feels light and artificial in my hands. As I push the trigger, I'm afraid to crush it.

I'm wrong. This is no plastic toy. The blast nearly throws me off balance and the echo inside the small enclosure we're in threatens to shake the walls loose and make them collapse on top of us. I tighten every muscle in my body and suffer through the vibration, feeling as though a hot metal spike has been rammed through my eardrums and turned. Once, twice, three times. Driven deeper, piercing my brain in a thousand places at once.

I swallow a cry.

Canosa gasps, and I know I've got a hit. Her wheezing balloons my ears, and I fire again, just to make sure.

BAM!

Pain threatens to break my skull and shatter every bone, but it becomes tolerable, as if my teeth are being drilled without anesthesia in some other distant room, and I observe them from behind a looking glass, jaws empty, smacking my lips in the anticipation of putting back the dentures when ready.

The tall guy, Jimmy, drops whatever it is he was holding and flees with a wail. It rolls on the floor and comes to a stop as it hits the wall with a hushed din. It sounds hollow and weightless. Must be another sonic gun, never used.

"Hunter, you all right?" I scream, but wince at my own voice. The aftershock of the boom is buzzing with a hundred

flies around my head, nagging and constant. Metallic tasting bile fills my throat, and I force it down. Turn my head away from the door and peer into the back of the lab. Hunter's face is grey in the dim light, stretched into a mask of horror and surprise. He yells something and waves his arms, but I glimpsed what I needed to see and tune him out before he can stop me.

I drop the gun aside, force-open Glen's eyelids to establish contact for igniting his soul, slap him on the face to make him see me. He coughs. His reddish eyelashes flutter like that of a shy boy, now bleached and thinned out with age. His pupils slowly appear on the upturned sclera, dilated and drowsy. Two fermata points, poked into a spin of russet irises. Good enough for me to start.

I link them with mine, like two notes on the same line, connect them with a tie, mine on the left, his on the right. It can't be a slur, otherwise it won't work. I don't know how I know this, I just do. There is an invisible snap that shimmers between us with connected darkness. Mezzo piano. In that instant, his face softens with a childish glow. And I remember what Hunter said about siren's victims. *They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped. They search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What's creepy is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

It crosses my mind that sirens are most vulnerable while feeding, because of the necessary eye contact and time it takes to sing out a soul. I brush the thought aside. My chest rumbles with hunger in the anticipation. Glen's soul wavers, tries to hide, all its cow-bells and whistles and bad drunken tunes.

"I'm sorry, Glen. I will kill you now. But before that, I will make you happy." I inhale and force my voice into the air, force it to come out loud and clear despite the soundproof walls that threaten to hush it into nothing.

"You...

"Will never find...

"What you're looking for,

"What you're looking for."

And my song ends there, because a sound explodes around me, in my body, in my head. I go limp, falling with my face directly onto Glen's beer-belly. He's beginning to stir under me, coming to his senses. The smell of his sweat mixed with the stench of years of fishing and spoiling his soul with beer drinking and who knows what else make me lift my face despite the weakness.

What I see is something I thought I'd never get a chance to see again. Something that is akin to a violation of one's privacy when closed off in a locked place. One place where the typical rules don't apply, one where men and women are equal. But no amount of blinking changes what I see.

Daddy.

His figure a black marker outline, roughly colored in, sharp against the grey rectangle of the door opening. Illuminated from the back so that it almost glows. Dressed in the same orange rain suit as the two fishermen, but somehow smelling of newness, of resin and synthetic lining and protective waterproof coating, as if snagged from the factory's floor while still warm. Doused in the best chemical odor. A perfect mixture of compounds, fixatives and solvents. Even his rain boots emit a scent of rubber latex.

Daddy takes a step forward with that squeaky sound, like he's rubbing a balloon. His face stretches into a knowing smile, just as my heart both soars, *He's alive!*, and drops, *He's alive*.

"That's my girl. Good work." He points at Canosa. "However, sweetie, unless you want to hurt your lover boy here, I suggest you save your breath. What I'm saying is, I'm glad to see you. Ailen." Daddy pronounces my name as if he struggles with each letter.

"Daddy?" I manage.

"You abandoned me in your haste, how inconsiderate." He takes another step, his right hand behind his back, his smile all-accomodating and fake-welcoming. "We'll talk about this when we get home. Here is to make sure you get the message this time."

Before I have time to react, he takes his right hand from behind his back and aims at me the wide muzzle of another sonic gun.

BOOM!

A blast of condensed wind explodes next to my ears.

I black out.

## 22. Dry Lab.

I burn at the stake, my spine its post, my misery its fire. I smell my own hair singed with heat, hear my skin crack as it starts to blacken and curl and split. Sweet vapor of my juices wafts up my nose. My brain is about to boil. Recant or endure? Too late. The choice has been made. I'm welcomed to where I began, into divine fold between life and death, the one that rips open as soon as it's entered. Before my vocal cords dissolve in this brilliant blaze, I want to utter one final cry. It starts at the edge of one hundred square yards of lungs, speeds through eight inches of trachea, streams into larynx, my voice box, and promptly dies on the back of my tongue, stifled by a wall. I'm gagged.

My whole body shakes with a burst of dry cough. It whoops into a bundle of cloth stuffed in the cavity of my mouth. Paroxysmal a la caesura. It tastes of saliva and salty cotton. My lips sting, stretched out to the biggest 'O' they can make, pulling skin tight over my jaw, unhinged to near breaking. My chest aflame, my gills feel cracked and dry. There is a tingling pinkishness that comes to view. Skin penetrated by light.

I open my eyes.

I'm on the floor of a padded room. A single light flickers on the ceiling through a net of protective wires. Series of square pillows cover walls the color of washed out sand. Everything about this room is soft. The filtered lighting, the foam on the walls, even the stuffy smell of real ocean scent. And I know that this room is soundproof. Perhaps specifically designed for locking up caught sirens. Yell all you want, nobody will hear. Not like I can test this theory now, no chance of that thanks to a gag.

The floor shifts and sways. This means I'm still on the boat. But what boat this is and how I got here, I can't remember.

I suck in the air through my nose and smell the stench of fake leather. My attention turns from head to body. It's numb as if not there. I try moving. No use. I tighten my abdomen, and, with an inaudible grunt, lift my head to look down the length of my torso.

Ailen Bright, the pupa.

Chalky cotton holds me in a cocoon, perhaps same cotton that fills my mouth. I'm the wound, cleaned with running water, washed with soap, rinsed and dressed in layers of gauze. From an embryo sixteen years ago, to a larva feeding on human souls, to a pupa, will I ever reach the stage of imago? Will I ever sprout

wings and fly? And if I do, what pattern will be painted on them? A face or a skull?

I try to flex my hands, pretend I'm playing a piano. It doesn't work. Pathetic. Can't move a finger, but I can bend. I arch and contract like a leech pinned under a stick. Wiggle. Roll over. Facing the soft padded floor, I retch into my gag, pause for breath, roll again. The room revolves around me like a kaleidoscope, a cube of mirrors supposed to contain a multitude of colored bits of glass. Instead, it's only me.

One minute goes by, maybe one hour.

Breathing through the nose is getting harder. My gills are dry to the point of lacerating. One more flex, just one more. I roll, bend at the knees as much as the cocoon allows, and hit the wall with my feet. Once, twice, three times. Pause to breathe. Hit again. Nothing, no sound. Not even the tiniest vibration. How many layers of foam are there?

The swaying of the floor makes me dizzy. I lift my head off the floor and shake it. Can't quit now, can't. I bite into the gag and hit the wall again, then again. Pause to rest. Hit again. Repeat.

The kaleidoscope turns, as if someone is peeking through its lens, amused but bored, seeking that new fascinating combination. I roll away from the wall, now back to it again.

Another hour goes by. Or maybe two? I've lost sense of time. Is it night or day? What was it that needed to be done? Nothing comes to mind except one very clear goal. I have to hit the wall until someone hears.

I bend and stomp on it one more time with as much force as possible. The shock from the hit pricks my feet with needles.

Something gives. A foreign noise breaks through the matted silence. A jingle of keys, a turn of the lock, a click and revolutions of the handwheel, a swoosh against high threshold like the rubbery sound of two latex gloves brushing each other.

The door opens. Set at about six inches off the floor, it has rounded corners, and looks sound, water, weather, and splash-tight, not mentioning, perhaps, siren-tight as well.

There is no soul and I know who it is, yet still raise my head to look him straight in the face.

*Hi, Daddy, you came in to check on me, I say with my eyes, what a treat.*

He holds my gaze, steps inside, shuts the door with a metal clank. I don't see what he wears, don't notice the style of his hair or the smell of his cologne. There are only two dark pupils that burrow into my consciousness with vivid hate, this time unmasked, borne from a deep place inside his being, perhaps one that's beyond mending, that's been torn out of him a long time ago, maybe when he was child. A horrible empty hole that he

didn't know how to fill with love, so he decided to fill it with hate, because keeping it empty hurt more than filling it with something, any junk, anything at all. To survive.

Three seconds, that's as long as I last.

A terrible grief floods my gut. To my horror, tears of understanding cascade down the sides of my face. All anger gone, I'm back on the highway of sorrow. I blink and keep my eyes closed, wiling lids to keep running water.

That thing that's gone, that place that's been torn out of him, I know what it is. I've known it all along. His soul. He has no soul. It's gone. For the first time, I wonder who took it, and I want to hunt that creature and tear her apart, with my teeth, my nails, my screams, my everything I have. I want to yell in her ear, "You bitch! You give it back to him! Now! You give back to him what's his, you fucking thief!"

And in that moment, I realize something else. The futility of my attempts. There is no use singing to him, he'll never hear, without a soul he's deaf. It's not that he doesn't want to, maybe he does. It's just that he can't. There is no apparatus that is able to receive my signal and transmit it into intelligible wavelength that can be transcoded by his brain into a jolt to his heart, that can in turn interpret it as a feeling. The one and only feeling that's worth living for.

Love.

This is how it works. A siren dies if a man successfully resist her charm, her temptation, her seduction. In short, her voice. This is how Mommy must have died. Perhaps she was a siren? Is that why she was so obsessed with her songs, why she would disappear for weeks at a time? Could it be? If she fell off the bridge as a siren, could it be that she's still alive? Could a siren and a man spawn a child? These questions make me dizzy with horror and glee at the same time. If I ask Daddy, will he tell me the truth? If only I could make him hear. I decide, if he won't hear me, at least I'll die trying.

There is only one way to fight emptiness. By being empty back.

Daddy walks up to me, looks into my face, traces my tears with his gaze. His obvious distaste hits me with such force, I cringe. I don't want to see. That greying hair pulled away from a strained forehead with an expensive gel, those raised questioning eyebrows, groomed with tweezers. Those big round eyes drilling into mine.

He hovers a hand over me in a gesture of parental impulse to console. Air fills with chlorinated smell of faucet water, freshly scrubbed skin, and soap. I breathe in through the nose, ready to faint.

"There, there. Quiet now. So nice to have you back." His face blocks the lamp.

I shrink, my tongue and limbs tied, flat on the floor, nice target for his shoes, to be stepped on and kicked and kicked. I expect no less, empty and ready.

"You all right?"

*Eat my guts, I want to say. Like you care.*

His face wavers with a tint of fear, and then it's gone. I smile. He leans closer, mouth tight.

"Sorry, I couldn't quite hear you. What was that you said?"  
A hand curled over his ear, all attention.

I go through a repertoire of foul words in my mind, from bastard to asshole to creep. Add 'fucking' as a mandatory adjective in front of each word and try saying them, one by one. My throat wouldn't budge. Some mumble comes out instead, mixed with ragged nasal breathing. But I think he sees the poison in my glare, because he takes his hand away and stands up.

Now I notice he's dressed in a suit, immaculate, as always, as if about to depart for an outdoor opera performance at The Baths of Caracalla in Rome, flying in on a private jet. Complete with a cashmere scarf carelessly draped over his shoulder against the mild September breeze.

He looks into distance, as if focusing on some point miles away from the room we're in.

"My dear Ailen. What you don't understand is, your future is what's at stake." I glean the bottom of Daddy's shoe, of the

finest Italian leather, as he kicks right into my gills, swift and precise.

SMACK!

Hear the sound of impact. Yelp into cotton. Contain the agony, revel in the mastery of suppressing pain. That's what I do. My Daddy, he stands and looks. Cold and calculating.

I witness the sole of his shoe one more time. A twisted neck and an arrested cry later, I'm back to our lovely exchange of familial gazing. A new level of love, beyond the one Hunter mentioned in one of our conversations. A brief moment of memory makes me wonder where Hunter is, but I easily disregard it. In favor of this new game. It's not passive-aggressive like he explained. Oh no, this is so much better. It's violent to the point of mutual joy. Perverted, if you will. A contest of absence of any feeling.

*It'll take more than that, Daddy, you know that, I'm sure.*  
I say with my eyes and smile. I see my message reflect in his face. Good.

"What you don't understand is, life is hard. It's not all clear water, sand castles, and sun. It's a mirage. The second you dip in your foot, you sink into a swamp. What I want you to learn is, good things come to those who wade all the way through, to the other side."

Another kick. I hardly feel it this time, grinning from ear to ear, as much as I can with the gag in my mouth. He can see, because a muscle twitches slightly on his cheek.

"Oh, does it hurt? Tell me how you feel." He squats and strokes my gills with one finger, gnarled and long. I wince. The muscles behind his ears stretch his lips into a thin sneer, toothy and cold.

I look straight into his colorless eyes and don't waver this time, don't blink.

"What I want you to learn is, discipline is the answer. Learn to suppress the pain, learn to carry on even when you feel like you want to die." He steps on my neck. I can't breathe. Blood swells in my vessels, fills my eyes, pulses in my ears. My gills open and close like a gaping mouth of a fish thrown on sand. A siren can't be strangled to death, yet I suffer the pain all the same. I manage to suppress it. It's like witnessing your own bones and sinew being crushed, but from a safe distance of the executioner.

My cry for help is taped shut. I push the pain deeper still, to the point where my nerve endings are frozen as if stunted by a strong dose of anesthesia.

One minute goes by. I don't flinch, don't make a sound, don't blink, hold his stare and don't look away.

Foot off, he lets go.

"Good, Ailen, good. Push the pain down. Practice silence."

I take a sharp breath. My nostrils flare. His face convulses in disgust, he steps away from me as if from a road kill that stinks.

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

*I want to sing!* I wish I could yell it out loud.

"Contrary to what you think, I care for you. Deeply. That's why I'm being so hard on you. I want to help you carve out a place in this world. You've proven to me, by being hard to catch, that perhaps you're worth more than just hauling water. Perhaps. I intend to test this theory. When we cut your vocal cords, you'll become useful to me. You'll help me with an important task, killing sirens, every one of them, and, as payment, I will let you stay alive."

A chill runs down my spine.

Before I have any time to react, he pounds on the door, no, on its viewing window. I was right about the kaleidoscope then, was Daddy looking on this entire time? Was it part of his game, to watch me squirm and squiggle? I shudder. Rubber on rubber, the door slowly opens, as if hesitating, comes to a stop with barely a gap ajar.

I want to gasp, to be deaf. I want someone to pierce my eardrums for good, so as not to hear. Not now, not this. Not the melody of the happiness I can never have. Canosa was right, this is torture. I'd be better off dead.

Hunter takes small steps inside, looking beaten and haggard in his dirty jeans and sweatshirt, matted hair over his pale face. His head down, he creaks the door open more, avoids looking at me, minces his feet.

"Don't just stand there, pick her up. Please." Daddy throws his hands in the air and rubs his temples.

"Do we really have to do this? I mean--"

"I said, pick her up."

"But you could simply send her away or--"

"Pick her up!"

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

*Hunter, oh, Hunter, why, why?* I want him to see my eyes.

He looks at my stomach, bends, pushes his right arm under my knees, his left under my shoulders, squats and heaves me up with a grunt. I feel his warmth through the cotton layers, his beating heart going over a hundred beats a minute, out of tune with his soul's concerto.

I'm a swaddled baby, hungry and distraught, in need of care, missing my mother, handled by two men who don't know how to properly care for a newborn. Pity.

As if sensing my thoughts, having barely lifted me off the ground, Hunter loses balance, drops me, and falls down on his butt, head hanging in humiliation.

"Well, I can't so it. She's too heavy."

"What's the matter, Hunter? I'm sure you've fantasized about carrying her over the threshold, didn't you? Here is your chance. Or does she seem too much a burden for you, boy?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I meant, maybe--"

"Do me a favor, stop talking and do what you're told, fast, please. Unless you want to break our agreement."

At this I perk up. What agreement? Did Daddy hire him again? Hunter nods and leans to hoist me up. I see his face now, tight mask of grief and strain.

*Hunter, I say into the gag, don't do this, please. Please, don't. Just let me die, I don't care.* Hushed mumble comes out.

"Don't talk." Daddy says, pressing his foot on my neck, then taking it off. "It's better that way. Learn to be quiet. Carry on."

Beads of sweat prickle Hunter's forehead. He squats, spreads his legs apart for added balance, and, with a strained groan, heaves me off the floor, a bundle of cloth, anger, and fear. He bends his knees, springs up for momentum and folds me over his shoulder.

My nose hits his back. I enter the smells of sea, dried sweat, and turbulent emotion. Like a newborn, I can't talk, only feel. This is being born the wrong way, to the wrong people, who carry me out in the wrong fashion. Caught fish position, back curved, head down, fins flattened. Yet there is gentleness that wasn't there when Daddy lifted me, to stuff me in the trunk of his car.

Hunter's movements are fluid, soft, akin to a waltz. The swaying boat adds to the illusion. I imagine it's the senior prom I never had, never will have. This is my minute of fantasy that's better than nothing.

I'm wrapped in cotton, but to me it's a fine gown made of ivory silk. Hunter hugs my knees, but I feel like he hugs my waist to pull me closer. He walks out the door, but I think it's the entrance to the ballroom. He hobbles with me on his shoulder through the dimly lit corridor, but I know it's a dance. Every step exquisitely performed.

The standing foot, halted for a full waltz measure. The moving foot, suspended mid-air, then dragging slowly. Rise and fall, shoulders move smoothly, parallel to the floor. Left foot change, right foot change, step promenade. Gradual, tender.

"In here, please."

"Isn't there another way? Please?" Hunter pleads.

This snaps me out of my vision, I smell the stink of damp hair, glue, and decay, turn my head to look.

Fluorescent lighting tubes and pipes fill the low ceiling like a bunch of trumpets cramped together. Another door protrudes from the wall. It peels old whitish paint and sports a yellow sign that spells *Chem Lab* in black letters, and, below, *CAUTION, Hazardous Materials Beyond This Point*. The idea of my vocal cords being taken out makes me shake so hard I nearly wiggle out of Hunter's embrace. A blow to the back of my head makes me hang still.

Daddy's so quiet, so important. His hand in his pocket. The clickety-clack of keys, smooth on insert. The turn of the spindle, the click of the bolt. The spinning of the handwheel. Hinges groan. The door opens into a pitch-black room.

Daddy's practiced hand reaches inside.

Bright light floods me with a thousand suns. I'm blind.

Hunter carries me in and lays me down into something hard and cold. I blink like mad trying to make the afterglow vanish to take in the room. My vision adjusts, and I wish my eyes were gagged, not my mouth.

## 23. Chem Lab.

There are bathrooms that lock, and then there are bathrooms that nail you shut in their bellies like funerary caskets gone mad. This is the latter kind. A hybrid between an old-fashioned lavatory, a surgery room, and a communal shower. Its walls painted metal, its decor operating tools hanging from the hooks, its central feature an antique clawfoot cast iron tub standing on a raised platform directly in the middle of the room. An exact copy of the tub at home, except the sirens are gone. All, but me. There is no faucet either, instead, a pipe opens directly over my head, about two feet away. Several leather straps curl on tub's bottom like dead snakes with eyes long gone, cutting into my cocoon through layers of gauze. My guts fill with lead.

Daddy closes the door shut, rolls the handwheel to his satisfaction, and waves at Hunter. "Please, proceed."

There is a pause. I inhale and tears roll down my face from the burn, there is so much chlorine in the air.

"How do I know you'll hold to your part of the bargain? How do I know you won't kill her after it's done? For all I care, this is just another one of your sick experiments." Hunter curls

his hands in fists. Fluorescent lighting throws sharp shadows under his features.

Daddy stands by the door, looks over him, coolly. "Do you think you have a choice?"

"I need a guarantee. Some sort of paper or something with your name on it. And your signature. Get that?" His voice catches at the end.

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

"That's not what I said. I said--"

"I'm asking you a simple question, Hunter. There are only two simple answers to it. Yes or no. Which would it be?"

"You're twisting my words, man."

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

There are several steps and I feel a plastic nozzle touch my forehead.

"No --I mean, yes --I mean, I agree. Don't touch her, please. I'll do it." Hunter brushes fingers through his hair, as if to hold on to something.

"Good. She's all yours." Daddy steps away.

Hunter leans in, his hands shake as he reaches for the straps, pulls them from underneath me and fastens me in, tight with tension under Daddy's watchful eyes. Bronze buckles clink against porcelain, as he keeps missing the holes, struggling with separating prongs from the frames to latch them. I wish they were blue, my favorite color, perhaps that would've made me feel better. But they're brown. I hate brown. Three is my favorite number, but there are four belts. Another miss. It's my unlucky day.

I study Hunter's face, his pressed lips, but he turns sideways, purposefully avoiding me. I can't even moan, throat stuffed tight with cotton, but I burn a hole in his forehead, staring, and he finally steals a glance.

"Hunter, please," I try saying. Nothing comes out, but he blinks. He's nervous. His soul is a mix of sad sweetness, guilt, and shame. I let myself get lost in it, just to retreat from reality into sound. The sound that only I can hear.

Daddy reaches in and checks the straps.

"Good job." He gives Hunter a quick pat on the shoulder.

"You can start."

The floor lurches and lights flicker, both Hunter and Daddy grab the tub for balance. The boat must have hit a big wave.

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

Hunter stretches out his arm to the wall, groping for something. Something I don't want to see.

What I want is to kick the bathtub. What I want is to destroy the boat. A thousand escape plans form in my head in rapid succession, draining the rest of my mental energy. This is final. There is no way out. It's the knowledge of being locked with a stranger in the cellar of doom, when hope slides against hope, in the last attempt to grab onto something, knowing it's too late.

No! I can win this. I can do it. Focus, Ailen, Focus. I cast out my thoughts, like I did to the lake, without humming this time, charged with desperate wish alone, trying to concentrate on distant souls of marine life, anything I stumble along, seaweed, fish, whales, trees on the shore. One monster's a capella through fibers of fate. Tear it, break it, connect.

NOW!

There is a dull echo and a gentle vibration buzzes through my chest. Seems like they answered me, or maybe I imagined it.

Click.

Piercing light shines from above. I close my lids but not before more water runs from under its corners. The world attains a shade of shimmering pink, even when squeezed.

Daddy stinks of disinfectant and sick anticipation. He wants it so bad, I can tell by sweat seeping from his eccrine glands, evaporating through layers of carefully applied perfume.

"Ailen?"

I force myself to look.

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

*I'm empty. You're not my father, you're a butcher, I want to say, I want to die. I wish I was never born. Not for this.*

Ailen Bright, the gutted fish. My bed is the pile of steaming entrails, iridescent in their beauty. My gut is my song, my song is my life. If he takes it away, will I live? Will he cut me open just to see what I'm made of? Will he?

"Let me know if you're uncomfortable, ok?" Daddy says. So caring, I want to puke. So steady that it seems he has no emotions at all. "Hunter, we haven't got all day. Please."

Hunter wipes sweat off his face, pulls on resin gloves, reaches up and turns a lever on the pipe. Screech, squeak, flow. Water over my face. I cough through the nose. It's ice cold but it burns me with a concoction of disinfectants. The tub half filled. The tub full. The cotton soaked. I can breathe through

the gills, slowly, but it's some relief. There are two feet of water above me. I'm submerged.

Hunter hangs over with me a curved knife in his hand, I can see it through the layer of water, its blade shimmering.

One second. Three. Ten. Nothing happens.

"I'm waiting?" Surprise written all over Daddy's face, blurred by the water I'm looking through. His words come in warbled, but I understand every bit of it.

Hunter's hand shakes. Daddy puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Steady, boy. Relax. You did this before. Just like practice, remember? Breathe."

Hunter passes a tongue over his lips.

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

I try to sink deeper. Hunter nods, dips into water and cuts the cotton over my neck. Carefully. Gently. Not a scrape on my skin.

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

Pause.

"Go on."

Hunter drops the knife. It floats down the tub, turns a few times and lies still on top of me like a question mark. Hunter steps back.

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

"I thought we've closed this topic."

"How can you? You're her father, for Christ's sake! What are you, some kind of a monster? This is your daughter, your daughter..."

"And your friend, isn't that right? Would you like your friend to die because you're a coward? Is that what you call friendship? I think you need to reevaluate your values, Hunter. Paper over words, and now betrayal over friendship. Not good at all." He shakes his head.

"Then do it yourself!"

"All right. I thought this might happen. What a waste of time."

The boat lurches again and the light go out for a few seconds. All I can hear is some struggle. Then the lights go on again but water still shakes and all I see is two distorted figures. One of them leans over.

"Ailen, please, forgive me if you can." Hunter reaches in and takes out the knife.

I have at most one second. My eyes bulge out in fear. I tighten my muscles, hear the fabric give. Not enough. Try again, yell at myself. *Do something! Scream! Sing!* Instead, I shut my eyes, feel my eyelids pry open. *No, I don't want to see this!*

"Look, Ailen, look. It's a state of the art procedure, you don't want to miss it." And I know Daddy's soul is double-dead. No matter how far my eyeballs roll, I still see every little detail of what's being performed.

Hunter lowers his arm and with one blow cuts me open, through remaining fabric and skin and meat. I shudder in pain and scream a muffled cry. He cries out too. Slime oozes out of the hole in my throat, floats up in clouds of goo. Hunter's gloved fingers dig into the cavity and touch my vocal cords.

At first, nothing happens. Then I feel like a mini-earthquake shakes the trawler, no, the entire ocean. My body turns to liquid as if someone threw a stone deep inside. I'm a circular wave that turn to ripples, reaches a crescendo and shimmers.

BUZZ!

Hunter jerks out his hand with a loud yelp and I hear him collapse on the floor. This is what happens when you drop a working fan in the water, or stick your wet fingers into a socket, or touch an open wire in the rain. Me, I'm an electric eel, happy to shock anyone who dares touching my voice. Daddy, he's bent on having Hunter do it. That explains it.

"Get up, you fucking son of a bitch. Be a man and finish the job." Daddy's voice comes dampened by two feet of water. Cold water. Cold anger grips my throat. "Get up, I said. Finish

what you started." There is a kick and a moan. The pattern repeats. It's me he's kicking, not Hunter. It's me who hurts, me who wants to cry. Me who's bitter, helpless, a wet discarded cotton roll soaked in tears. Useless, useless, useless!

"Up, you little piece of shit!"

I remember the game we played with Hunter the day before I died. He asked me, have you ever met a siren? And I said, what's a siren? And he said, the one with a voice that makes you do things. The one that can sing out your soul. The killer kind. It's me he was talking about. I *am* the killer kind. I have to stop pretending and accept it.

*Without Mommy, one minute of fantasy is all I have left.* I think, and I get mad, really mad.

I suck in moisture through my skin and strain to expand, to break out of this cocoon, to snap off the straps. They stretch and moan, rigid. I grunt with effort, soaked, inflating. A few threads tear, then a dozen, a hundred. Eyes closed, I tune in on dissolving their very atoms into liquid. There is no bathtub anymore, only this effort. Ailen Bright, grow a spine already. I'm full of quiet concentrated rage. There's nothing left in me but this. It clears my mind.

I close my throat, knit it shut, will it into humming, send its reverberation up the walls, through the ceiling, up onto the

trawler's deck, under the stars. The night is full of drizzle and it hears me.

One second goes by.

From droplet to droplet, rain carries my hum all the way into the cloud. The cloud shrinks, collapses on itself like a giant magnet, pulls moisture from miles away into one spot, directly over the trawler. There is a rumble of electricity and a crack of lighting. I feel like a conductor of a giant orchestra called weather, hushing the background music and bringing out the front, the heavy artillery, making it charge.

Slash!

Water gushes down in one focused cascade, towards the roof of the bridge, through several feet of metal construction like it's no more than dirty sand packed by a child on a beach.

Two seconds.

I'm in the zone, hum some more. I pull and nag and coax every single water drop in my vicinity to move, call on the ocean itself. Lights flicker once again. There is a pressure in the walls, then a loud rumble and fizz. The cracking and groaning of metal, before it gives in and opens up.

Water spurts through every crevice and hole and gap it finds and begins flooding the room. I hear it rising.

Then I see Daddy's face emerge over the water, Hunter slumped next to him, half-standing, half-hanging in his embrace.

We lock eyes and Daddy smiles very sweetly. It takes me a moment to believe that what I'm seeing is true. That it's not actors in a movie, but two very real people out of my own life, and it's not a game.

Daddy holds a gun to Hunter's head. Not a plastic sonic one, no, this one is very real.

My humming stops as abruptly as it started.

## 24. Chart Room.

They say your whole life flashes in front of your eyes in a matter of seconds, right before you die. A lucid dream composed of tender moments, moments of love... if you had any. A tunnel with the light at the end, so resplendent. A sense of levitation, of complete dissolution, of serenity. How cliché. What they don't say is what happens when you witness someone else die, someone dear to you. It flashes just the same, only double. Everything held in your memory spills out in a myriad of pictures, silly snapshots of life taken at the photobooth by the station, a quick stop on the journey to adulthood. Don't be late, or you'll get stuck waiting for the next train. And who knows where it's headed. Who knows what tunnel it will purge next, flooded with what, draining what liquid into what basin. Blaring what sounds in an attempted cry for help.

"No." I weep into the gag. My rage completes a hundred and eighty degree turn and aims at me, wild. It can't just evaporate, it has to go somewhere. I'm an easy and convenient target.

Tears burn my eyes, muscles scream against cotton, but I hold still. Ripped gauze floats in shreds, leather belts hang

loose, unsure if they can moan or it's best not to stir. Two feet of water ripple with momentary agony, splash over the rims, and sit easy. A sway of the boat adds to the pause.

Hunter slumps against Daddy, a rag doll held by its puppeteer, eyes wild, nose bloody. Its hidden strings of attachment slashed, its control bar scorched into nothing. One last performance cut short by the absence of theater, stage, and the audience.

"Do we have an agreement, Ailen?" Daddy says. "Do me a favor, do not sing unless instructed, all right? I'm tired of repeating myself. Didn't I explain to you, if you want to keep your boyfriend alive, you better cooperate?"

My rage blooms into a carnivorous flower, it's balloon-like chamber ready to swallow me whole. I manage a nod.

"Good. Let's try this again, shall we?"

Hunter moves his lips.

"Please, no talking. It gives me a headache. Besides, the floor is wet and it's ruining my shoes. Let's get out of here, to some place dry. We'll have ourselves a little talk, what do you say?"

Rage suffocates me. I hold it, steady.

"I'll take it as a yes. Now, unplug the tub, please." He smiles, tucks in the loose end of the cashmere scarf and watches Hunter reach into the water. With a smacking pop the stopper

yields to a slow swirl. It gurgles. Boat tilts. Hunter buckles and hits his head on the tub with a loud yelp. I hear him collapse into a splash of a shallow puddle with a smack of the back of his head against steel.

There is a moan and a kick.

"Fucking klutz. Get up." Another kick. I scrunch up my entire face in an effort not to hear. The commotion, the pleading, the slapping noises, the cursing. I'm in a snap trap of my own fury.

"Do you know how much I paid for this suit? Finest Italian wool, elegance at its best. Look at it now, it's ruined. You useless piece of shit. Make another move and you're dead, am I clear?" There is splashing and mumbling. "Good." Daddy walks up to the head of the tub, leans in.

"Your friend here is in no state to carry you, sweetie. Do you mind?"

His eyes cast me into an acidic bog. His face blocks the light. His jacket is off. His pink shirt sleeves are carefully rolled up, scarf secured with an elaborate knot. Fingers spread, swift, precise. It takes him a few seconds to unbuckle the straps. I'm a swaddled baby, lifted, in need of a change. I've been bad and I wet myself.

Three days since death.

Three days since birth.

This is my lucid dream. My one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, worth every second, paid for with suicide. Daddy coming to change my clothes, to swaddle me up, to sing me to sleep. A private solo for me only. An exquisite déjà vu.

He yanks me out of the tub, but I think he lifts me with a soft smile. He throws me over his shoulder, but I feel like he strokes my face, telling me what a bad girl I am to wet myself from head to toe. He bumps my head on the doorsill, but I imagine he throws me into the air so high that I brush the ceiling with the back of my head. He carries me into the corridor and enters another small room, drops me into a chair, rips off wet gauze, but I know he means to unwrap me, give me a warm bath, hug me in a towel, help me with pajamas and tuck me in, kissing my forehead good night.

"Once again, you're not allowed to open your mouth unless I tell you so. Understood?"

The poison of self-hate seeps into my veins, yet I nod.

"Good."

He ungags me. I draw a deep breath and convulse in a series of coughs, each threatening to tear me apart, aware that any noise I make irritates Daddy to no end and makes him yell at me to be quiet.

So it is now. He yells and slaps his desk in frustration, but I think it's a clapping game, and I know how to play. I'll

pick up the rhythm, learn the tempo. I'm a smart little girl. I search his eyes to see if he knows it, to see if he approves.

I won't cry, I won't cry. I won't cry! But I almost do.

This is a psychodynamic murder. I really want to kill Daddy but turn anger towards myself, out of helplessness, disgust, and in revenge for hurting Mommy.

Whomp.

Hunter locks the door behind him and slumps into a chair next to me, directly across Daddy's desk. Its fine wood surface gleams in a pool of a single lamp, illuminating space beyond, the size of a typical bathroom, about eight by five feet, with piped ceiling pressing low and oak paneling shining bronze. Full of dead sea stars, dried specimen of fish behind glass in wooden frames or on spikes, and cases with shells. A monochromatic treasure.

Daddy places two guns on his desk, a real one aimed at Hunter, the plastic sonic one aimed at me, his forefingers on the triggers. "Are you all right, son?"

Hunter has a dead look about him. He lifts his eyes as if to merely register where the voice is coming from, seeing nothing, glazed over and passive. "Yeah, fine."

"Good." Upper sides of Daddy's cheeks pull his orbicularis oris into a grimace that's supposed to look like a smile. I try

to read him and understand what the man wants, what he thinks, where his incessant drive for hating women came from.

He asked Hunter first, not me. He called him *son*. Another stab of rage. Of course, Hunter is more important. He's the son my father never had. The toy to be played with, hired, fired, employed again, forced into deliberate slaughter, and, in case of failure, perhaps serving as choice meat for newborn sirens in training, like me. The thought makes me hungry. I yearn for his soul. There is but a smidge of concerto left, an echo of melodic marvel that I'm used to hearing.

*I hate you*, I want to say to Daddy, but instead only look, feeling another pang of rage. His grey hair glistens in the light, in contrast to the rest of the room drowned in shadows.

"I take it you're comfortable, kids. Let's begin. An explanation of your behavior, Ailen. Please. I'm all ears."

I flare up. "You were about to kill me, and you're asking for the explanation of my behavior?"

He has this pained expression on his face, then a shudder of disgust, as if digging in a pile of rotten fish with bare hands.

"Shhhh. Talk quietly, please. Where do you get your ridiculous ideas. It was an operation to be performed for your benefit, which you, as is typical of you, made a mess. We will get to that part. Now, answer my question."

"Come on, Ailen. Answer his damn question. Please, I want to get this over with." Hunter looks at me and through me at the same time. I think I hear a trace of tears in his voice and such finality that it makes me shudder. He's being serious. It wasn't me who sucked all life out of him, in the end.

Without thinking, I turn and look Daddy in the face. "I take it, this is your boat, is it? Is this how you caught Mommy, same guys, never yourself? How much did it cost you to hire them to do your dirty work for you, Daddy? Huh? What is your problem, anyway?" As soon as I'm done talking, terror raises its ugly head. I dared to talk back to him. I watch his face.

He winces as if in pain, his gun-grip tightens, but I think I detect a flash of surprise and a hint of fear. "Do we have to go through this again? I talk. You listen. I ask, you answer. What part of the word 'answer' do you not understand, Ailen? Take a lead from Hunter, that's a smart boy right there."

I stare at the muzzle of the sonic gun, wondering how many shots I can withstand at will, realizing that even if I can last for a while, Hunter won't last after a single shot. I steal a glance to the side. Hunter hangs his bruised face into his left hand, his right crawls across the gap between the chairs and clasps mine. He squeezes it three times, as if trying to pass a message. My mind reels, but it doesn't make any sense. Three is my favorite number, that's a start.

Daddy's voice comes as a drone from the end of the tunnel. "Remember, noise is akin to chaos. Organize your mind, learn to obey. Answer my question."

A stream of words pushes its way out of my mouth in a stutter, before I can arrest it or even realize what I'm saying.

"You. It was you. You did the same thing to Mommy, didn't you. She was a siren, am I right? And you, pathetic piece of a siren hunter caught her and thought you could--"

BAM!

A sonic shot fires in my belly and I'm momentarily deaf, sliding down the chair, clasping Hunter's hand to prevent myself from falling. He pulls me back up, eyes open in a wide circle of surprise. He squeezes my hand three times again. I curse my brain, want to kick myself, bite my tongue really hard. Tears spring from my eyes. I hate it, I hate it.

I hate it!

"Sometimes I wish I was mute." I say under my breath.

Daddy doesn't hear me. He never hears me. His voice is on the verge of that all too familiar binge, caught between working jaw muscles for now.

"Let's not strain from the topic, please. Hunter is eager to hear the details of this particular assignment, aren't you, son? You want to go home and check on your mom, don't you?"

"Yeah." Hunter says through teeth and with quiet contempt that was barely detectible.

The thought about putting Hunter in danger cools me, and I know that Daddy knows it and is using it to his advantage. I'm afraid to look up, devouring my bare bloodless feet, Hunter's sneakers, and Daddy's oxfords sticking from under the table, wet and shiny.

"What you don't understand is, siren hunters don't make mistakes." Pause. "Since you two are so inseparable, I'll send you both on a job."

At this, Hunter squeezes my hand three times again, as if not surprised by this turn of events. I raise my head, startled.

"You what?"

We pass a glance then both look at Daddy. He looks us over.

"Hunter, you'll be in charge. Ailen, you do what he tells you to do. Is that clear?"

"Wait, you—"

"Ailen, do you want another taste of this, or shall I try on your boyfriend this time?"

I promptly close my mouth. Hunter squeezes my hand again. Three, what does he mean. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an average person to drown. Does he mean... no, it can't be.

"You'll go to the siren's feeding ground, under the Aurora bridge. The love fresh suicide jumpers, don't they? I want you to kill the two remaining ones, Ligeia and Teles. Those—"

"What about Canosa?" I interrupt before thinking, the close my mouth at Daddy's stare.

"If for whatever reason they're not there or if they manage to escape you, you'll track down to the siren meadow and finish them there. If you complete this, Ailen, I'll allow you to keep your voice."

I hear and don't hear at the same time. He didn't mention Canosa. Canosa was the one who dipped our boat and she also hid in the wet lab, spying on us. There must be a connection, perhaps they made a deal, and she helped catch me so that she can remain untouched?

"You got it." Hunter smiles, clotted blood peels off from under his nose. I open my mouth, but he squeezes my hand again, and I close it without saying anything.

"Ailen?"

"Yeah, we'll do it."

"Excellent." I detect irritation in Daddy's voice. Sweetest sound in the world. Second to Hunter's soul. "Any questions?"

"What if we fail?" Hunter asks.

"You're asking the wrong question, Hunter. I thought I made myself clear. Siren hunters don't make mistakes, siren hunter's

don't fail. I hope you've learned your lesson, and I'm giving you a second chance. Please, don't prove me wrong."

The message is clear. Do it or die. We both get it at the same time. Hunter squeezes my hand again, and I finally get it. Three minutes under water. Three words of our game. Have you ever. Me asking him, has he ever wanted to die. Him telling me how he'd do it, if he had to. I squeeze his hand back, and it's a warning. I hope he gets what I mean.

"—and don't forget, siren hunters don't leave witnesses." Daddy drones on about the rules, but I don't listen.

I watch Hunter. He adopts a cheerful expression and nods to everything with enthusiasm. I sense it's fake, I know what it's for, and it makes me mad. I want to scream, to grab him by the collar and shake him and tell him that this is serious, to wipe off that smirk from his face, but I can't. Daddy's watching. And I'm afraid to make another move, because I don't want him to hurt Hunter any more.

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

"Remember, Ailen. You complete the assignment, your lover boy here stays alive." He smiles. I don't know if I can muster enough hate to radiate out of my eyes, afraid to utter a sound. Daddy holds both guns aimed at us. They imprint in my retina, I stare at them so hard.

"I'll be watching you two. Off you go. Use one of my kayaks, if you need to."

Hunter grabs the handwheel and turns it to the right three times, the door creaks open. We walk through the belly of the boat, ducking our heads to avoid low door headers, pass a galley behind which I feel no souls. Looks like Glen and Jimmy are gone. It feels like there is no ground under my feet, only another layer of hidden terror, and maybe more, in the water.

We come out on the deck.

The noise of a busy neighborhood hits me square in the chest. To my left, at eye level, people scurry across the Fremont bridge as if trying to beat crawling cars to the other side. To my right traffic darts across Aurora Bridge, up a good hundred and sixty feet in the air, the world's second famous location for suicide jumpers. It must be a beautiful sight from above, at this hour in the evening. Dusk spray-paints the air in a lilac haze, seagulls squawk their hungry calls, darting at random. The smell of fallen leaves mixes with impending wetness threatening to gush from scattered clouds. The air is cold yet not freezing, pleasantly tasting of early fall.

I glance up to my right. I jumped off this bridge three days ago, into what? Into this. Into being trapped again, worse than before.

Hunter takes my hand.

"We'll be all right."

"I think I know what you mean, and I don't like it."

He looks at me quizzically.

"Kids, you'll have plenty of time to talk later. I forgot to mention one little detail. You have till the end of tomorrow. This is when I expect you to come back with a report. Come on now, get lost." He quickly darts his eyes to the sides, his real gun tucked in his pants. He points with a sonic boom to a couple kayaks bobbing on the water, tied to a slip post. The sonic gun looks like a miniature loud speaker and wouldn't look suspicious if carried in public.

I squint into the distance. Rare yachts break up the slow drone of the freeway, and the evening darkens fast. I realize Daddy wouldn't dare shooting Hunter here, in the open, for fear of attracting attention. Nothing prevents us from swimming away. Into the open ocean, into freedom.

Hunter helps me into a kayak and I let him.

As we sit, the sky opens up into a rapid drizzle. Rain drops trace our faces, but neither of us makes an effort to wipe them off. With the last wave of the hand, Daddy disappears into the trawler and after a short while starts the engine.

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

"I'm sorry." I say, as soon as the sound of the engine dies. "It's my fault you got dragged into this. I should've never—"

"Ailen, stop it. One way or another, I would've ended up doing this. You only accelerated the pace." Hunter's words drop like stones into water. While I gazed towards the trawler, he untied the ropes and managed to pull the kayak out of the marina, post by post.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, so stop asking." There is that teary look again that he's trying to control.

"What was that about, your hand squeezing mine three times?" I ask, but I already know the answer. "And what—"

His hand falls over my mouth. It burns with fever, no, it burns with his warmth that's somehow on fire.

"If you go, I go. I can't live without you, Ailen, would you get that into your stupid brain?"

"But your mom—"

"She'll understand. She was in love too, once."

"So you meant, our game— Have you ever— Three words?"

"Right. Only I changed my mind."

"To what?"

"Forget motorcycle. I, um... want... you." I can almost hear blood rushing to his cheeks, feel his eyes burn me with light in

the oncoming darkness. "I want to die from loving you. From—" He places his hands on my shoulders, and a different type of hunger sears me from neck to knees.

Still, I refuse to believe him. "Of course you do, I'm a siren, right? So the charm is working."

"No, it's not like that. I don't care what shape you're in. You're Ailen to me, always will be. Always. I just want to feel you, all the way?" His voice catches at the end, his head tilted unconsciously to the side, childlike and honest.

"Me? Do you, really?" I whisper, beginning to shake as if from high fever.

"Yes, you, silly. Really."

A catastrophic yearning to be held, to be loved, boils over me and sweeps away my hatred, anger, anxiety, guilt, all in one smooth wipe, sending them up into sky in a sort of invisible steam, as if the lid held over my feelings flew open. I tip forward and place my lips on his as an answer. Slowly, like a man in a dream, he takes me into his arms. And then he's kissing me. Rain patters my face, but I hardly feel it. And before descending into an ache of falling that's both sweet and final, the last feeling I register of this world is a queer sensation of being watched.

## 25. Under the Bridge.

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

Moon shines on us her watchful eye through the break in the clouds. An hour must have passed, but it feels like one minute. Shivering, we're helping each other to get dressed.

"What just happened?" I ask, to separate myself from this dizziness.

"Something special, something better than smoking weed. The best joint ever, called, making love." Hunter reels with this

smug satisfaction only a horny teenager can have after waiting for months for the sacred moment.

"Did we just have sex, right here, on the boat?"

"Thy miss the correct expression, my dearest. It is called but making love. In the darkness, under the bridge, to the gleeful eye of the moon itself, spying on us like a barren bitch who never saw two people shagging."

"I'll slap you. Stop it!"

"Go ahead, that'll make me horny again." I can see his grin in the moonlight, wide and crooked. "Though I admit, you felt kinda cold, you know, as compared to the other times. Must be siren and all, dead body. Man, does that make me a necrophiliac?"

"What? FUCK YOU!" I push him in the chest.

"Gladly. Here, let me get myself worked up again, just a second." He rubs his arms for warmth, then his belly, stomps his feet and shakes the boat, with a genuine concentration and small sounds of an athlete warming up for a marathon.

"Uh-uh-uh. Almost there, thank you for your patience."

He looks so comical that I laugh.

My voice rolls into the sky in a series of golden bells, reverberating through the night around us. Hunter's soul melody envelops me in the familiar warmth. And maybe for a few minutes I stop caring about what will happen. Sitting here together, on

the boat, makes me happy. I feel at home. Hunter's melody tunes out other noises, the whizzing of late cars, the discord of human unrest as it presses from the land, unoriginal, fragmented, stale, turning and twisting in its insomnia.

I look at the moon. Its light falls on the water in a silvery film. A few rain droplets hit its surface and make it quiver. It's beautiful.

"Hunter?"

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

"Do you ever feel like you're faking it?"

"Faking what?"

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

"Is that how you feel?" He takes my hands into his, and the contrast in our body temperature makes me want to cry all over again.

"What's one reason not to die? I remember skipping stones with you into this lake. I was so happy then. What happened to me, Hunter? When did it change, at ten, twelve, fifteen? When?"

"You mean, when you decided to turn it all off, cause it hurt so bad it was easier that way?"

Night wind sways our boat.

"I wish I knew how it came to this. Look at me. I'm a dirty plastic bag of a person who got stuck in a puddle, torn. Without bottom cause it fell out, without handles cause they both broke. Remember that dancing plastic bag in American Beauty?"

"Yeah?"

"Like that, only after it's been filled with too much water and stomped on in dirt." I look at my hands.

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

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

I dip my hand into the lake, to feel it.

"I can fill you in. I just did, didn't I?"

I pretend I don't hear.

"Sorry, bad joke. What do you want me to do? How can I help?"

"I wish we could drop it all and swim away. Into open ocean. Wish I could swim away from myself, but I can't."

The boat careens left and right in the tiniest waves. Distant city lights flicker on and off. Stars sprinkle the sky.

"Promise me something?" Hunter says.

"What?"

He palms my face. Darkness reflects around his pupils.

"Promise me, you won't argue with me, ok? When you go, I go."

"You can't. What about your mom..."

"Please."

"But—"

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

The boat slowly revolves around itself. That nagging feeling of being watched returns full force, and I break the kiss. Too late.

With a quiet hum and glistening eyes, three sirens circle the boat. I flick my eyes to Hunter with a momentary panic in them, as if asking, *what do we do now? We haven't even discussed how we're going to catch them, with what, nothing.* He winks at me, drops his head into a nod, as if saying, *it's ok, I got it, just follow my lead.*

"Hey girls." He says, squeezing my hand three times. "A bit too cold to go skinny dipping in September at night, don't you think?"

They giggle.

"Ailen, where have you been? We've missed your riddles. Oh, we've missed them so much!" Ligeia tilts her head to the side and her wet locks roll off her shoulders.

"Shut up, remember what Canosa said." Teles hisses into her ear, clasping the edge of the boat. I turn my head and meet the one and the only. Her hair glistens in the moon light, wet and braided with lust. All caution evaporates from my mind in one instant.

"I see you're still alive, traitor." Hunter steps on my bare foot, but it's too late. The words escape me at an alarming rate. "You're a traitor and a liar. You weren't ever going to show me where Mommy is, were you? And she didn't die, did she? Was she a siren, like you? Answer me, was she?" Hunter stomps on my foot again, and I fall quiet for a moment.

Canosa ignores me. "Hunter Crossby, still holding on to your catch. Splendid, ain't she? How long has it been now, three days? Not bad, not bad at all. Thank you for the show, it was mesmerizing to watch. Heartbreaking, in fact. My girls here almost gagged with desire."

Ligeia and Teles nod energetically.

"I'm hungry." Ligeia sticks out her lower lip in the gesture of an upset toddler who's about to throw a fit. "Canosa, can we please eat him now? Pretty please? We've been good like you asked, and it's been so long, and he sounds so yummy!" She

looks back at Hunter with carnal lust, grinding her teeth, transforming from a cute maiden into a fierce monster at the onset of her hideous hungry smile. Femme fatale as she is supposed to be.

Teles joins her, Canosa floats behind them.

Now it hits me. We have no chance of escape, no weapons to fight them with, they caught us at a vulnerable moment. It's like when I found Hunter at the siren meadow all over again, only worse, because I feel Canosa does not intend to let us go this time, and Daddy won't show up to interrupt her. A feeling of wrongness hangs in the air, of being very close to death, like never before, as if being watched by her, like a player watches its game pieces, trying to decide if it's time to cut one, or two, or all.

As if we've spoken and death took my suggestion, darkness becomes absolute and all stars dim, replaced by three pairs of eyes shimmering around us in the waiting silence. My spine turns to ice. Hunter passes a shiver, looks deep inside my absence of soul, takes both my hands and squeezes them three times. "This is the perfect moment. Ready?"

My heart, already down to my knees, drops further to where I can't feel it at all. "You sure you wanna to do this?"

"Yeah. The first part is done, isn't it? Perfect timing." He smiles with a finality of someone who knows death is near but

refuses to give in to its terror. His hair moves in the light breeze. I can hardly make him out, seeing only flashes of teeth and shine of his hair in the glow from the sirens.

Their silence unnerves me. They're simply waiting.

"Not like we have a choice, huh? Ok then. Let's do it." I squeeze his hands back three times. It's like that moment before I jumped, a few seconds of utter despair that pushed me over the edge, only now we're doing it together.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch them drift.

"Go ahead, girls," I say, "we're ready. What are you waiting for?"

"Ailen Bright, you give in just like that? Without even some attempt at struggle? What a pity." She mocks. "All right, let's see what you do when your boyfriend here calls for help. Ligeia, he's all yours. Teles, get her." She cackles, dropping poison into silence.

Ligeia begins to sing. Air rings with her high pitch, amplified by the emptiness over the lake, reaching high, all the way to the moon, in a reverse vortex directly over the boat, then dropping its force onto Hunter, his eyes locked with hers, his soul steaming out of him in a thin ribbon of mist.

I focus on Hunter's eyes, arrested by the beauty of a pause before a storm. When everything stands still, about to erupt, hanging on the edge of hesitation.

Teles swims in circles around the boat, perhaps jealous of Ligeia, stops behind me and places her fingers around my throat. The song intensifies, flaps at my ears. Hunter's soul strings out of him, a rainbow gone wrong and stripped of all color except dull white.

Maybe there are places of death, places that attract people to them like a magnet. Maybe that's one of them, directly under a one hundred sixty seven foot high bridge, very convenient. This is our place of death, and we're a speck of life about to be swallowed. Ligeia's song makes waves. The kayak tilts precariously, then flops back upright and tips to the other side. Hunter's face drains color rapidly.

Something shifts in air, as if we all agree, as if death is happy. Something passes between us all, me, Hunter, sirens, a question so dark that it has only one answer.

Down, down, down.

"Mommy, I'm coming." I hear myself say, before Teles cuts off my breathing and I choke. My hands feel cold and clammy. As if drowning in the bathtub is not enough and now I have to drain together with the used up water, into the labyrinth of underground pipes, accompanied by the ever-present Siren of Canosa, carrying a zither, her right arm over her head in a moaning sign, her left on my shoulder, guiding me on my after-life journey.

Kayak tilts further to the side and slides, a coin down the spiral wishing well. I wished for something blue on my birthday, instead I got water that's not even blue but black, the color of burned weed, a bad trip from a drug that's worse than teenage love, a trip with only one possible destination: death.

I hear a car honk.

I hear someone gasp on the shore.

I feel Teles let me go.

I hear Canosa yell. "Stop it! Get back to her! I said, STOP IT! NOW!"

I nearly fall out of the kayak from dizziness, gasping for air. I can't see in the dark what's happening, but from the shouts and struggling guess that Teles decided to have Hunter for herself and attacked Ligeia.

The air pierces with girl fight cries.

"You stupid bitch!" Ligeia whines. "I almost had him. You're so mean. Get off me, Canosa told you, hear? Get off me!"

I shake my head. This is our chance. Canosa is yelling and fighting both sirens, Teles hisses at her, then lashes into a long string of swear words. Light penetrates darkness and I see Hunter's soul slam into him from Ligeia's lips as Teles puts her in a headlock and pulls her underwater. Hunter slides to bottom of the boat, eyes closed, pre-morning fog is blanket.

I want to move but a strong feeling paralyzes me. Forget about deadly whirlpools, they're nothing compared to shame. Shame floods me with a renewed force. Shame for thinking only about myself and pretending I care for Hunter. Shame for being so selfish, for pulling Hunter into this and agreeing to double-suicide. It's not too late, I can fix it.

Canosa shoos the sirens towards the boat, they're a few feet away, possibly reconciled with their roles and ready to finish us.

A brilliant idea visits me. I look at Ligeia and Teles. "Girls, I forgot to mention something. Do you know why we were here in the first place? To kill you. At the order of my Daddy, the siren hunter. He made a deal with your beloved Canosa over there so she can live on long after you two die."

Their eyes widen in shock.

"Don't believe me? Ask her."

"Kill her! She's talking nonsense, she is a fool, don't listen to her. Kill her and that idiot boyfriend of hers, kill them now!" Canosa throws, yet shrinks away from approaching sirens.

"Is that right? Oh, how could you, how could you?" Teles advances first, Ligeia after her. Their talking quickly escalates to shouting obscenities at each other, to tearing at other's hair to outright fighting.

I have perhaps seconds, shift my attention to Hunter. He's still unconscious.

I lick my lips. *You just wait, Daddy, you thought it's be so easy, huh? You set this all up as a trap, didn't you? Well, I'll show you what women were made for. Just you wait.* I inhale and hum, moving the kayak silently to the shore, away from the sirens who now resemble a bunch of sharks fighting for a particularly tasty piece of meat in a feeding frenzy.

I hum some more.

Siren shrieks escalate to wails of such grief and rage that not only my spine but my whole being turns to ice, brittle, threatening to break into a million sharp pieces. Water rises and falls into a series of waves, frosted with foam, higher, higher, until we're bobbing on top of a gigantic pot that's boiling.

The shore is only a few yards away, but water doesn't listen to me, boiling like crazy. The kayak bobs and Hunter hits his head on its side, opens his eyes, stares at me, looking both dead and alive.

Moonlight paints the night with white glow, fading, yielding to early morning. The echo of the siren fight blares all over the lake and it feels like it's about to consume us, boat and all. A hysterical chorus, a boom of otherworldly rage,

at their realization that we're gone and turning our way, ready to kill. I hear them swimming.

Mad waves lick the shore and splash all over the Burke-Gilman trail, surprising the first morning biker. The boat marina groans and moves, its wooden posts dangerously close to being uprooted. I hum and the kayak bumps into dirt. I hear siren cries a few paces behind me, rotten, desperate, a week-old stew reeking of spoiled meat, too slimy to swallow. And I hear something else, somebody who came to check on the trap, its engine tossed into this cacophony of noises, struggling against the current.

Daddy's trawler.

## 26. Fremont Troll.

All it takes for a full cup of water to spill is a drop. One drop too many, one sound too much. The drone of the trawler's motor does it. I drain into an empty calculating creature that used to scare Mommy into blabbing nonsense, trying to coax me to listen to her and at the same time being afraid, very afraid to see a piece of Daddy on my face, set in its stubbornness to win or else. Unmoving, impenetrable, deadly. I'm my father's daughter, after all. At this moment for the first time in my sixteen years I'm glad we're related, intending to use this willfulness to my advantage.

I jump out of the kayak and pull it over the grass, reach in for Hunter at the same time as Ligeia and Teles reach for him, snaking their arms out of the water. I throw myself towards them, stop one inch from their faces and utter a shriek that blows away their hair.

"Get off him, you fucking bitches. BOTH OF YOU!"

"Thief! Canosa gave him to me, he's my property!" Ligeia shrieks back at me.

"You wish!" Teles claws at Ligeia's face.

I open my mouth and utter an ear-splitting roar, happy that Hunter is out, wondering what kind of damage I'm inflicting to his hearing, but thinking I'd rather have him deaf and alive than dead.

Sirens cover their ears and drift a few feet away, pushed back into the water by my screaming as if by a powerful gush of wind. They grab onto Canosa's arms like two little girls grab onto their mom when faced with a crazy bum in the street. I guess I can move objects with enough air inhaled with sheer force of airstream.

"And don't you dare getting close to him ever again, you hear me? Don't you fucking dare!"

The wave of my voice slaps their faces and they dive underwater, all three. I grimace in something that might be called a satisfied bully smile.

"Do you hear me now, Daddy, do you? This is your daughter screaming her head off, are you proud?"

I boom across about twenty yards, towards the trawler, watch it stutter, and I know he must have heard me. But a new feeling rises to grin at me ugly smirk. A terrible fear. I'm scared. Scared of the power I have. Petrified, even. Before I knew I had it, I used it carelessly, not knowing what it can do. Now that I know, suddenly I'm afraid it won't work on command, I

won't be able to summon it unless emotionally disturbed and stressed to a breaking point.

I pull Hunter out of the boat and on the ground, away from water, up onto the asphalt trail. He lays still, eyes glazed, wet hair plastered to his forehead.

"Hunter! Are you ok? Can you hear me? Tell me you can hear me. Please, Hunter?"

Lake waves close in on themselves with a powerful rush and hit the shore where Hunter lay a few seconds ago. The kayak flips and slides off into the water. Dawn pencils air in a lavender of an early morning, rainless, perhaps even with a chance of fall warmth. It smells of an upcoming sunrise.

I shake Hunter, but he only stares in the distance as if in a coma. "Let's get out of here, ok? I'll carry you to your house."

I kneel next to him, grunt and attempt to lift him up on my back. He slides off. I hear the faint sound of his soul, feel his heart. He's alive. I can only do one thing, move forward, stubbornly, with blind determination. I try again and hoist him up all the way this time, then take a few tentative steps. Having blown the remainder of my energy on yelling, needing a soul to satisfy my hunger, to gain back strength.

A biker stops, asks if we're ok.

I contemplate sucking out his essence right then and there, but decide against it. Wrong place, wrong time. I push him aside and crawl up the bank, stone by stone, tree by tree, all the way under the north end of Aurora bridge, then collapse right by the Fremont troll, one of favorite homeless spots.

I close eyes to catch my breath and hear two things. The blare of a police siren, which means that asshole biker must have called the cops, and the sound of a soul. I heard it before, not too long ago, greedy yet surprisingly serene, like a calm of an overgrown garden, earthy.

I feel a grip on my arm and open my eyes. A homeless mushroom of a man looks me over, his mismatched bundle of clothes reeking of stale urine.

"There we meet again, little birdie, so we do. And where are you going this time, pray? Don't want to spare change for a poor man? Young people these days. Tsk-tsk."

"Don't touch me!" I yell, but he tightens his grip.

"Oh, those pretty blue eyes didn't let me sleep. I bet you got those from your mama, did you? What else did you get from your mama, pretty girl? Let the old man see." He gropes along my arm to my breasts and I reel with such revulsion and hatred that I shriek directly into his face and throw him off me in one arm-movement.

"YOU SICK FUCK! For this you deserve to die!" I find a convenient target for my rage and forget everything else. I have to get it out, it's boiling. The world wraps around me into a tunnel. Nothing exists except me and my target.

He staggers back, stuffed sleeves revolving for balance, pig-eyes unblinking dots under matted brows. I lock my gaze with his and begin to sing.

"Lost on foggy paper I am aware of you

"Fondly calling in the distance...

He collapses on the ground. A thin ribbon of smoke oozes through his cracked lips, a soul punctured with poverty and despair. I suck on it greedily, no matter how revolting the taste, it's all but sweetness to my senses to extinguish this vile human being.

"Algae weaving around your earthy face

"As I lean down to kiss your brow...

A look of a happy child washes over his face, smoothes out wrinkles, radiates innocent delight not unlike he probably experienced decades ago if not more, from his mother's kisses.

"Salty lingers the echo soaked in yearning

"On my soar lips - I reach falling for divine."

His soul's tail traces a delicate arc across five feet between us. I slurp it in and swallow, mesmerized by transformation. The shape on the ground in front of me is that

of a man peacefully asleep, dreaming a rosy fantasy with his eyes open, his smile a sweet gentle thing, childish and endearing.

I'm coming out of my tunnel vision when a police siren blares up in short bursts, on repeat, blinks its revolving red and blue lights, and stops a few yards away. Dazed, I watch a cop come out of the car, slam its door, approach. Before I can compose myself, he takes out his flashlight and shines it into my face.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed at this hour, girly, waking up and getting ready for school? Your mama making breakfast?"

I blink, blinded, my half-waking mind reeling from recent feeding. What I see is a middle-aged man with a beer belly clad in uniform a tad too tight, a sea lion type of mustache gracing his face, air of assured responsibility around him, a perfect candidate for a straight police record on his way into honored retirement. What I hear is his soul composed of twinkling beer bottles of such intensity that I'm instantly hungry.

I cast my eyes down to escape the brightness. No good. There are two men laying at my feet, one unconscious and one dead. Lovely.

"Can I see some ID, miss?"

The light shines right into my eyes and I wince, the afterglow burned into my retina. This wakes me up.

"Do I look like I have an ID, sir?"

His hand falls to his gun and freezing terror fills me, not so much for me as for Hunter.

"Don't give me attitude. Identify yourself. I need to see your ID. NOW." He briefly flashes his light down, though morning has arrived and dimness escapes from under the bridge into a general muted greyness.

"What have we here." He whistles and flashes at Hunter. "Hey? Can you hear me?" He moves the light over the face of the homeless man and gasps at his staring unflinching eyes and creepy smile. "What the hell..."

He takes out his walkie-talkie. "This is quite a situation you've got yourself in, girly. Don't move." He flips on the switch. "Calling all units. At Fremont troll, north thirty sixth. Back-up needed."

"Yeah, you got that right." I say under my breath, thinking about grabbing Hunter and making it for a run now that I have more strength. Too late. A few onlookers gather, early dog walkers, and peer at us from the sidelines with interest. Free entertainment to start their day. I don't know if I want to kill all of them, and if I won't be taken over in the process.

"I need your full legal name, miss."

"Ailen Bright." I say automatically.

"Tell me what happened, Ailen. Can you tell me what happened?" He talks back into his portable radio.

Hunter coughs. "Officer, it's all right, we're ok. I can explain." Hunter's voice makes me beam for a second, and then I drop into more despair. How will we get out of this?

"Don't move! Stay where you are." He shouts at Hunter and continues to bark clear and concise phrases into his radio like "copy" and "over" and "go ahead".

"Do you have an ID on you?" This is directed at Hunter.

"No, sir."

"What is your full legal name?"

"Hunter. Hunter Crosby. We were just returning home from the party, officer, and then..."

I'm so sick of pretense, I interrupt.

"You want to know who I am, officer? I'll tell you. My name is Ailen Bright, and I'm a siren."

"You're a what?" I knew I got his attention.

"What the hell are you doing?" I hear Hunter hiss, but choose to ignore him.

"A siren. You know, we live under water, because that's where seductive girls belong, right? We're the killer kind. We kill people by singing their souls out. We like those whose souls sound exquisite, like a delicacy. Yours, for example,

stinks. But I'll eat it, anyway." I smack my lips for an added effect and take a step toward him.

The officer's pupils widen. "FREEZE!" He pulls out his gun.

"Officer, please, don't listen to her, she's just high. You know, we took some drugs and we're sorry and..."

Two more police cars roll in. I hear Daddy's trawler halt right by the marina, but no sirens. They must be gone.

I fight the urge to give in to my power, to kill this officer and then kill off one by one all those who gathered, curious, ready to run off and gossip latest neighborhood news where the robbing of unlocked car makes it into a newspaper.

I look at Hunter. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Two more police officers arrive, both on motorcycle, the typical primary officers at a crime scene, first to respond because of their mobility. Onlookers now consist of a small crowd of morning commuters. Their hum buzzes around my head like a swarm of bees.

"It's the same girl, I swear. Back from the dead." Escapes from the mouth of a newly arrived officer, young, with a mock of reddish hair, as he slams the car door shut. The same officer who ran up to me on Aurora bridge and saw me jump down three days ago. Daddy argued with him and called him a moron. Another cop takes off his helmet and joins in.

"What's the big deal, sergeant? Can't handle a couple kids on your own?" *A couple kids?* I think. *I'll show you a couple kids.* They walk toward me and I explode.

"MOVE!" My voice pierces the air. I feel like a conductor, helping an orchestra find its tune. Faces look at me, expectantly, paralyzed and mesmerized at the same time, as if witnessing an animal talking.

"I said, move, NOW!" They don't need to be told twice, turn and walk, both civilians and police, then run overtaken by instinct. It takes one minute, they're all gone. The sudden silence is overpowering.

I turn to Hunter. "You ok? Feeling all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." But his eyes don't radiate the life as they used to as he pulls himself up and into a sitting position, head hanging.

"We need to get out of here, now." I say.

"Isn't that what we planned to do all along?" His eyes reach deep inside me, he flicks his eyes back as if to say, that mob won't be gone for long, and when they return, then what? Same old shit? "He will never leave us alone, your dad, you know that, don't you?"

I nod, crestfallen.

I choke on life itself, that perpendicular stubborn fish bone stuck in my throat by stupid accident. I can't take a

single breath, can't close my mouth. My eyes fill with tears, heart pounds. I gag, want to take in some air, but I can't. I try to rip myself open. Good luck. Hunter's soul gives me warmth I can't have. I'm fine being cold, I'm fine, I'm fine! I want to turn back the time, to reverse what's been done. No use moping now. Words jam in my mouth, I open and close it like a beached fish.

"Come on, Ailen. Let's do it." Hunter says.

"Sure. That's right. Attempt number two? Or I don't even know what number it is for me, lost count. Anyway. I guess I'm game." A dare to death itself fills me with strange excitement. This is something I have control over. This is something I can do on my own without being controlled.

I want to take my life.

I smile in a mad grimace of a lunatic who has no understanding of the consequences of such thinking. But I don't care. Because Hunter grins a smile of a boy who doesn't care if his newest mischief will cost him his life, because it's too good to be true. "Looks like we've got ourselves a new toy. Would you mind standing guard?"

"You got it." I say, grinning.

Hunter grunts and stands, walks up to the motorcycle on shaky legs, pulls a piece of wire from his pocket which somehow survived our trebulations, folds it into a fork and reaches

behind under and behind the fairing. The bike is a Harley Davidson Road King with a nice big windscreen that makes it look like a George Jetson's sky mobile about to take off into the future.

A click, and Hunter is mounting it, beckoning me to sit behind him. I hesitate.

"That's how I wanted to go, remember?" He beams, but there is no laughter in his eyes. Nothing at all. Just emptiness, calm. Me, I'm a perverted moth, drawn to darkness instead of light. Wishing for vacuum. Suck me in, keep me blind, never let me go. Hunter, he's the lamp with no bulb.

"Care for a ride?" His hand doesn't shake. Long slender fingers. An upturned palm. And this look.

One second.

"Yes." I say. I can talk again.

"It's a little wet, hang on."

A breath. Two. I stumble after him under the watchful eye of the stone troll. I want to ask where we're going, instead I watch my bare feet paddle the asphalt. I want to say I'm sorry, instead I slip onto the seat and grip Hunter from behind, fingers entwined. I want to ask why we're playing this game, instead I notice glowing sunrays tear at the clouds.

Hunter pushes the start button, guns the throttle. The roar of the bike's engine echoes off the bridge's underbelly. An

elderly woman shouts at us from the porch of her house a few yards away, either to be quiet or fashioning some other scolding, I can't tell.

I flip her a finger.

"Are you ready?" Hunter yells over the noise.

"You sure you're ok?"

"I'm fine. Where to?"

"To the other side!"

And we fly.

## 27. Mount Rainier.

We're a white drop of speed against slow moving traffic, sea of grey prone to commuting boredom. If there is a way to go in style, it's by cutting into the fabric of mundane and ripping it apart even if it means setting yourself on fire in the process. Those who follow the rules stay inside preconceived lanes. Us? We cut on top of them, oblivious to honking, mean stares, and flared up indignation. A toy motorcycle skirting the rim of the tub filled with humanity. A wheeled escape tittering and tottering and in danger of tilting at a weakest gush of wind. Live every minute as if it was your last. Experience a million lives in a moment against half a life in a hundred tedious years. This is my one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing.

We dart along highway ninety nine, across Aurora bridge and into Seattle downtown that busts with life while the rest of the town is sleeping. It's swarmed with morning souls, carrying their bodies in cars to and fro, sipping their first cups of coffee, puffing the air with delight after each gulp.

The roads are dry. Sky turns pink. Morning enters the air. Wind rips at my face; ruptures my bubble of fear, guilt, and

shame; my regret, my disappointment, my hatred and my hope. Ears hum with constant drone of speed. I hug Hunter tight, press my cheek against his back, expecting to crash any second. Together.

This is the same route we took escaping from the siren meadow in Seward park, except backwards.

We speed by a police car that's leisurely patrolling early commuters. I hear the cop spill his coffee, curse in surprise, and flip on the lights. Red and blue flashes in my peripheral vision. I consider flipping him a finger then decide against it because I'm too comfortable and don't want to break the embrace. Hunter's body trembles, he shifts into fifth gear. The bike jerked and lurches forward.

Police siren gets off in the back.

Bweep! Bweep! BWEEP!

"We've got to lose him!" I yell over the wind howl, under the stares of giant crane-dinosaurs rooted in the waterfront a couple hundred yards to our right, their necks stuck out to the cloudy sky in the hopes of coming alive. A herd of Loch Ness monsters that never happened. I nod to them and they nod back, as if we're family, as if they understand me, as if they say, *go on, we won't judge, we wish we could keep you company, but we're stuck here, you see.*

I blink and they're back to being cranes.

Hunter either heard me or felt the same need, because a few seconds later our knees almost scrape the ground when we veer onto the dark swallow of the off-ramp and come out by the stadiums.

No traffic this time. Faint blaring noises behind us. Hunter speeds up to fifty miles per hour, sixty, eighty. Runs the red light, up the hill, swerves to the right, along the loop, into empty Interstate five south to surprised looks from north-crawling traffic. Another cop comes ablaze with noise behind us. Great.

Hunter shakes, making me shake with him. I stand up on the pegs and move my mouth to his ear, my hair rippling in the stink of traffic exhaust. "What's wrong?" I yell.

"I'm freezing!" He shouts back against the tide of air. "I can't feel my fingers!" His teeth chatter, his soul vibrates to the rhythm of his fear and exhaustion.

"Let's stop and get some gear somewhere?"

He doesn't answer, probably hyper-focused, intent on going as long as he can. That's typical Hunter, once he sets his mind to something, there is no swaying him back.

"Shit." I sit back behind him, thinking hard. I parted rain before for us to stay dry, but there is no rain to part now. My spine is ramrod straight, mind focused. *Think, Ailen, think!*

Nothing. Blankness overrides any attempt at producing an intelligent solution.

I feel Hunter's temperature drop as fast as we fly in between road lanes, oblivious to angry shouts and beeping, blaring sirens behind us, now one more adding its shrill to the first two. Cop Wednesday morning fun.

I lean my cheek against Hunter's sweatshirt that's lightly damp, smelling of wet laundry, ballooning and rippling in the wind. Suddenly I know. One moment there is emptiness, and another certain knowledge appears as if it was always there. Humidity. Of course, water vapor in the air. Perhaps if I can move little droplets faster, make them warmer, exert the pressure with my voice on the moisture in the air, they can...

It's worth a try.

I look up at the sky and open into a guttery animal wail akin to pre-mortem a capella. Hike it up a pitch, higher, higher, overpowering the cacophony of rolling tires, sputtering engines, blaring police sirens, boneless human souls. My yowl explodes into a solo opening for reckless opera, dotted rhythm, court ballet for three, one oxygen atom and two hydrogen ones, connected by covalent bonds, or, in simpler words, a chemical embrace. Listen to me. Perform a hydrological dance, from solid to liquid to gas. Tasteless, odorless, colorless, transparent. My sisters in disguise leading same bleached existence.

They hear. First the atoms, then droplets, then clumps of moisture and clouds themselves. They shift and scat and jitter in tune to my vibrato.

Never mind the tunnel of dry air that parts rain into pouring rattling sheets. I can do better. A bubble of warmth, tiny basic units of water bound to me by the force of my voice. I bellow. I'm a conductor for the world's largest orchestra covering seventy percent of Earth's surface, an ensemble of vitality at my disposal and at my command.

I lose myself in singing, touching sky's every turquoise bell, strumming every clapper to every lip, producing a divine concoction of resonation. I feel Hunter's core warm up, stop trembling and relax. My fingertips tingle with buzzing heat.

Seems like it's been only a minute, or perhaps an hour, because city buildings gave way to low-strung malls and houses skittered along the highway. Police cars still blare behind us, and now distinct helicopter chop-chop sound enters the game. Hunter guns the throttle, his soul alight with panic. I howl to keep him warm.

We're pressed by cop patrols on both sides.

Hunter guns the bike, whizzes ahead and veers into closest exit. The off-ramp slope goes up so sharp, the front wheel of the bike lifts off the ground and then we thump down as Hunter brakes and nearly lays the bike down in the turn.

"Woohoo, we popped a wheelie!"

I hear him yell, in a kind of delirious excitement. We speed across the little bridge over the highway, police whiz by underneath, too late to react, but sure to turn around at the first opportunity. We roll off asphalt road and skid into the bushes, dirt splatters upward and over the bike.

I break my howl.

Mid-fall, before bike crushes Hunter's leg I jump off and jerk it upward, lay it down on the other side. "You ok?"

"That thing you did, warm air? That was awesome." His dirty face splits in a wide grin. He pulls himself up, muddy and shaken but happy, like a toddler after a bout of some particularly good mischief, and wipes his palms on jeans.

"It wasn't air, it's water. I can move water so faster that it gets warm."

"Whatever, it was awesome all I'm saying." He wipes his nose.

"Where to now?" I ask.

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

"I say, drowning is overrated. Meh. Want me to teach you how to fly?"

We hold a gaze for a few seconds, the bridge of understanding strung in the air, temporary, to cross only once and then disappear as if it never existed.

I nod, faintly aware of time passing and wondering how much longer we can stand here and talk before being caught. Hunter seems unfazed. He always falls into this calmness at the onset of danger, knowing exactly when to rest and when to run. I decide to trust his intuition.

The air is thin. Sleepy suburban houses stir with life, souls tinkle on from slumber like pieces of orchestra beginning its session of tuning before a big concert. First dog walkers gawk at us pulling the bike into the road and wheeling it up the hill, me bearing most of its weight, away from the highway, leaving dirty trails as a sure sign for police to follow.

We stop at the crest of the road, looking down.

"How the hell are we going to evade the cops?" I say, feeling them turn around a few miles and away and heading back our way. "They'll be here in about five minutes."

"Figures, slow fatties. Trust me, I know this area like the back of my hand, it's where I used to ride Dad's bike. Haven't been caught once. Ready?"

I look at his face illuminated by morning sun that breaks through the clouds, and behind him I see Mount Rainier, snowy white in its splendor.

"Is that where we're going?" I point.

"Yep. Where else? We ought to go in style, right? Ever flew off a stratovolcano?" He falls into his comical speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our performance, the one and only show. Today! Don't miss it! There will be no reruns! We will make sure to donate all proceeds to future suicide victims, of which, let me assure you, there will be many." Perhaps my face makes him stop. Still, he tries to joke. "How about it, glacial ice for the audience and Rainier valley for a stage?"

"Yeah, a dream performance." I echo.

"Right."

"Right."

The topic dies and we stand across each other, uneasy, time ticking away almost audibly in the silence.

"I have an idea, actually, about the cops. Do you mind doing your thing again, to keep me warm? And maybe, like, shroud us in fog or something?"

"Oh, is that why you're in no hurry? Ahead of you, punk, already planned." I smile.

We high-five and steal another few seconds of contemplation, holding hands. I watch rows of empty roads in front of us, blue shimmer of atmosphere behind them, rolling blankets of fog creeping up the mountain itself, forever quiet, oblivious to our drama.

"Can you keep it up for a second?" He asks.

"Sure."

He reaches behind the fairing, connects the wires and pushes the start button. Bike roars to life, and at the same time I hear the wail of police sirens behind.

"We have two minutes left!"

Hunter nods, mounts the bike, I hop behind, grab his waist, and we're off. Towards the back-roads, full of twists and turns to enjoy one last time.

Yellowing trees frame our flight with their canopies of burnt foliage on top of tufts of green as if gigantic hairy heads dipped in fire. Dump smell of fallen leaves mixes with the crispness of fall, fresh and chilly on touch.

I ignore obnoxious blaring noises from behind us and helicopter blades above, press my chin between Hunter's shoulders and open into a song.

"Lost on foggy paper I am aware of you

"Fondly calling in the distance

"On shores I gather driftwood to build a cave

"Abandoned all the belongings to thrive

"Through spume and tides I lit a fire in the night..."

Thick steam rolls out of my mouth and lick us into warm cotton candy ball of fog, leaving circular opening for Hunter to see where we're going. All other noises hush. I sing some more.

"Grains of sand peeling upon your bare body  
"Behold are thee in moments of weakness  
"Cocooning my mind into treasure chest  
"Resting on cold, dark grounds which gave birth  
"To sounds so evoking for human desires..."

Fog ball spreads out thin tentacles of mist ahead of us and behind us. I create a dense blanket of haze underneath which we speed like a scurrying mouse under a carpet, lifting it a tad as it moves, nearly invisible to anyone who happens to look down.

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

I tap him on the shoulder in response and sing more.

"Algae weaving around your earthly face  
"As I lean down to kiss your brow  
"Salty lingers the echo soaked in yearning  
"On my soar lips - I reach falling for divine."

And I'm ready to fall.

It's been perhaps an hour of a spectacular ride through a cloud of my own creation, watching ghosts of trees appear out of nowhere and be swallowed behind us into oblivion, their branches grinning toothless smiles along the ribbon of the road. This is as close as it gets to vanishing into nothing, approaching the

horizon that seems so close yet is far away, the never-ending milk of perspiration.

Hunter stops the bike. I stop my song and listen. Nothing. Only a few distant ranger souls.

"We've lost them."

"No, it's you who lost them. Thank you." He turns and takes my face in his hands, bike idling softly and radiating heat between us.

"Ah, it's nothing."

Fog recedes and I see the base of the mountain and a zigzagging road that snakes all the way to the top, vertical rock on its right, void on its left, opening into a sleepy valley shrouded under a layer of dew.

Hunter squeezes my hand. "Ready?"

I try to make out the mountain's peak in the clouds, golden in the sun. "Do I need to answer?"

We lock eyes, transfixed by what we're about to do, pressed by its weight and lifted to the highs of existence at the same time.

"No. I understand. This is my bridge."

"That's not what I mean."

"What do you mean then?" His eyebrows fly up.

"You never told me. I told you, and you never told me why. Get it? I think I deserve to know."

He appears to study a nearby bush sprinkled with bursts of yellow salmonberries, looking out curiously at us as if with a couple dozen sunny eyes.

"That week, when father left, I thought I could fix it." His eyes brim with tears and flaps his hand at them and presses his lips together so next words come out suppressed as if they never meant to be heard by anyone. "I was stupid and arrogant, thought I could fix anything, but I couldn't. There is no magic glue for family, you know, no magic pill for cancer. I felt so useless, just wanted to lay down and die..."

"...and you decided you couldn't hold the weight anymore, is that right? It was too painful to bear."

"You're stealing my words." He stretches his lips into a hint of a smile, still studying the bush.

I simply hold his hand and don't answer.

"Yeah, something like that. But I picked myself up and decided to fight. To push back the date. I got a job, a real paying job." He steals a glance at me. "Your dad, the siren hunter, you know. Suddenly, I could afford her meds." I hear tears in his voice. "It was a fake, fake hope. It only extended what I knew would happen all along. She doesn't even recognize me anymore, asks my name every day. So what's the point, tell me, what is the fucking point!"

He grabs my shoulders and shakes me. I let him.

"At least you have a mom." I whisper.

He falls silent, as if I slapped him on the face and took his breath.

"At least you have a dad."

That slaps me in return, hard. A surge of hate fills my throat. "You call *that* a dad?" I shake and yank my hand out of his to curl it into a fist. "That control freak, that sicko woman-hater, asshole, pervert, that..." I catch my breath. "That..."

Tears spill down my cheeks in two angry lines.

He cradles my face. "How can I make you feel better? What can I do? What else can I give?" His eyes widen and all I see is the sky reflected in two blue pools, his irises, pulsing with care. It fills me with brilliant pain that's borderline pleasure, and hunger rears its ugly head, straining to hear Hunter's soul, the shuffling of the slippers on the floor, the clanking dishes set out on the table to dinner, the chirping of birds, all against the background of Vivaldi's summer season.

It takes an enormous amount of will to not lunge at him and suck out his soul in one go, battered by Ligeia's attempt but still intact and as beautiful as before. My chest lights on fire and threatens to tear me apart, I clasp my hand over my mouth to keep it from singing.

The beauty I can never have, and if I have it, I will destroy it. My decision affirms at this thought.

"Summer is over, it's time to fall." I whisper through curled fingers, hoping against all hope that by sheer force of smashing on the rocks into a million pieces I will finally stop existing.

"What did you say? You ok?"

I take a deep breath and exhale the pain, numb. "I said, have you ever given someone a ride of a lifetime?"

We exchange a smile. It's this game we play. Have you ever. Hunter and me.

"What's a ride of a lifetime?" He winks.

"You know, the killer kind."

"Nope, never have."

"Can I be the first? Pretty please?"

"You? Of course. Always. And forever."

Unable to restrain myself anymore, I lean in and he's kissing me. Desperate to feel most of it, I press hard. Lips, tongue, my whole face. We gobble each other up. There is no room for breath, no room for thought, only this.

His hands in my hair, I ball up the collar of his clammy shirt into fists, watch clouds drift and reveal blue sky. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes only one minute to fall down ten thousand feet. I close my eyes, imagine what our bodies would sound like, flying into abyss, cascading down the mountain rocks, crashing through pines. And,

when they land, will we be intact or torn apart, our eyes closed or staring into nothing.

Distant helicopter shopping breaks our kiss. Pulling against desire as if against a strong magnetic force, we break apart and reach for a breath at the same time.

"It's time." Hunter says.

"How long to the top?"

"Twenty minutes at the most."

I grab his hand and squeeze it hard. "I love you to death."

"I love you more." He grins and gives me another peck on the lips. "You're so beautiful, you know that?"

And I don't know how to parry that, dropping my eyes. Me, an ugly duckling, beautiful? A surge of excitement runs through me, pins and needles. My hands shake.

Hunter turns and revs up the bike.

"Shit, we're almost out of fuel. Hang on!"

I clutch him from behind and we whiz up the path, higher, higher, taking tight turns at incredible speed, waiting for that perfect drop-off to come.

## 28. Antler Peak.

How ironic is it to experience the last twenty minutes of your life as most vibrant and happy. Sky-dome aglow with September morning, I gobble it up with my eyes. Cool wind full of autumn smells, I suck it through my nose. Thick brush dotted with deer souls, I absorb their distant tinkle with my ears. Mountain air, I taste it on my tongue like a nectar of vastness and freedom akin to standing on a peak's top, hugging rough rock, yelling to the world, *look at me, I made it!* And, above all, Hunter's soul, sweet penultimate note to finish it off. A bird's eye of indefinite duration. A never-ending fermata at full discretion of its conductor. Me.

I begin to count minutes.

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

Not a single car ahead of us or behind us, not for miles out. A racer's dream. An empty circuit to die for. We're a wild

card entry, competing for Grand Prix. The final obstacle to win is to get airborne, two baby birds ecstatic to fly before they realize their wings don't work.

Each turn makes my heart stop, and each turn it's not *it* yet. Not quite. We ride higher still. A layer of fog palms tops of trees, ever so gently, torn into patches of needlework by the sun. I dare not breathe, so as not to blow off whatever is left of it. Because it's pretty, reminiscent of Mommy's songs, tracing paper over my dreams, unframed paintings of wilderness lust contained in a glass jar of wishes and let loose on the mountain to its delight. We tickle her side, she's about to shake us off, a couple crumbs down tree-colored skirt.

Six minutes left.

Douglas firs and red cedars and hemlocks recede, give way to occasional pine clumps against open meadows tickled with berries and dew. I hug Hunter tighter. He covers my hands with his left palm, hot and sweaty despite low air temperature. I press my knees into his thighs and squeeze hard, feel his stomach muscles roll under my arms, imprint my face in his back wanting to melt into him and become a permanent impression. Become one solid being instead of two, if only for another minute.

I listen to low thumping of his heart and imagine riding inside his blood vessels at full speed, bathing hot and red and

scalding like boiling tea after a walk in a winter afternoon.  
Straight to his heart that's still beating.

Four minutes left.

Two more turns, maybe three. Pieces of crumbled rock fly from under the wheels and skitter down left side into nearly eight thousand feet of obscurity. At next turn we circle the mountain at almost one hundred and eighty degrees. Sun hits us with golden glory. It shines down the basin of dawn, to our left, milky and thick. Colors mountain ridges pink, to our right.

One minute.

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

"We're out of fucking fuel!" He yells. "Right on time!"

"I love you!" I yell back, wondering if these would be the last words I tell him, rubbing my hands all over him in mad urgent caress, up his face, across his lips, down his neck.

"Love you more!" He shouts in a delirious glee. His voice sharp with shrillness. We must be near. We must be almost to the top.

Thirty seconds.

Final stretch. Final big turn. I clench my arms around his waist not worried anymore if I cut off his breath. I'd mash him to pieces and stuff him in a pocket if I could, to dip my fingers inside his homespun goodness, forever warm and soothing. Hunter grunts and grabs my hands briefly, crushing my fingers.

Ten seconds.

We go in a straight line, right into the sun, into a split between over and under, light blue and dark blue. Blue is my favorite color, so what's the difference what shade it is, right? Or if the line happens to be jagged instead of straight, who cares? Or if the road turns in a perfect curve or slips a little due to drunken road worker oversight. None of it matters. Only its arc, from one reality into another. There, where it bends, we do not.

Three. Two. One.

As if anticipating our descent, the road sports no rail, not even a single bush or wisp of gruff meadow grass. Our hearts beat in unison and threaten to overpower motorcycle buzz. Tires hug the asphalt one last time. Revolve another ninety degrees in a fraction of a second and burst free of gravity like a rookie diver propelled forward by sheer dare, off the cliff, into the air.

We fly.

"YEAH!" Hunter's voice echoes into space as he takes his hands off handles and intertwines his fingers with mine. Joined, we spread our arms like wings before the wind tears off our feathers. Bike roars and falls out from under us. We speed down, wind flapping in our shirts, Hunter face first, I'm floating over him. It all happens in less than a second, and another second later I get hit by a fully blown panic attack.

Air grows thin, freezes my guts. Wind grows loud, tears at me with its fingers. Its rush deafens me. My mind reels with big red pulsing letters forming one word.

WRONG!

As if to tell me, wrong way. Wrong decision. Wrong direction, idea, everything! But it's too late to turn back. Too late to do anything at this point. Another forty seconds or so and we're mush at best, slime at worst, to be scraped off the rocks as our final act of togetherness.

I hyperventilate. *This is the worst thing I could have done*, I want to scream. *Fuck my life. Stop it, Ailen, do something, now!*

Hunter's fingers clench mine with the force of a corpse in its final death grip, bone-crunching and icy. We tear through milky fog, our clothes instantly damp, faces teary, eyeballs chilled to a hurting point. The forest is near, pines lined up as spikes, ready to puncture. In that moment something shifts in

the atmosphere, we hit a denser air mass at the wrong angle and spiral out of control. Mind ruthlessly tossed aside, my body takes over and lets survival instinct kick in.

I scream.

My desperation passes through vocal cords with great force, exits at one hundred thirty decibels, the loudest scream ever recorded, if anyone cares. A battle cry, a death growl, a rebel yell, all combined into one frightening holler. We're a few seconds from hitting the ground, about to drill into it like a high-speed screwdriver. Mist shifts. Droplets appear out of thin air and multiply at an alarming rate. Water condenses around us and wafts down in a river of rain. We're soaked. I clench my arms into a tight hold, curl my knees and lift legs up, twist in the air, my back to the ground, Hunter embraced and protected.

CRACK!

We crash through pines. Branches snap across my back, their furry hands slap my face and cover us in a shower of needles.

THUD!

My back lands on wet ground, softened by water and grass. It momentarily indents and sends shockwaves in circles, then rebound back onto me. A wave of sound travels through my spine from collision with such force that it breaks every bone, stretches every muscles to a snapping point, but I hold tight. This is my death grip, and I won't let Hunter go.

My body bounces up as if made from resin, intact. That means it's impossible to break a siren apart. Noted. Yet my shirt has been nearly torn off and the skin on my back peeled to reveal flesh. Like Daddy said, sirens are easier to cut underwater, though I'm only on wet ground and not fully submerged. That was enough moisture for my skin to become vulnerable? Noted.

I refuse to let go and roll, through the underbrush, in a tangle of wet dirt, pine needles, and twigs. My right hand over Hunter's face to protect it from damage, my left clenching his stomach, my entire body flattened by the fall and blanketing him on all sides.

I realize I still scream. Water cushions my roll, sliding us into grassy mountain valley. Here rolling stops. I close my mouth and eyes shut. Silence falls down in a hushed hammer.

We lie on our left side, I cradle Hunter's body. Warm. Alive? My ears ring from the commotion and I can't hear his soul, nor breathing, nor beating of his heart. Only feel my fingers sticky and wet from his blood, afraid to untangle, to let him go. Wildflowers crunch violet-blue and white under my arm, their petals tickle my nose, fill me with their gentle fragrance, unperturbed by our fall, blooming. Chikorries. I inhale their aroma and smile. It reminds me of sweet acorns if ground into powder, with a bit of a sour hint, their souls

nearly inaudible whisper. A huge Douglas fir towers over us in a protective giant gesture, one of many on the edge of the valley. A small lake glistens in blue about twenty yard away.

This is the moment of truth.

I wait. I feel. I'm alive. I cry, deciding to never ever do this again. My elation gets overpowered by something profound. I can hear Hunter's soul! Then he convulses and coughs up blood, a warm trickle down my hands.

"Hunter! You're alive, you're alive!" I croak. And I laugh. It's hysterical, all fear released into guttural jerky sounds. It rings off mountain walls, hushed by the wind.

"We didn't die." I say. "We're alive, Hunter. Did you hear me? We're alive." He breathes in short gasps. "Are you all right?" I can't move my arms, have to wait until my body repairs itself, broken bones and torn muscles and severed skin. A couple hours, maybe more. I want to make sure he's ok.

"Can you talk? Say something, Hunter, please. Please, say something." My voice breaks, throat sore from screaming. I feel his blood seep into my sleeves. "Hunter, please answer me, can you talk?" I want to shake him, but I can't. Instead, he shakes in a violent fit and is still.

"I'm here, here with you. It'll be ok." I whisper.

No response.

I don't know if I want to know, clinging to hope, waiting, afraid to faint from anticipation.

He takes a breath, produces a barely audible "Fuck."

"Holy shit, you're alive. You didn't die. We didn't die. That was the stupidest thing we've ever done, you hear me? It was fucking retarded. I don't care what you say, but I'm so not doing this ever again. So not doing it. Forget it, it's not our turn yet. Fuck this game. Got it?"

I hear rapid breathing in response.

"As long as you don't die on me, no need to answer. Just keep breathing, ok?"

My muscles knit together on their own accord. I feel them mend, limbs tingling, skin itchy as if a million red ants bit me all over, ate their way in towards the bones, softened cartilage and glued broken pieces together, hardening them with their saliva into one rigid mass. Dense connective tissue a la femme fatale. *Stand aside, creeps, I'll be reborn here any second.* This sounds like something Hunter would say.

I wish. I wish he would talk. I want to hear his voice.

Ten minutes go by, and I'm still broken. I flex my fingers. They work, but my hands can't move. Hunter's breathing slows down. *Oh no, no, no-no-no. Don't panic, don't panic,* I think. *It's ok, it'll be ok.* All I can do is breathe into his hair and

chikorries and wait, listening to the faint violin moans of his soul's concerto.

Another half an hour later I can move my arms. Carefully, trying not to listen to Hunter's whimpers, I pull my left arm from under him, try to prop myself on one elbow and promptly collapse back onto the grass.

An hour passes by. Or two?

A couple deer graze nearby, flicking their ears and cautiously approaching us, sniffing yet keeping their distance. I clear my throat, thinking whether or not I can lure one in to feast on its soul. That would do me good. As if reading my thoughts, they sprint and are gone. Darn.

I try lifting myself again. This time, it works. Beads of cold sweat break on my forehead and my gills puff up with blood. I have to pause for a few seconds to make sure the dizziness goes away. Slowly, I roll Hunter onto his back, holding his head and laying it down on the ground, having a first good look at him since we fell.

I don't want to see what I see. His face is mush, one bloody mess caked into a mask of pain. His hair an old wig from a prop shop that needs to be thrown away, it looks so matted and greasy and dirty. His clothes a shredded heap of cotton from another life, the color of mud. His legs bent, feet in socks but sneakers gone, torn off by our crash. One arm limp on the left

side of his body, another stuck out at an awkward angle. I touch his cheek and tear my hand away. It feels like his scream will never end.

"FUCK THAT HURTS! Don't touch me. Talking hurts. Oww..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Hunter sobs. Tears trace two clear lines on the sides of his filthy face, his bright blue irises the only two things of clean color, as lovely as the chikorries framing his head. His cheeks are swollen and bruised, so is his forehead. I decide if I look at his face any longer, I will start sobbing myself, so I get myself busy, ball up the bottom of his sweatshirt and with one yank rip it open.

"Your ribs look like they're intact." I gently pat his shoulders. "Perhaps a broken arm, though. It's twisted at a strange angle. Can you move it?"

I touch it and Hunter wails, then coughs up more blood and stops moving. I hear his soul dance in his ribcage like a moth at the light, wanting to flee, thrashing, breaking its delicate wings. It cries out to me, begs for mercy.

I get a crazy idea that maybe if I sing it out, I'd be able to revive it and stuff it back inside so as not to let him die. I pry open his eyelids, but they don't budge, glued shut. His mouth falls open and the first tendrils of mist curl out. Maybe if I can find somebody else's soul, somebody who'd be willing to

replace his... There is no time to think. I can't help myself and begin to hum. My tears transform into sound. Soft, velvety, it drips into song, creates a stream of calming water, drop by drop, puddle by puddle. I take Hunter's cold hands into mine, lower my face over his so that our lips almost touch. I sing and I sing and I sing, pouring out my wish to take his pain away. His soul skirts around me and up into the sky, ready to flee his body.

"NO!"

His bloodied face turns old, eyelids fall into sockets, buried in wrinkles, hollow.

"No!" I yell at him. "No, no, no!!!" I try again. The song comes out ugly, torn and disjointed, but I don't care. I don't want him to die, not now, not after all this. What else is there to do except to try and bring him back? He's not fully gone yet. I hear faint breathing, slow beating of his heart like flickering lights. Now they're on, now they're off. Each flicker a hope of repetition.

I choke on tears and sing more. I call to the mountain, to the lake, to trees, to flowers, to grass. They sway in sorrow together with me. I call to every living soul detectable, miles away, plants, insects, animals, people. All of them, one by one, asking, begging. They don't budge, saunter on with their lives, oblivious, ignorant. But something shifts in the air and it

gives me a surge of hope. I keep searching, cast my voice farther out, as far as I can, until I find it.

Find her.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who breaks my rules."

"You!" I recoil, all air gone from my lungs as if someone kicked me in the chest, hard.

"Who else? Guess whose turn it is."

"I hate you!!!" I scream.

"Such ungrateful girl, where are your manners? You ask for help, I help you, and then you yell at me bad bad words. You disappoint me, oh, how you disappoint me."

"Who do you think you are, fucking with me, Death herself? Well, you're not! You're just a player in her game, like me, like all of us. A messenger who puffed out her chest too much, to accompany the dead on their after-life journey, thinking she's bigger than she is. Hear me? Accompany. That's like a taxi driver job. Guess what. I don't need a ride, thank you very much. Neither does Hunter here, so shut your fucking mouth and leave us alone!"

"I'll throw in a little twist into your game, want me to? Want me to revive your beautiful boyfriend? Here you go." She produces an indescribable wail and snaps her fingers. The noise is deafening and I cry out involuntarily.

"Can we do without screaming, please?" Hunter croaks. "I thought paradise was supposed to be a quiet place."

"Hunter?" One second I'm miles away conversing with Canosa, her white sugar-stick body half-submerged in a stinky lily pond, another I'm back in the valley, kneeling over Hunter, white teeth of his crooked smile across his bloody face. Intact. Chikory blue matching his eyes. I gasp and produce a short chortled laugh, because all of this is absurd.

"Hunter? Your soul, it didn't... You ok?" I ask and touch his hands, arms. They feel solid. He winces, but doesn't cry out. Canosa did what she promised to do, I grin and then frown, wondering what's behind her actions.

"Fine, considering I just fell ten thousand feet down off a cliff of a mountain, not too shabby. Who is it you were screaming at with such passion?"

I shake my head. "You wouldn't believe it."

"Try me."

"Canosa."

"Oh, she's still playing around, eh? Nice. She must have good survival instincts, I tell you. That bitch." He spits to the side, obviously very angry. I bite my lip.

"How did you recover so quickly? Last I saw your soul was escaping through your lips..." I begin, but I know the answer and wonder why did I say anything at all.

"How would I know. One minute I'm flying through the air, another I wake up all bruised but alive here all the way on the bottom. I'm supposed to be in shock. Get off me!" He makes this angry face of a dog whose bone has been taken away, complete with snarling and bared teeth.

I recoil, calculating in my head how many hours it would take for me to fully recover, against how many hours it would take Canosa to reach us.

"We can't stay here, she heard me, she'll be on our heels in a couple hours, if not sooner. Sirens can move fast when they want. Can you move at all?"

Hunter shifts his weight and throws open his mouth in a quiet cry. "I think my arm is broken. Great."

"Fuck. I'm sorry. I'm..." I reach out to touch him, but he yells with such intensity I fall back on my butt.

"I said, don't fucking touch me!" Tears spring up in his eyes, he swats at them, grinds teeth. I stare, non-comprehending. Sky fades its pinkish glow of late morning into afternoon. Rare clouds shift above our heads, distant.

"Why are you mad at me? What did I do wrong..."

"You saved me, that's what! Stupid siren superhero. Did I ask you to do it? Did I? Why the hell do you think I needed help?" He opens his mouth wide at the last word and scowl in

pain, covering his bruised lip with one hand, covering his eyes with another as if to ward off an oncoming headache.

"I... I only wanted... But... Hunter! I couldn't not to." I'm hurt and confused and am trying not to cry.

"Want to know what you did? All that insurance money for my mom, that goes down the drain now. Thanks to you. So thank you very much, darling." Then, after a pause and a brief look at me, as if backtracking, he says, "Hey, tell me it's not true. Tell me we're having a bad trip. We just took some strong medicine grade weed, right? For fuck's sake, did we really just fall down the mountain cliff? This is not happening. This can't be happening." His eyes widen in two round blue dots.

Anger grips me. "I'm not sure exactly what we did and I don't wanna talk about it. Let's make sure whatever it was, we'll never do it again." Regret joins suit.

"Who cares what you want, Ailen. It's all about you always, isn't it." He attempts to fling his hand to dismiss me and suppresses a cry of pain.

My ears adjust to a sudden change. I put my finger to my mouth indicating silence, listening for any sign of life to determine our path of direction, thinking I'd carry Hunter on my back once fully healed. It's quiet. In fact, it's too quiet, and the feeling of being watched creeps into my senses again.

"I don't like this silence." I whisper.

"What?" Hunter asks.

I scoot next to him, listening to forest life. A mouse here, a bird there, and deer. Many deer grazing on the grass. Their souls a soft rustle of leaves in the wind. Pine needles crunch under their hooves. Pine needles fall.

Pine needles fall on my head. I look up and meet two eyes. The eyes of Canosa descending down the tree, with a hiss, Ligeia and Teles behind her.

## 29. Sunrise Lake.

There is stillness in the air akin to preserved vacuumed sealed off *nothingness* itself. And I know that as soon as I make a move, even attempt to take a breath, it will erupt. World folds into darkness and I see only Canosa's two piercing eyes a few feet above my face. Glowing. Hungry. Ageless. Perhaps a hundred souls sunk into them, perhaps a thousand. I don't move, staring, immobile, glued to the ground. That white mane over an eerie face, those large milky eyes. How I get lost in them. How their chill makes me shrink. How I think it's impossible for me to get any colder, yet I do. I freeze and crust over with a layer of frost. How I know that this is not a game anymore, it never was a game, and now it's truly my turn. Not just any turn. It's my turn to die.

"How did you get here so fast?" I manage.

"Ailen Bright, welcome to your move, silly girl."

That's her opening point. I get it.

"I thought you were out of the game. I thought I blew you guys out of the water and told you not to bother me again, didn't I?" I clench my fists to gather more courage. "And I *just* told you *again* to stay the fuck away, so what's your problem? Do

you not understand the word *away*? Do you need me to spell it out for you? Cause I can."

Without breaking the gaze, from the corners of my eyes I see droplets of water caught between pine needles. Ligeia's and Teles's hungry eyes peer from above, glistening with anticipation and somehow changed, as if grown up, that's the best I can describe them. Cold, distant, bent on feeding their lust, savoring the idea of swallowing Hunter's soul already.

A pack of hunting sirens on the prowl.

"Girls, there is your reward. Have fun."

Canosa lunges down and I'm born. Of air. This is my opening point, eat that. A note rises into my throat, forces my lips open. I scream.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

Trees sway in response, the mountain pulses to the rhythm, ground shifts under my feet. I scream an animal scream, a wild call to protect my territory. It means *back off, or I'll claw at your eyes, rip out your heart, feast on your flesh, grind down your bones into a thousand pieces, and spit you out to rot.*

The siren above me answer with a guttural wail.

"OOOOOOH!"

It booms through pines and picks up in the echoes off the mountain, whining and howling and moaning, hungry. They're waiting for their alpha to make her first move.

And she does.

Canosa lets go of her grip and lands on my back together with strips of pine bark and needles. They stick to my sweatshirt, sticky with sap and smelling of rosemary. I'm a delicious chicken a la rosemary-baked, no potatoes this time, but plenty of finely crushed hate. She tosses me to the ground, preparation stage one. I clutch her shoulders and we roll away from the tree. Dirt stuffs my eyes, my mouth. Bitter, crunchy. Preparation stage two. She tightens her grip on me, she's strong, but I'm faster, even though I'm not fully healed yet. I twist in her grip and kick her face with the back of my head. She lets go with a cry.

"How is that for a recipe?" I crawl back towards the tree. Hunter stirs.

"Don't move." I tell him without looking.

Canosa stares me down, calculating. Her nostrils flare, her eyes search me, lips tight. She pulls herself back up, no shred of clothing on her petite yet womanly body, except thick strands of hair. Hair so long, it touches her feet.

She glances up. A signal. This is Canosa like I've never seen her before, animalistic and primitive. A huntress at her best. Ligeia and Teles squat next to her. They both look at me, waiting. I know they're here just along for the ride. They don't care if I die or not, only Canosa hungers for my death, or,

perhaps, she's not done playing with me yet. But I realize I am. I'm not wanting to play this game anymore. After this morning I think I've had enough of dying.

"Bravo. This will give you bragging rights. How many sirens did you bring with you to take me down? Only two? Will that be enough against an injured newborn? If I were you, I wouldn't take any chances."

Canosa stiffens and produces a loud hiss.

"You've lost your ability to talk or something? That's what it was all along. To wait for me to fall off the cliff and break all my bones to be an easy target. Sorry it took me so long. I apologize for any inconvenience."

"Hush! The girl who never listens. We made a deal, you didn't hold up your end of the bargain. I came for my payment. In fact, I had to *mend* my payment." She flicks her hair in motioning towards Hunter and assumes a stance of a boxer, legs spread far apart for balance, arms bend close to her sides, hands in fists.

"What, you were afraid to come talk to me one on one? You had to bring your sorry sidekicks to stand by in case something awful would happen? Come to think of it, how did I not notice this before. You're a coward. You wanted them to take me under the bridge, but it didn't work. Ailen Bright, the little girl who turned out to be so dangerous and terrifying. With her

terrible dangerous friend, only injured from a fall off the cliff of the mountain." I motion at Hunter who throws me a terrified look back, as if asking, what the hell are you doing? "Oh my fucking God, everyone, run and hide."

Ligeia giggles, Teles picks it up and snickers into her hand.

"Shut up!" Canosa yells.

By now Hunter manages to sit up. His uninjured hand pokes around his jeans for the whip. Alas, it's not there. I can hear his laborious breathing without looking, backing away towards him, spreading my arms in a protective gesture.

"I'm not afraid of her! I'm not afraid of you. The little thief who stole catch. Again." Ligeia purses her lips and wipes the dirt off her face, sneers, showing rows of jagged teeth that I haven't noticed before.

"Just say the word." Teles says, her voice melodic yet harsh. "We'll split him in half this time, ok sister?" Her hair, curly and thin, barely covers her body.

"Oh, so you act on command only? Canosa here is your boss, right? That's a lovely arrangement." I say, eyeing them with a murmur of distaste.

"Quiet, I said. Back off, both of you." Canosa interjects.

Cool on the surface, my mind races inside a mad daze. What should I do next, how can I overpower three strong sirens while

my bones are still knitting together and Hunter is injured and weak.

Canosa takes a step towards me.

"What do we have here? A girl fight, just for me. Thank you, ladies." Hunter says, as if he just woke up to a crowd of people in his bedroom.

"Looks more like a party to me, in honor of our jump. I think we broke a world-record on survival." I say. "Care to join?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not sure I'm dressed for the occasion." He motions his arm at his torn sweatshirt with an attempted humor and poorly concealed irritation.

"Hunter Crosby, hired, fired, then hired again. The unfortunate siren hunter who happened to forget his weapon. How typical of young men. But it's nice to see you again. How's the mom?" Canosa asks.

I sense Hunter tense all over, emanate hatred, and then it's gone, washed over by his self-control.

"Fine, thanks. How's yours? Do you even know who it was, of the four? Let's see, there were Terpsichore, Melpomene, Sterope, and Chthon. Nice names too."

I break into a wide smile.

A fizz of anger erupts from Canosa's lips. "Move it! Enough talking, I'm tired of waiting." She assumes a stance of a

nonchalant observer, her back to the glistening lake, obviously enjoying herself despite Hunter's attacks.

Sirens advance at me. I step closer to the tree, feeling pressed into the corner of a gigantic basin framed by mountains, their ridges its rims, their vegetation its slippery coating. The only thing that's missing is water. I glance up. Not true. Clouds could be the soapy foam that floats on top it, and I'm under, with two sirens against me, at least for now.

Canosa watches me with her lips stretched into a smile, her body stiff with anticipation, and for a second I think that she's simply a bronze faucet, until she snarls at me and cackles her hideous laugh.

My heart sinks. I'm just a plaything to her. This is not a fight, this is slaughter, and perhaps she'll leave me alive after it, just to play some more. Perhaps she'll kill Hunter in front of my eyes, just to see what I'd do, how I'd react. She's bound to win.

I decide my only defense is my voice.

I concentrate on inhaling a lung-full of air.

Too late. One second Teles flexes her muscles a few feet in front of me, another she clasps her hands around my neck behind me, cutting off air, just like she did on the boat last time. Not that I need to breathe, but I can't make a sound without breathing. I hear Hunter groan, as I kick my heel into her

crotch and twist my arms to try to grab a fistful of her hair, but it's so smooth and slippery that my fingers keep sliding. The best I can do is hug her behind my back and not let her go.

The best I can do is... wish myself deaf.

So I won't hear what's happening. So my ears are blocked. But I hear every bit of it, even though I can't turn my neck and look back.

I hear Ligeia descend on Hunter, pin him down, laugh. In my mind, he's in a tub, covered with a moving mass of maggots. They want to eat out his soul, tear him apart, suck on his guts, and then devour him whole, bones and sinew and even hair. He cries in pain then falls silent. She must have propped open his eyes. First tendrils of smoke reach my feet, the temperature drops ten degrees. Ligeia begins to sing.

"I said, we'll split him in half this time, you whore!" Teles shouts at Ligeia and in my ear. Canosa blares her lethal cry to silence the arguing, hushing the rest of the noises into a thick layer of fog. Teles relaxes her fingers on reflect, frightened.

And it gives me a break I need.

Half a second.

It strikes me as if the knowledge was there all along. She's slippery, yet dry and smooth to the touch. She must've been out of the water for quite some time. She must hurt. Her

gills must hurt, those little gaps below her ears that my fingers keep sliding over in an effort to grab her hair. An image of Daddy stepping on my gills in the bowels of his trawler flashes my mind. Every siren's vulnerable point.

That's it.

I lean backwards. Taken by surprise, she falls under me. Before she has time to react, I scoop two handfuls of pine needles and stuff them inside her gills, pushing with my thumbs, hard. She lets go in silence, I slide off her body and turn around in time to see the shock on her face quickly change to a grimace of utmost concentration and finally get replaced by a cry of pain. I grab two more fistfuls and stuff them in, whispering all the while, "There is your stuffed chicken, Canosa, you mixed up the recipe, it's not rosemary, it's pine!" Teles writhes in agony like a leech on hot sand. I plop myself on top of her, push her wrists into the soft ground, and sing in her face.

I have perhaps seconds left, before Hunter's soul takes a hike in Ligeia's chest.

Mist dims the mountain, rolls over the lake in a giant bleached tongue. By some unknown instinct, I lower my face directly over Teles and sing into her open mouth, making her body shimmer as if aglow, rising an octave higher, stretching my tessitura limits, approaching the highest female voice possible.

High C, coloratura soprano. If a sonic gun can cause a lethal vibration, so can my voice. It all comes down to air waves, after all, that reaching a speed faster than the speed of sound, to produce a sonic boom, much like a mini-explosion.

I reach into the depths of my throat and end the note loud and high. A piercing shriek at seven hundred sixty one miles per hour. Presto. I break the barrier.

POP!

Teles blows up into a burst of droplets. I drop on the ground where she was a second ago, now gone.

"I blew her up, just like that." I whisper, staring at broken chicory stems, crumpled petals under my knees, letting the knowledge sink in. It hits me that I really did it, willed myself to do it. Delirious, with any absence of memory or understanding of where am I and what I need to do next, I shriek pitching my voice to the impossible height.

Ligeia hover close to Hunter as if in a dream gone wrong, her face distorted with hatred and anguish at the same time. Her hands fly up to cover her ears. Too late. I lunge for her, throw her off Hunter, and scream directly into her open mouth. The nightmare repeats. She pops. Fog produced by my vocalization becomes so thick, it starts to feel like light rain. I make out Hunter's body curled up in dirt, hands over his ears, eyes squinted shut.

"Come on, Ailen Bright. Only two? I thought you could do better than that. Look at me, I'm still standing." Canosa appears from the mist, smiling sweetly and putting her foot on Hunter's chest. His breath rises in a mushroom of steam into the cold air before she chokes him into silence.

I take a breath to answer, my throat hurts.

"What do you want?"

Canosa giggles like a little girl, as if it's so apparent and I have somehow missed it.

"You, silly. Haven't you figured it out by now with that smart brain of yours? Too bad, too bad. Well, now you know. I'm very pleased. It's only two of us now, ain't it splendid. Come." She stretches out her hand to me. "Leave these mortals to their bickering. BORING. Let's go fry some big fish, together. Sounds like fun?"

"I don't recall ordering fish for lunch." I say. "Last thing I ordered was a ride off a cliff."

Canosa falls silent and studies me. "Is that your final answer? You don't want to play with me, then? Did I hear that right?"

Terror surges through me, then confusion, then anger, and finally elation. I have power and I know it.

I can sing.

I wish Daddy would hear.

"You heard nothing yet."

I take a step back, stand tall, feet apart, armed with my voice alone, and dive into a capella. Sing my way through the drizzle for the frequency of the rhythm, the tempo that causes Canosa's particles move, little water cells that make up her body and mind. From the distance of several feet, I try to match her pulse, to lead her to an exploding crescendo. I want to unravel her, octave by octave, note by note.

And it works.

She takes a gulp of wet air to sing back at me. Big mistake. Her singing gives me her pitch, the key to the melody, the core to her tempo, a siren DNA of sorts.

*Battle served, a la girl fight of high class, I think,* raise my arms and yowl an ear-splitting discord.

This is how it looks.

Me, I'm the drop of death into an enormous tub dug out by nature itself. My voice, it's the wake from the drop, spilling over the rims in a visible wave of destruction. It travels outward, splatters needles from the pines, tears young trees out of the ground, lifts Canosa and throws her into the air, her limbs flapping and twisting, her hair a sail of a disoriented boat, captain lost, navigation skills in tatters. An octave higher and it jolts the sky itself out of place as if nothing more than thin plaster ceiling. On it goes, for miles and miles,

thickening moisture into heavy clouds, too heavy to hang in the air, needing to fall.

Rains slaps me in the face as if an overturned bucket of water. Canosa is gone, swept away by my voice.

I stop. Beneath heavy rain patter, silence is absolute. I'm afraid of it, it's wrong. A wasteland in place of mountain lake and meadow, every single chicory flower uprooted and gone. No blue, no color at all except dirt. I'm the peg in the center, proud and still, soaked in rain, terrified of what I might find by the tall pine.

It stands erect, thick in age and girth, unmoved, rooted in the mound of earth at its base, fragrant and fresh, smelling of worms, clinging to my bare feet as I step closer to inspect.

Hunter. No sign of Hunter. He's gone.

## 30. Rainier Valley.

A feeling of loss first unbuttons my neck then cuts open my torso in one swift movement. If I had a soul, it'd fall out into the absence of grass, still warm and writhing, pulsing, unaware of its housing severed by the stupidity of the owner. Me. My hands, they don't belong to my fingers. My feet, they don't belong to my legs. My head drops into my pelvis, watching my knees rise up into its place. Dismembered, I stand in a daze of a drunkard who realized there is no ground under her feet, only air, and like in a bad cartoon, she's about to fall straight down, climbing an invisible stair to hell. Backwards. There is no branch to grab, no helping hand to reach out to, only emptiness. That's not the worst of it. What finishes me is the knowledge that I did it myself.

I killed him.

In my murderous glee, I killed my love.

"No!" I scream and clutch my face. "No, no, no, no!"

As if in answer, a feeble violin moans a few yards away and falls silent. I dash in its direction, feet slipping in quickly forming puddles; stop to listen. There it is, coming from the pile of broken twigs caked with pieces of uprooted turf full of

grassroots, next to a fallen pine trunk, laying on the ground as if bones of a broken arm. Dirt moves, a hand emerges, clutches a broken stump of a branch for hold. Rain rolls off its skin.

I drop to my knees with a wet smack and start digging like mad, fingers and nails, one little frantic mole.

Hunter's face clears of debris. He coughs and opens his eyes, stark bright by contrast to all this dirt, gulps raindrops and licks his lips.

"You're alive." I grab him and press him against me, hard. "You're alive, you're alive, you're alive. I'm so sorry for what I did, so very sorry. Will you forgive me?"

Hunter looks at me, obviously disoriented.

"Talk to me."

His face is bewildered, his eyes rotate in their sockets to and fro, struggling to find a compass.

"What? What is it? What's wrong?"

"Ca... Can't..." His voice quiet and garbled.

"Come on, let me carry you, let's figure out a way to get out of here. We'll go to your house and you will take a bath and a nap and feel better and see your mom and..." I chatter nonsense to make him feel better, but mostly to make myself feel better, and at the same time stagger to stand up, slipping in mud, but he grabs my arm and pulls me closer to him.

"Stop... I can't hear you... STOP."

Strength drains from me. The feeling of dread returns, brought on by some horrible mistake I made and can't revert no matter what I do. It's like Hunter's mother and her cancer. I feel hopeless, don't want to believe what I think has happened. I break into hysteria.

"What do you mean, stop? What do you mean, you can't hear me? Listen to me! I killed all remaining sirens - Well, except Canada, but - But I don't think she will bother us anymore. You should've seen her fly, it was epic. We didn't die, that's all that matters. We can live, we can run away, we can..."

Hunter shakes his head. This makes me angry.

I shout obscenities at him, wave my arms for added effect, but all I see in response is pain flashing across his face, and I know I went a little too far.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that... It's just... I was... I'm overwhelmed with all this shit, ok, it's gotten under my skin and it's too much. I want to leave it all and run away, hide some place quiet, you know. You know what I mean, right?" I trail off, not sure what else to say.

"I... can't... hear... you." Hunter spells out each word carefully moving his lips, and now the meaning slowly sinks in. "I... can't... hear... myself talk."

"You can't hear me?" I repeat idiotically.

He nods, wipes hair off his forehead leaving a dirty streak.

Rain patter turns into gushing stream, heavy.

"Did I blow your eardrums? I did, didn't I." Before anything else comes out of my mouth, I close it with both hands, watching drops splatter on top of the puddle, making teeny plopping sounds and creating circular waves that are barely visible and momentarily gone, only to be replaced by the new ones, converge one onto another, disappear, appear, the dance of inanimate life.

Hunter looks at me without any expression.

I want to cry. The moment is ripe to feel tears rolling down my cheeks, but they won't come, my tear ducts dry as a bone. Rain cries for me, drips down my face, over my tattered sweatshirt, into the ground.

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

Hunter screws his face in concentration, perhaps attempting to read off my lips. Then, stumbling over each word and stopping to make sure I understand him, he begins to talk.

"You didn't need to save me, Ailen. I didn't ask you to, but you're so stubborn, always doing things your way. I decided to call it quits, as you remember. I planned for it, carefully, in case you didn't know. And now I'm alive and deaf. You know how weird it feels talking and not hearing what you say? Do you

think I want to exist with this pain for the rest of my life? If you can tall that life. We were supposed to exit it spectacularly, once and for all. I thought for sure falling down ten thousand feet would do it. Ever read interviews with suicide jumpers who didn't quite die?"

He holds back tears. I swallow and study my palms, then bend fingers and inspect the grime under my nails, black and sticky.

"A disabled teenager with a single parent who's dying of cancer. Hunter Crosby, nice to meet you. A siren hunter that can't hear. What a joke. I don't know what else to do, this is all I know. It's all your father taught me. To hell with sonic guns and whips, why bother. You exploded them with your voice, just like that, pop, pop, pop! What's the need for me after this? Nice job, Ailen. Go brag to your Daddy."

His words hurt.

"Remember this game we used to play, Hunter, *have you ever*. Have you ever felt like death is not enough, like the mere fact of your own existence poisons everything around you, no matter what you touch? Like Midas, except instead of gold, everything you touch turns to dust?" I suppress the oncoming tears and rise to my feet. My world turns upside down. Hunter looks at me, but from the expression on his face I see that he can't figure out what I just said.

Rain splatters over tree trunks and drips down into the ground. The air is moist and earthy. Hunter starts to shiver. I keep forgetting that he has to be warm. It's me who feels good under the rain, not him. I hear his soul. Somehow it doesn't sound like home anymore, doesn't sound like anything at all. A melody empty of meaning. He opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of the water, but no words come out. I wait.

He averts his eyes, looks into the distance, not seeming to see anything at all, his gaze empty.

"It hurts, you know, not being able to hear." He finally says in such a small voice, as if his whole body shrunk. He's in pain, I can feel it, and I lean in to comfort him. He shifts away.

"I want to be alone. Can you please leave me alone? Go away."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I want to reach out to him, cry, stroke his hair, hold him.

"Your Daddy was right. Sirens poison our very spirit, sweetly, quietly. With a hundred percent rate of success. Why can't I simply quit you? Why? That's why you need to be extinguished. I'll let you live, this time. Don't ever cross paths with me again, do you understand?" He says, looking at me. I sense an urge to hurt me in his eyes, a childish wish to

strike out just because. Just because maybe it will make him feel better, and I take the blow and nod.

He looks past me, turns his back on me, pulls himself up and over the trunk, moaning in pain. I stretch out my arms to help and then drop them, knowing he won't accept it. He turns to look. I never saw his eyes that cold.

"I don't ever want to see you again, you hear me?" His voice catches at the end. "Never."

He turns away and slumps, breathing heavy.

"Mission accomplished then." I whisper. I want to beg him not to leave me, I want to scream and yell and thrash, but my muscles atrophy. One phrase echoes against the walls of my empty core, *he decided to leave me, he decided to leave me*. I can hear finality in his words. The best I can do is give him one last ride home.

I hum and pour my grief into the melody.

Water seeps out of the ground, now it rises a foot, over the dirt, swirls into a pond of broken tree limbs and patches of grass and brown liquid. Hunter looks at me, clutches the fallen tree trunk, pulls himself over it, water up to his ankles, then knees, then waist.

I still wait. I hope he'll reach out, tell me that it's all going to be ok, that he doesn't mean any of it, but I know it's

a waste of my time. He keeps staring under his nose, half-turned away from me, silent.

And I think, at least I had it, my one minute of fantasy. It's better than nothing. Now I can let it go and die for real. Now there is truly nothing else left to live for. Nothing at all.

This knowledge makes me calm. I know what to do.

Water reaches up to our shoulders now, gurgling, filling up the basin between the mountains. For a moment I think it's not a valley at all. It's a gigantic bathtub filled with liquid mud, my pain, Hunter's pain, Daddy's pain, Mommy's pain. It absorbs it all, brown mess of life that stinks, that's hard to face, shoved in the backs of our minds in hopes that it will vanish.

Not a chance, it says. Smell me, I'm nice and rotten now, would you like a taste? Here. BAM! How about a panic attack. Don't like it? Fine. How about a disorder, let's say, an eating binge. Alcoholism. Drug addiction. Adultery. Still no good? Ok, try domestic violence, child abuse, passive aggressive behavior in public. For the topping we serve serial killing, spawned in the early years of childhood, requiring years and years of maturation in the farthest corners of your soul. No preservatives, please, so as not to spoil the process. Uncork at your own risk. Don't pull with your teeth, the bottle might break. Don't shake, it might explode.

My voice echoes across the entire valley in foolish repetition of someone else's screams.

Hunter shouts at me something, pointing to the water, into the distance, then back at me. I don't hear him, floating, humming, absorbed in my sorrow. Rapid fluid darts down the mountain sides at maybe fifty miles per hour. A loud rumble fills the air, as the announcement of mixed soil, water and debris. An almost musical mudflow, with me directing its performance. I'm the vocalist of erosion, the lead singer of an avalanche, the soloist of destruction and devastation. Mount Rainier National Park is my conductor stand, my voice maestro's baton. Curved horizon my limit, earth my wobble-free base.

Something bumps into me and makes me pause. Uprooted trees fight for space, their branches lap at each other. Several yards away dunking in and out of water, Hunter clutches to the pine trunk for dear life.

I swim toward him, feeling an object sliding about a hundred miles away, concentrating on it. A boat, perhaps. It glides slips across the vibration of the water, and all it takes for me is to change the tune enough to create an undercurrent. No soul on it. Good, that boat will be Hunter's ride. I'll deposit him inside and hum him all the way out of this mess. I reach Hunter and prop him back up on the trunk, as if he an object in a dream, wet yet unreal somehow.

I'm on a roll and can't stop humming. My world is split in two, over and under. I'm under now, in a different reality of self-absorbed creation, an artistic daze of sorts, composing music out of water, mud, and air.

Five minutes go by.

A boat appears in the distance. A dot on the newly fashioned line of water, a siren-made lake between the mountains, made with my voice. A colossal bathtub chiseled in stone, adorned by forests, steaming with evening mist.

"There, that's for you." I point and get back to humming. Hunter doesn't even look at me. I glance at myself, my arms, my shoulders, submerged in thick brown soup. *You're a monster, I think, remember that. Won't you ever forget your place. Admit it and move on.*

Ten more minutes go by.

It's a row boat, empty, not a soul on it. Two oars trail on its sides, their handles sticking out of rusty metal oarlocks. Hull painted bright blue perhaps years ago, now faded to an unidentifiable shade of ultramarine. I close my eyes willing it to move, tugging at it with my voice, wanting it to come close.

It bobs on the waves, weight disproportionate with the shape and size of its wooden body, submerged too deep in the thick gumbo of dirt that I conjured.

I open my eyes.

I float very still.

Daddy sits up in the boat, grinning.

"Excellent job, Ailen. Very good. Four sirens gone, Canosa damaged. I'm very pleased with you, very pleased, indeed."

This is my nightmare. I gape at it coming alive from the dreamland into reality, as sharp as a doctor's pinch, a needle inserted carelessly with a professional hand, to administer the anesthetic. It works, I feel numb all over. Chiseled from rock that miraculously doesn't sink.

"Out of all boats, I had to pick out the one with you, didn't I. Seems like there is no escape." I whisper, every word lost on my tongue and slow to emerge.

"So sorry I left you hanging, kids. I certainly didn't think it would take you this far from Aurora bridge, but a job is a job, right? No matter where you do it, the fact remains. It's done, and I will hold my word. You both will live. Ain't that good news, Ailen? Aren't you happy now? Where is that smile, show Daddy. Please." He looks at me with a new look in his face, the one that I don't recognize. Half awe, half fascination, and perhaps a hint of jealousy mixed with fear. All hiding under the mask of fake parental love.

"Will you forgive me?" He has never apologized to me in my entire life. Ever. He stretches out his hand to me, his grey hair moves in the breeze, lips form a perfect smile.

When I fail to give him my hand, he pats me on the shoulder lightly with a contained grimace of disgust. Daddy always hated wet things, especially wet dirty things. He takes out two resin gloves from his suit pocket, the kind that Mommy used to don for washing dishes, thick and yellow, like that self-help booth on Aurora Bridge designed to attract attention and help distressed suicide jumpers.

"Here, help me pull in Hunter here, please?"

He carefully kneels, his wool jacket creases softly indicating expensive fabric and exquisite craftsmanship, a trace of Gucci perfume wafts at me. I notice the color of his shirt, pale lemon, as if to match the emergency gloves color.

I hesitate, but only for a moment. Hunter is right. Daddy is right. Sirens are poisonous. Look at what they did to my dad. That means I am a monster after all. But he apologized to me. He praised me for a job well done. He heard me, he talked to me like to a normal human being. So what that it took for me to die to get this, it's what I wanted my entire life. Perhaps he loves me, really loves me after all. Then where is my place? With my family. At Daddy's side.

I motion Daddy aside and prop hunter up and over the boat's edge. He slumps into a wet shivering pile, never shedding a single word to me or to Daddy, stating into nothing. I steady the boat from shaking left and right and propel myself up and

out of the water in one swift jump, landing softly between Hunter and Daddy, splattering mud over both, watching with horror how beautiful light-grey fabric absorbs brown stains on Daddy's suit.

I feel Daddy burning a hole in my head with his stare and I dare lifting my eyes at him.

"Don't worry, sweetie, it's just a suit. I have a hundred of these puppies, don't I?" He gives me another pat on the shoulder and pulls off resin gloves with a sickening snap, then pulls out two fishermen overall, jackets and hats, bright yellow, from under the bench.

"Here, put these on, please, both of you, so you won't get wet." I take the gear and slowly unfold it, handing the other set to Hunter, hardly believing what I'm hearing, mouth open.

"Let's go home." Daddy says and picks up the oars.

## 31. Bright's House.

In this newfound happiness, I'm buried alive. Inside a coffin of forced joy, six feet under Daddy's gaze, except it feels more like three feet underwater. No matter how loud I scream, not one living soul will hear me. The boat, the flood, my incongruent daze. From swollen creeks to overflowing Puyallup river to south appendix of Puget Sound itself, the journey home is paved with anguish. Three days ago I was in a different life. Three hours is how long it takes for me to return to it. Three minutes is what it demands to surface. Sealed off, with no way out, I can't breathe, knowing that I'll die right here. Doing things on autopilot. Mooring the boat. Walking up the hill to my house, a funerary casket, shut doors its nails, lack of oxygen my own choice.

This is all backwards, it's not how it's supposed to be. Playing in reverse, from the moment I jumped, returning full circle. No more running for you, Ailen Bright. And to where? Where would I dare to go? Hunter breathes rapidly in front of me, taking each step with great care on stone stairs, mossy and slippery, same stairs I ran down on my birthday to flee to the bridge. He moves slowly, moaning, his yellow fisherman jacket

brushing my face as I nearly stumble into it. Daddy is behind me.

I'm caught in the middle. I can dash into the bushes on the side at any moment, but I don't. There is a softness that destroyed my resolve, hope for Daddy's love. One more attempt to verify it's true, to try. One girl's needy yearning, however crazy or hopeless it might sound. Perhaps it can never be destroyed.

We emerge into the dusk of an early September evening, our fishermen suits squeaking with every move.

There it is, Roy street, always empty at this hour, full of dinner smells and wet from recent rain, pools of light glistening on the asphalt through the house windows. All neighbors glued to their TV's, their expensive cars parked on the side of the road, neatly, next to rolled out garbage, recycling and compost cans, so truly Seattle-style, screaming, *we're upscale, we're green, we care for the environment*. Fucking hypocrites who dare not open their secrets.

We stop. I look up. There is a house of one of them.

Daddy and his nightly beatings, covered up in the mornings by proper social stance of a respected businessman with a wife that's gone a little coo coo. But whose doesn't? *Women were made to haul water*, his words echo in my mind as I stare at our manicured lawn. The only sign of disturbance is a pile of

sheetrock, wooden beams and construction equipment on the grass right above garage, to patch up the hole in the ground where I happened to escape his private man cave.

"Welcome home." Daddy says and prods me gently up the stairs, onto the porch and towards the front door, which he opens with a familiar jingle of keys, so nostalgic and yet so foreign. I step in, Hunter follows me. Daddy shuts the door behind us.

Click!

Hunter steps out of the fisherman suit, tears off the hat, staggers into the living room and plops on the couch, hands over ears, all without uttering a single word, keeping silent for three hours straight now. This unnerves me.

"Go on, take a seat." Daddy motions me to the couch, then proceeds to carefully take off his Italian leather shoes, pulls on the left shoelace, then on the right. He stands and brushes his suit with his palms, takes time to flatten the collar of his shirt and smooth his hair, checks his teeth in the mirror as if after a particularly delicious dinner.

I strip off the jacket and the overalls that stink of glue and resin, toss them in the corner, plop the hat on top of the pile and walk over to sit next to Hunter, feeling like I'll never get out of this house again. Ever. It's like a bad déjà vu. To my left stands our dinner table of cherry wood, a thick

oval top balanced on a spindle leg, four chairs tucked under it, illuminated by tulip-shades of a chandelier. Swarovski crystal. I remember climbing onto the table and pushing it to swing, watching shadows dance on the walls and pretending I was underwater. Daddy hit me hard for that, from behind, without warning. I flew off the table and split my chin on our polished parquet floor. There was a lot of blood, but I didn't utter a sound. I flinch at the memory, Mommy bringing out the casserole and the plates and the jug of juice and the candles, averting her eyes, avoiding the scene, as if nothing happened. I can almost smell bubbling hot cheese and burnt matches, hear the wax melt, hear her soft voice calling us to dinner.

I shake my head and look away. To my right is a big window, unobscured by blinds, because Daddy likes his light. In the evening haze I can see Aurora Bridge, all three thousand feet of it stretched from my house to Hunter's, where his mom is probably thinking him dead at the moment. If she's capable of thinking anything at all. I turn my head and intercept Hunter's gaze in the same direction. He quickly lowers his eyes. I wonder what he's thinking but don't dare to ask, remembering he won't hear me anyway. I suppress the urge to grab his hand and press it towards my chest and to never let go.

"It's a perfect blend of art and science, wouldn't you say?" Daddy interrupts my stupor.

He lifts a glass sphere from the coffee table and turns it this way and that, squints at the water against the light that filters through the glass, causing fish to scatter in all directions, bump into walls, into each other. Locked in their glass casket until they die. One of Daddy's sealed aquariums scattered across the house.

"Yeah..." I trail off, looking at it with new understanding. "Hunter needs to see a doctor. His arm might be broken, and I think I... " I want to say, I made him deaf and lose it mid-sentence, ashamed to admit it.

"Don't you find it fascinating?" Daddy continues, obviously deciding not to hear what I said. My usual treatment, so I close off and ignore him.

If Hunter lost his hearing, I must have lost my ability to speak. I feel like I'll never talk again. Can't move my tongue, formulate thoughts into words, words into sentences, sentences into stories. And what's the point? Who'll want to listen, anyway? Hunter is deaf *and* hates me now. And Daddy never listens, that is, until today he didn't. I'm mad at the flicker of hope that made me weak, I want to spit on it and hear it hiss, like an extinguished candle fire.

Maybe I should sing. Not to make him hear me, no. I already did that. To destroy it all. Otherwise it'll destroy *me*.

"It's not very polite to ignore me, Ailen, you now that. Don't you have anything to say?" Daddy places the glass orb back on the table. He comes up to me, squats and lifts my chin towards the light, peers into my face, as if it's my turn to be his orb. As if I'm back to being five again and he's inspecting my chin cut with the precision of a professional surgeon. I freeze at his touch, warm yet not comforting, rather warm like a dead animal that decided it's not dead yet after all. *I'm not transparent, Daddy, I'm empty. I have no soul. No use looking.*

"Sorry..." I say, and I don't know what I say it for. It's a habit.

"No need to apologize. You're my star, after everything you've accomplished. Albeit a bit messy, but I understand. We all love a little fame, don't we?" He pats me on the shoulder. I barely notice.

"Hunter needs to see a doctor, Daddy. Now. He lost his hearing, he's in pain." I turn my head to see Hunter slump into the corner of the couch, sleeping.

"I see." Daddy's back on the couch across. "He seems ok for now, don't you think? Sleep will do him good. Meanwhile, I want to show you something. I want you to pay close attention, please." He sticks his thumb and forefinger into his shirt pocket, takes out a small object and places it on his upturned palm so I can see what it is.

A pearl.

While I look at it, he pulls out a sonic gun from under the couch and places in front of him on the coffee table with a cautious smile.

"Let me explain something to you, perhaps it will help us understand each other better. Do you know what this is?"

*Do you take me for an idiot*, I want to say, but keep glancing at the gun and answer his question instead. "A pearl."

"No. Not just any pearl, it's a natural pearl. Do you know the difference between a cultured and a natural pearl?"

The way he says it, I feel dumb. The way I'll explain it, he won't hear. I give him an excuse to shine. "No, I don't."

"Of course you don't. Most pearls you see in stores are cultured, grown on pearl farms. It's a fascinating process, really. They take a tiny mother-of-pearl bead or a piece of sand and implant it into a mollusk. The host." He pauses, waits for reaction.

I nod.

"This one," he puts it on his palm, "was made by nature. It's perfectly round, which is extremely rare. Look." He lifts it against the light, pinched between his manicured fingers. "Very pretty. The closer it is to an ideal spherical shape, the more expensive. Up until last century they've been valued above all other gems. You know why?"

I shake my head.

"Not for their beauty. For their rarity."

He gives me that long look. I shift uncomfortably.

Something sinister wakes in his eyes, I can't place it. He leans over the table, his other hand on the gun.

"Tell me how natural pearls are made."

I stare. "Daddy, do we need to talk about pearls right now? Hunter's..."

"By a *parasite*." He interrupts me. A film of greedy fever rolls over his face like parchment. I have a sensation that I'm looking at a marionette controlled by an evil puppeteer. I recoil.

"The parasite enters a mollusk's body so that it can't be expelled. The mollusk fights back by producing calcium carbonate and protein, to cover it up, layer upon layer, until it's completely enclosed. Dead. It becomes a cyst, a cancerous growth. That's what a natural pearl is. Ailen."

He closes his lips on my name with an audible smack and pulls corners of his mouth into what's supposed to resemble a smile, shifts back into groaning couch cushions, apparently satisfied with my reaction. My understanding.

I freeze.

Cars honk behind the window on the bridge. Late evening commuter souls clink into a tired escapade from work, going

home, or going places because they can, not because they want to. Darkness presses on our house, smelling of gasoline and nightly perspiration. My tongue tastes bitter.

"A parasite." I repeat without sound.

Me. He means me. I'm the parasite. Enclosed in a beautiful shell. His most precious pearl. A work of art and science combined. Extracted from a broken mollusk, discarded after delivery. Mommy.

I shrink into soft leather, feeling out of place, wanting to run, battling the wish to stay and discover if my yearning can be answered. If it's true or fake, no matter the cost. Then bitter disappointment overwhelms me. A sudden temptation takes over, and I throw next words at Daddy like I don't care.

"You forgot something."

He raises his eyebrows, taps fingers on the sonic gun in a steady rhythm, lifts his feet on tiptoe, silk socks pressing lightly into freshly vacuumed carpet.

"Please, enlighten me."

"You forgot to check if the parasite is still alive." I savor the pause.

"Not for long." He stretches his lips, but his eyes don't smile. The air grows thick with my anticipation. "We'll be staging your funeral tomorrow morning. To quiet the town's folk

and stop the rumors, you know. The works. To give you a proper goodbye.”

“What?” My mouth hangs open. The rest of what he says I don’t hear. I just sit there. Whatever life was left in me, vanishes. I’m supposed to scream, jump up, kill him with a song. Instead, I do nothing, bolted to the couch with incomprehension. Debilitated. Maybe I’m finally dead for good, shell and all.

“...where would you like to go?”

“What?”

“After the funeral, where would you like to settle? You didn’t hear me, did you? How typical.”

I gape. “Sorry. What did you say?”

“I’m doing this for you, Ailen. I made a mistake, as a father, and I apologize. Once you’re ‘buried’, we’ll take off and start a new life, just you and me. What do you say? Where would you like to go?” His knuckles grow white, skin stretched over the hand holding the gun. His face lights up. There was only one other time that I remember him glowing like that, and it was when we returned from Mommy’s funeral. He explained to me back then that he was happy the ordeal of looking for her body was over.

I shake my head to make sure I heard it right.

"You're serious? You mean this? For real?" As I say this, my traitor heart burst aflutter. Hopeful. Childish. Full of naïve excitement.

"Of course! How about that for a birthday present. We make a great team, don't you think?"

I study him, wanting to make sure there is not a hint of lie in his eyes, not a hint of twitch in his facial muscles. I'm scared, terrified to believe. Choking on tears, I don't let them out.

"Can this be true?"

"Can't an old man change at the sunset of his life? Come on, Ailen, give me some credit. Look at me." He places the gun down on the coffee table and raised both arms in surrender.

I want to hug him, but I can't move. I've never hugged Daddy, neither did he hug me. Not once. Confusion swirls its nasty doubts in my head, twisting my guts one the end of the stick for good measure. Pulling, thrashing, threatening to pin my sanity. Isn't this what I wanted all along? To have him all to myself? To sing to him, better than Mommy? To have him admit that I can be of value, can be loved, am worthy of his love after all?

"I don't care. Anywhere. You pick, I guess."

"All right. I have an idea. How about Italy? On the outskirts of Rome, away from heavy population, say, in some small village, so that every weekend we can take a trip to..

"...the Baths of Caracalla. To listen to the opera..." I finish automatically, before I can arrest my words.

"How did you know? That's exactly what I thought about." He looks at me quizzically, as if expecting an explanation.

"Back at your trawler, when you... caught me, I was thinking the same thing. You had this cashmere scarf on, as if you were going to an opera performance in Italy or something." I trail off, thinking I saw him shift like a face reflected in a thick layer of water, but he didn't move. It's me. I blink tears down my cheeks, mortified at the fact that he'll see me crying.

"Interesting. Perhaps that confirms that we're truly related." He grins his grimace.

I gasp. "What do you mean by that? Are you implying that Mommy..."

"This is rather exciting, don't you think? But let's not get carried away. About the funeral." He interrupts me again.

"But what about..."

"SILENCE!"

His scream is so sudden and so abrupt, that my teeth click as I close my mouth. This and the idea of being buried alive gets back my attention.

"You play dead. At the funeral. For now, Hunter will stay with you while you prepare, I'm sure you'd like that." I steal a glance at Hunter's face, peaceful and serene, eyes closed, hair bunched up over his fist, lips puckered and cracked open, his chest slowly rising and falling. "I have to leave to prep the venue and the boat."

"The boat?" I say and clasp my mouth with both hands.

"For the burial-at-sea." Daddy measures each word carefully through pursed lips.

I blink.

"I'll explain the details to you later. The only way I can smuggle you out is in the coffin. You'll swim out of it and we'll meet up on at Seward Park after, in the siren meadow, ok?"

"But..." I have so many questions, that my words are momentarily paralyzed, bunched up in the throat in a mass of screaming prodding kicking wonderment.

While I hold my hands over my throat as if drowning and choking, Daddy comes over to Hunter and shakes him awake, prods his arm with his delicate fingers, announcing, "It's not broken, just twisted. You'll live. Your job is to get Ailen prepped for her funeral, boy."

Hunter's eyes fly open at that, "Wha...?" He winces. I can't tell it's because he realizing once again that he can't hear or because his arms hurts.

"I'll explain." Daddy picks up a Moleskin notebook from the coffee table, cracks open its leather cover and scribbles longhand on the first page.

I hear pen scratching and see his upper hand, covered with fine hair, manicured nails darting across yellowish paper. I focus on his sleeve, woolen, soft, so close, I want to touch it, to caress it, to squeeze it and to feel it curl around me, both arms. Warm, really warm. A bear hug. Maybe even a kiss on the forehead. Being held in Daddy's arms. The ultimate dream that consumes me in a blur of longing.

A funeral, what a lovely word.

A happy ending.

## 32. Bright's Bathtub.

Funerals are my new special favorite thing. It's where families get reunited. To witness passage to the other side. Like a birth, worthy of being recorded in pictures. Flash. A ripped out sheet of paper with instructions, handed to Hunter. Flash. A tap on my shoulder, Daddy face close in a moment of wishful tenderness. Flash. A jingle of keys, a chatter of heels against parquet floor, a click of the door latch. Flash. A glance of understanding between me and Hunter, two mechanical dolls on an important task. Flash. Carpeted stairs to the bathroom. Flash. Stripped off dirty clothes on the floor, a twist of faucet handle, bubbling water. Flash. Descent into stream, rush of submersion, tilted head to the ceiling. Bliss. It's as if no time has passed, as if I'm back to my birthday, getting ready for big day, to be all nice-smelling and adorable and pampered.

The ceiling doesn't share my sentiment, it frowns. I notice something is wrong. Something is amiss. The bronze faucet is bare. It's simply a long tube protruding out from the tub's rim. I sit and bend over, water dripping from my hair on the floor. The bathtub sits on its bare bottom, without feet, flush with

tiles, a black-and-white game board. All sirens gone, killed by me. Including Canosa. I look back at the faucet.

"Hunter!"

Steps on the stairs, then a tentative knock on the door. For a second I panic, but then I hear his soul. How did he hear me?

"Clean clothes for you. May I come in? I'll wait for three seconds and open the door. I won't look, I promise."

I pull myself up and step out of the tub, grab the door handle, dripping water. It's locked and wouldn't give.

"I can't open it!" I shout, pull at it, harder. It doesn't give. "What the..." I curse under my breath, prick up my ears.

A melody penetrates me. Strong vibrations come from the outside. I pull at the door handle again. No use. The song comes through the walls, like a chorus of some ancient opera.

"Canosa!" My eyes widen. "She's here, she wants me! She didn't die! Hunter, do you hear that? Run, run now!" I panic, open my mouth to sing, when a powerful sound bursts through me. I crouch and clasp my ears.

I roar.

"Get the fuck away from him, you bitch!" I yell and hum the water to motion. It bursts from the faucet, lifts from the tub and spills on the floor, higher, higher. I propel my body towards the door.

One time. Two. Three.

The door groans and starts to give, close to breaking. I kick it one more time. The pressure of water helps, now up to my waist, towels and soap and washcloths floating around me. Door bursts open with a crash and a thud, water rushes out in one wet blanket over the stairs, mixing the stench of chlorine with moist freshly washed carpet odor.

Her mane matted, her naked body slick and moist, Canosa stands in front of me, laughing.

"Kiss your boyfriend goodbye, Ailen Bright." She holds him in a headlock, his eyes bewildered, face blue. He's chocking.

There is no time to think. It's not your typical 'staring-at-each-other-for-sizing-each-other-up' moment. Forget it. We don't talk like we did in the valley by the mountain, that was child's play.

To say that I leap at her is to rob imagination. I crash at her in a wave, ear-splitting in my shrill, all-consuming in my wake, tearing and howling and twisting in my fury. Her hair thrashes about. Her limbs bulge with veins. Her mouth opens to the cracking sound of her skull, her teeth sink into my arms, my stomach, my face.

I'm about to be eaten alive. I don't care. There is only one goal on my mind. To free Hunter.

I burst into a song. My throat splits open, my body gnawed on, still I sing. I draw on the water around me, on the pulse of life. It all melts into one. Her voice booms through me, makes me choke on my song.

"Stop it! We've got to have a little chat." Whatever is left of me, gets abandoned in a haste, as I stop fighting and she steps aside, still holding Hunter in a lock.

My feet slide and I fall on the slick floor, my leg muscles torn by her nails. I stare at them, knitting together with an quiet hush of ants busy, scurrying to and fro.

Silence thickens.

Canosa's face swims into view. It's beautiful in an eternal sort of way, forever young, yet menacing, darkened by age, a face that you dream about for soothing your pain, but when it comes at last, you want to run from, screaming, screaming.

"There you are. I've been thinking about you. Have you been thinking about me?" She touches my face with her free hand. Hunter's eyes roll up, he seems to have lost consciousness.

I want to scream at her to leave him alone, but my throat is cut open and won't cooperate. I choke on words, yet can't look away, wishing she never came, drawn into her eyes, drinking from them some sort of coldness that binds me first, then spreads through my agony, soothing.

"You have been thinking about me, haven't you?"

I shake from head to toe. She stretches her finger and strums bare muscles on my leg, strings that need to be tuned. Only there is no music. I want to gag in revulsion.

"Ailen Bright. You thought you could kill me. You silly girl." Canosa pulls my face closer to hers juts like Daddy did not too long ago. "It takes more than a song. You're not the first, you know. Many tried before you. He tried."

She motions towards Hunter, who lay motionless on the floor, abandoned now as if he served his purpose. I want to scream but I can't. My throat constricts, chokes with empty vomit.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. A secret only for you and me, what do you say?" Her breath on my face, I nod. I need to keep her talking. The pain is gone. My muscles knit together, healing. I need to keep her talking.

"You can't kill me. Nobody can." Canosa whispers.

The air around us agrees, nods in silence.

"You're just some dead meat that can sing." I croak, already relieved that the wound she inflicted is healing quickly. At that she reaches out and slashes my neck with her nails again. My vocal cords cry out before dangling limp.

"That's what you wanted to be, isn't it? Isn't it what you are now, Ailen Bright?"

I shake my head a stubborn no.

"Go on then. Carry on. Pretend to live. Pretend we never met. How about it? How would you like to play that kind of a game?"

*I'm tired of your games, I want to say.*

As if reading my lips, she replies. "You're not just silly, you're rude. Didn't your mother teach you proper manners? Answer my question." She slaps me on the face, hard.

I shrink.

*Mommy was never there to teach me anything, I want to say.*

"You did it all by yourself. Aren't you proud? You took it all into your little hands. Like thousands before you, you asked for me, you called me, and I came. Aren't you glad?" Her nostrils flare, the stink of rotten lilies emanates from her in waves.

I shake my head 'no' and wrinkle my nose at the smell.

"You're a spoiled little brat, that's what you are. Thinking only about yourself, saving only your own skin. Disgusting." She stands and spits.

"You can't balance on this edge forever, you're smart enough to know that. Not after you've crossed to the other side. It's only a matter of time till you tip." She says it in a voice of authority not to be questioned. "One day we'll meet again. Like old friends." She beams.

"Until then, stay out of my way. It's my final warning. You let me do my business, I let you do yours. Agreed?" She stretches out her hand for me.

I stare it down, both terrified and relieved. Terrified because I don't quite know what this means. Relieved because at least something is certain. Before I can make a choice, she grabs my hand and clutches it with such force, I can hear my bones crack.

She yanks me up, a parasite, broken out of her prison.

"Thank you for payment, it was long overdue." She bends, picks up Hunter like a ragdoll and hangs him over her shoulder. "How about that?" She laughs, sending vibrations through the bathroom floor, through the house, all the way to the lake, as if a mini earthquake.

"What about Mommy, you promised to show me Mommy." I whisper, barely audible, as my muscles frantically knit together with a speed of scurrying mice.

She steps on my chest and pins me down. "Enough of this. You think you can outsmart me. Well, I tell you what, you think too much." She steps on my forehead, pressing my skull against the tiles. "Stop thinking, start to listen. Listen."

She sings. I find myself entwined in the ribbon of her voice. It binds me, lifts me up and whisks me away, to where there is no pain, no happiness, just nothing.

I let go and fall.

I fall into the vortex of her eyes, into her pupils, deeper into darkness, in what appears to be a mass of sirens, a colorless chaos of bare skin and tangled hair, waist-long, knee-long, floor-long. Their faces taut with shiny skin. I fall inside, become part of this mass. It breathes as one gigantic body, all-consuming, rhythmic. I want to erupt with everything I feel, yet it won't come. I can't breathe. It's not air, not water, but some sort of new liquid that rushes over my gills. It has no oxygen. It presses on me.

A current propels me on, towards the bottom of this crazy nightmare, ten feet, twenty, a few hundred, until my chest is ready to explode. Liquid around me turns syrupy and sticky. Absolute blackness poisons me with its gloom.

At the far end of this blackness appears a face, as if projected onto a movie screen in an empty theater. Canosa? It stands out against darkness like an ultimate black dot, all consuming, beyond emotion, plain in its vastness. A black hole. An ultimate end. A certain nothing that is absolute.

The face reflects squares. White squares, scattered in a strange mathematical pattern. I don't see its eyes, but I feel like it's looking at me, staring me up and down, and then it frowns, as if I interrupted its thought process, its complicated game strategy, and I'll be punished for that. Now.

"Didn't Canosa tell you? Go away. It's not your time yet. What part of 'go away' do you not understand?"

This is no symphony. This is a cantata, a declamatory narrative held together by a primitive aria of words transmitted though saccharine pulp.

Each sentence folds into an overbearing noise-string that drowns me in a roar of Niagara Falls multiplied by ten. Its echo sprinkles me in the shower of droplets. I raise my hand to shield my face and see more droplets congregating on the board. Coal-black. Moving towards the gigantic face in strange zigzagging patterns. As if magnetic dust of a Woolly Willy directed by an invisible magic wand gone berserk.

Terror rips me apart and freezes me into an essence of insignificance against this large overpowering being. I think I know what it is and I don't need to be told twice to flee. I turn and push off my heels, wading through thick velvety liquid, a swamp of grief and loss. This is where everything ends, but I haven't crossed the final line. Not yet.

That was Death. Death itself told me to leave.

What do I do? Of course I do only one thing possible. Getting *the fuck* out.

That something, that syrup that chocked me, now it spits me out and I take one frantic breath. I'm in a black lake filled with black water. It's moving, writhing with bodies, they brush

against my legs, like long lily stems. I shriek and swim, not feeling anything except red pulsing panic. I lose track of time, until I bump into the shore, but it's not a shore, it's the rim of the tub. I'm in a tub full of water and I'm climbing out, chipping the enamel with my nails, peeling it, layer by layer, as if I weigh one hundred tons and can't lift my own body. Dunk smell of abandonment packs around me, moldy.

Muted stillness clings in shards to my face, floor gives way under my palms and knees as I drop down and lay on cool tiles, head turned to the side, breathing. I glance at the broken door, pinch myself. Yes, Canosa was here, and yes, Hunter is gone. She took him. She took him for good.

Emptiness shrouds me in a heavy blanket.

I pull my knees up, hug myself and cry, rocking. Back and forth. Back and forth. As if the movement will soothe my pain. As if I fit in this dark lonely place. My misery. I push past coldness so deep, it touches my frozen bones. I want to warm up, to hear Hunter's soul, but it's gone.

Hunter is gone.

"Hunter." I say, as if this will bring him back.

I try to imagine his sound. To bring back that feeling of home, the clatter of food cooked on the stove, the clanking of dishes, the shuffling of feet in slippers on wooden floor, the laughter, the anticipation of a meal, the chirping of birds

behind an open window, the buzzing of insects basking in rays of a morning sun. Vivaldi's summer, allegro non molto. Presto. No more.

Nothing comes to mind.

I don't remember how it sounds. I tighten my grip and keep rocking. For hours. Perhaps for days. Maybe even years or centuries.

I create my own time, my own rhythm. Try to soothe myself to something, maybe sleep. But sirens don't sleep. This is as close it gets. I brood in a self-induced slumber. When will it break? And for what? What do I have inside? Emptiness, nothing else.

"One minute of fantasy is better than nothing." I say.  
"It's in the past now. You've had it, Ailen, now move along."

But I want to feel it again, the happiness and the joy. I want to call for someone, so someone can explain what all of this means, because I can't remember what it means anymore. Maybe Canosa can. Her song was so beautiful, so overpowering, it made me feel like there was meaning to life, like my existence could be validated, even if only for one single minute, before being snuffed out for good.

"Mommy," I say, "Mommy, I wish you were here. I wish you could hold me right now and tell me it will be ok. Why did you leave me, tell me, why did you leave me..."

Crunch.

Loose gravel on asphalt in front of the house moves under Daddy's car, the bronze golden 1969 Ford Mustang Fastback, his love and pride.

My heart fish out of the water, aflutter.

He'll save me, he'll take me away. Daddy. Daddy is all I have left. My Daddy. Yet I'm afraid he'll be mad and will change his mind. When he sees what I've done. My head pounds with horror.

Whack!

The front door slams. Foot steps.

"Ailen?"

I hastily pull on a wet towel from the floor and cover myself with unbending fingers.

It feels like three days never passed, like it's the morning of my birthday, all over again.

"I know you're here, sweetie. Answer me."

I want to make a dent in the floor, to disappear.

"Hunter? Where the hell are you, son?"

Steps. Up the stairs, then shoes. Fine Italian shoes is all I see. They abruptly stop in front of the broken door, their shiny noses glisten with contempt. I have a wild idea. I want to blow the air and see if they'll sail away, like two boats, into the ocean, far far away. Gone forever.

"Ailen?" Breathing from above. "What the hell happened here?"

He lifts the door and props it up against the wall.

"Will you look at this." I hear anger in his voice. He turns on the flood lamps and steps in. Now I notice that it's early morning. It yawns its purplish haze behind the bathroom window, oblivious to my staring. Light hits me in the face stronger than the sun. It's electric intensity colors my hands blue, my favorite color. Blue against a dark hole where the door used to be. Where Daddy stands, where his mouth is open, where his eyes are mad. Where his finger points.

"Look what you did."

All I can do is stare.

"You know how much it costs to replace a door?"

"Daddy, it wasn't me, I swear. Well, I mean, I did it, but it was because of Canosa. She..." I say.

He doesn't hear me. He points at me.

"Look at you. I spend all night preparing, organizing, calling people, arranging for caterers and flowers, picking out a casket. I haven't slept all night. I'm supposed to pick you up, all clean and made up. The funeral starts in one hour. And you look like shit!"

His finger pokes me in the chest, above the towel, and I wince at his warm touch.

"Do you smell it? What's it smell like?"

I don't answer, confused.

"Talk to me. Your father is asked you a question. What's it smell like?"

"What's what smell like?"

"Are you stupid or what? Answer the goddamn question."

"I don't know." I manage, afraid to lose the last pillar of my family, the one that is left.

"You. You smell like death. Dead meat. You know how much a funeral costs? You know how much it will cost me to make it all happen, to abandon my business, to move away?"

I shake, filled with terror. He lifts my face, takes a breath.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, I didn't mean to scare you."

I widen my eyes, expecting a blow, disbelieving what I'm hearing. Was Hunter the price for me to pay to get back my father? Was that it?

"Let's just get through this together, and we'll go away. Tomorrow, we'll start a new life, how is that?" His eyes narrow.

"She took Hunter... She took Hunter, Daddy. Can you bring him back?"

He frowns, then says:

"No, I can't. But I can assure you that she won't bother either of us anymore."

"So you did make a deal with her, didn't you, and you paid with Hunter." I fall silent, processing the information I managed to spit out without realizing it was there all along on the tip of my tongue.

"Look, what's done is done, no use mulling over it. Let's get moving."

"How can you talk about this like it's buying groceries or something." I pause. Each word takes an effort to produce through paralyzed lips, regaining ability to talk. "He was my best friend." As I say it, I feel the full impact of his loss and plop down on the floor, not wanting to ever get up no matter what.

"You're a siren, you can't have human friends." There is a finality in his voice, his lips press into thin line as if saying 'there will be no arguing about this.' I'm so afraid to lose my dream of having his attention, I decide not to press the subject. It's easier to push the pain down and forget, as if my happiness with Hunter never existed. Besides, I'm used to suppressing everything I feel, it only comes natural. I pretend to care for the conversation.

"Are you ok with me being, you know, a siren?" I wish I didn't ask this, wanting badly for the floor to part and swallow me up before I hear his answer.

"Of course I am. I'm your Daddy, remember?"

I cautiously raise my head and look up. There hangs his face, smiling, illuminated with the bluish electric light, resplendent with a fresh haircut and shave, yet grey and sunken from a sleepless night. And suddenly I feel pity for this old man.

"Let's get you all cleaned up and ready, all right? Can you do it fast, let's say, five minutes?"

I nod, happy to oblige.

"That's my girl." He smiles. "Now, here is what you'll have to do."

He talks and talks. Talks fast. He explains it all. The reception. The guests. The venue. The boat. The burial at sea. The speech. The passing of the coffin. The dip. The goodbye. All I hear is white noise, all I see is his eyes directed at me, for full five minutes. I have Daddy for five minutes, all to myself. It's a miracle paid for by enormous pain and it's worth it. If only he'd give me a hug. *One step at a time, Ailen, one step at a time.*

"...you'll break out and swim to Seward park and wait for me by the siren meadow, remember? Don't worry, it'll be empty at that hour. I'll meet you there after dark and we'll leave. All right?" He stretches his hand out and I place mine into his. It's the first time we touch when I don't flinch away, and he holds my hand, firm.

"Hunter is gone. My Hunter is gone." I whisper, unable to suppress it before it escapes.

"I know. But you have Daddy. Forever." He smiles and I don't know if he jokes or if he truly cares, if I should be scared or elated.

"The funeral. Our extended family will be there." I say, thinking, not daring to ask if Hunter's mom will be there, if she can make it. Half the neighborhood will be there. Remorse gnaws its silky torture into my chest. "I'm scared."

"You'll be fine. Pretend it's a game. Your role is to play dead. You can do it, I have faith in you." A pat on the back. "Let's do it."

He pulls me to my feet, I lean on him, lay my cheek against brushed wool of his grey suit, inhale his signature perfume, #10 Aqua Pour Homme Marine Cologne for men by Bulgari.

Close. Close enough to a hug. That will do.

## 33. Bleitz Funeral Home.

Death. Birth. Two ends of one stick. You don't know when you'll drop from one, or be struck with another. They both look the same, like two ends of a casket. Eighteen gauge steel, square corners, painted premium white in matte lacquer, embroidered head panel, silver stationary handles, nude crepe interior, adjustable bed and mattress. Clean new smell. Weight without body two hundred pounds. Weight with body three hundred and seven pounds. Appropriate body temperature reached after a period of natural algor mortis, the siren death chill. No cooler needed, properly stiffened. Me. Attending my own funeral. Washed. Changed. Dressed in jeans and my spare Garfield hoodie with the school mascot. Purplish-blue, close enough to my favorite color.

I'm served as the last dish in my own house, albeit in a very large casserole, on top of our cherry table. What a change from a bathtub, all this padding, as if it will soften my journey to the afterlife. The last I see above me is the luster of our Swarovski chandelier swinging above my head, throwing peculiar shadows on the ceiling as if ripples of water. Daddy's

face swims above me, blocking the light. His neatly combed hair forms a halo around his head, shimmering in iridescence.

"Ready?" He asks.

I nod.

"Remember, not a peep. See you on the other side."

I don't smile at his joke, somehow it sounds morbid. He closes the lid shut with a soft whoosh. The last ray of light disappears in the darkness. I smell synthetic glue and hear Daddy walking outside and yelling for help. Four men slam car doors and briskly jog up the stairs. Formal greetings and condolences offered, they come near me. Four souls, an instrumental quartet, one bass, one violin, one trumpet, one accordion. Not anyone I know, must have been hired as Daddy has no friends, all petrified and somehow broken, yet delicious in terms of food. My chest rumbles and I gasp, terrified they'll hear it. I'm hungry. For one split second I want to sever the lid and devour them all at once. Then I suppress the urge. *Play dead, Ailen, remember, play dead.*

They grab handles, two on each side, grunt and lift me up, commenting on how light I am, and how there is no foul odor, and what is on TV tonight and what beer they had the night before, and whether or not there will be free food at the service, and how of course there will be, what, with that rich prick throwing such a funeral for his drowned daughter; wondering how my body

was found, by whom, when, where, and how come none of them heard anything on the news. I half-listen, half-swim inside, as if in a womb of my mother, enclosed in softness, swinging in fluid movements, a bobbing plastic toy thrown into river, carried down the cascade of stairs, outside, into the back of a hearse. Its old rear doors creak as they flap open to receive their breakfast. Doors slam shut, engine roars to life, the hearse moves.

My heart surges and sinks. No sign of Daddy, I didn't hear his footsteps and I can't tell if he's inside the car or not because he has no soul. I don't hear his voice.

*Maybe he's driving after the hearse, there is not enough space I here, you know that, only room for four, I tell myself.* But I can't hear his Mustang behind us, it's quiet. I decide to breathe and wait. It will be all right. He promised, he will come. He has to show up for his own daughter's funeral, doesn't he? He can't be late, can he?

The car drives only several blocks down the hill, turns around, slows down and pulls into what must be a parking lot. Of course, how ironic. The place I walked by my entire life, beige Tudor-style Bleitz funeral home, conveniently placed by Seattle's own suicide bridge.

The way it's façade is layered, is how they do birthday cakes. The way its windows are placed, it's how they smear on

the frosting. The way its roof is colored, it's how they write Happy Birthday in a sugary glaze. The way I get carried in, it's how they slice it with a kitchen knife, smooth and velvety, with enough pieces for everyone to chew on, to taste, to comment, to swallow, and to forget.

Never would I imagine I'd lie here, in a coffin, on display, only four days after my sixteenth birthday. This is my own private party, complete with flowers, food, dressed up crowd and music. Only in black and white. I'll be the only piece of color on this occasion.

I feel every turn and stop, every soul. Men carry me out, pause, walk again. Right on time and perfectly fitting the occasion, rain starts pummeling the casket's lid. Parking lot is full of cars and hushed human chatter.

We pass inside through the side door, I can tell by the echo of the steps. Turn into one corridor, then into another. This is a speed ceremony, no time to lower me into the cooler via the elevator and have me all chilled and embalmed and made up. Daddy requested that. *Where is Daddy*, I wonder.

Men place me on top of what must be a display table and leave. Another man steps up and opens the lid, I instantly stiffen and press my eyes shut, but not too hard, so as not to squint. He doesn't mind, doesn't care, this is routine to him. He checks everything to make sure it looks good, even adjusts my

hoodie. I stiffen at every touch, wanting to leap out and sing out his soul, this one a mix of bad 80's music and cola cans opened in rapid succession, with an undertone of battle cries from video games.

"Ain't you a pretty one. Too bad you're dead. In another life I'd..." He sighs and traces the contour of my lips. I stifle an urge to burp from disgust. "Yeah. Rest in peace, girly." He walks away. I breathe out.

Now that the lid is open, a majestic opera of human souls wafts from the distance. The sound moves towards me, rapidly. I revel in it, imagine what it'd feel like to have this music within me, to be one of them, to live their life. Full of warmth, rich as velvet. It seems I've been gone for a century and forgot everything there is to being alive.

Four days ago, only four days ago I was one of them.

I lay still, frozen at the thought and the weight of it on my chest.

Faint smell of lilies travels on the breeze from the air conditioner. More cars arrive, their tires sloshing on the asphalt in the rain. People pile out, pull their children with them, help their elderly, check themselves in the mirrors of the entrance hall, greet. I can hear it so clearly, as if I'm truly a part of the party.

I'm about to be. The center of attention. The most popular girl of the party. The one whom everyone will talk to, kiss, and maybe even shed a tear or two, from utter admiration, of course.

People mill around in the foyer, chattering, waiting for the ceremony to begin. I feel important. The clock strikes eight, doors open and the crowd quietly passes into what I glimpsed as a beige interior of a chapel, empty one second, rapidly filling the next.

Footsteps, and I feel his presence. It's Daddy, I know him by the breath, by the barely detectable limp in his right leg, but the distinct smell of his perfume that fills my nostrils with hope and anticipation. He comes close, lightly touches me on my hand, and leaves.

I open my eyes just a sliver, to steal a glance.

There is dimness to the air behind the glass door-windows in front of me, to the right of me is a wall, and to the left the room opens up to rows of beige plus chairs and people, moving in a stream black attire and hats. Mostly women's hats, black with bows, black with veils, black round and black flat. Children with their hair made up and brushed and clean for the occasion. Men in dark suits. Curiosity presses against their inquisitive looks. Dull whisper spills through the cracks of their politeness.

Hello, how are you. Well, how about yourself. Oh, not too bad. What a tragedy. Nice appetizers over there. I wonder if they'll serve before or after. Fancy flowers. I just love lilies. Look at the table, there she is. I wonder what they used for the smell. Four days, must be decomposing by now. You don't say. It took them this long. Wouldn't have fish eaten off her face? Teenagers, so selfish these days, don't give a second thought about their parents. I say, it's in the genes, remember her mother. Pardon me, excuse me.

A small woman who must be the funeral director walks through the center isle, between filled rows of chairs, towards the end of the hall. Heads turn to watch her pass, hands reach to dab at the tears here and there, for show, like white snakes out of a black writhing mass. All the relatives and friends whom I never met, who pretend to care. Who came to see the famous Roger Bright in his grief, one by one, forming a line, eager to get that rare delicacy rationed from the table ahead, the final goodbye.

Yet where did he go?

I'm on the table. A table that seems a mile long, with a coffin on top, so thin and slender and final. I'm here, and I'm not.

I wait for Daddy to come up to me and give his eulogy, to list all his happy memories of me and my accomplishments. I'm

giddy as if expecting a huge surprise. No need to wonder what he'll say. I know. He'll say he loved me, he'll say he misses me so much. He'll cry.

The clock strikes three minutes too late. The crowd murmurs. They wait for Daddy, I do too, that much we have in common. But that's all. I'm dead. They're alive. I'm rudely cold, they're ever-warm, full of breakfast eaten at home and coffee sipped on the way, strapped into that new black dress or hat or shoes, right out of the brand new car. Obligated to be here. Death makes it hard to be excused.

The clock strikes off another minute.

Anticipation mixes with wonder.

Another minute goes by. I want to shift, to move, to raise my head and see where Daddy went. The crowd says one word, quietly, ever-politely, until a little girl hears it escape her mother's lips in a whisper and asks out loud.

"mommy, is her Daddy late?"

My heart a barking seal, a yelp of pain, it won't shut up. Something must have happened, something must have delayed him, where did he go, he was just here! I want to turn my head and look. I strain to listen, no sound of him, not anywhere near.

Another minute goes by.

The sea of people stirs with unrest, swallows me up in the noise of their souls, exchanged glances, wiped fake tears,

sniffing noses, gloved hands, craned necks to be the first to see. I feel air movement and hear the faintest whisper.

"Isn't it lovely, Ailen Bright?"

I shrink. She hovers close to my face, clothed in proper funeral attire, black dress and black gloves and black hat and black smile.

I catch the starting of a sentence before it forms on my lips, arrest it, push it in. Surprise gives way to shock to wonder what she's up to and why she's here and what I should do.

"Your flower arrangement, it's so lovely. White lilies. Mine were hydrangeas. Ugh. Looked to stupid, almost made me gag."

I correct my face, play dead, wait for Daddy, ignore. *What should I do, what should I do.*

"Poor darling, darling girl. So very sad. Your Daddy must miss you so much, he's so late."

She snuffles. Liar. My ears a drum pummeled into pulp of disgust. My head a balloon ready to explode. My fingers curl up into fists under the white cloth, white knuckles match its bluish shade.

*He's late for a reason, I want to say.*

"Ailen Bright, I came here to say. Don't meddle into my business, and I won't meddle into yours, remember?"

I fume.

"I'll take your silence as a yes. Oh, and I came here to sing a sacred hymn, just for you." The motion of her arm is for me to see what she didn't say, what doesn't need to say. It's a strangling gesture, her eyes blinking from a shroud of black. No pine needles this time, only silk and chiffon and gauze.

"I think he's here, I better perform." We both hear Daddy's footsteps. She moves to the side, to a stand with the microphone.

My body a string of nerves wound up to the breaking point. Silence rolls over the crowd with a final gulp, volume down as if I dipped under water. Quiet calls puncture through, trace his path. The well wishes of the sympathetic, lit afire and fizzled out in his wake.

Mr. Bright, over here. Good to see you, Roger. My condolences, Mr. Bright. Here, through these doors.

He moves by the rows of chairs, wedges in, accepting, nodding, shaking hands, responding in his ever-present politeness and tact. Answering, positioning himself at the other microphone.

I hear Canosa smack her lips, ready for a feast. I have to warn Daddy somehow.

He simply stands. I feel a layer of family friends and a horde of guests behind them, pressing on their knees, waiting for the spectacle to begin.

He stands tall, his hands clasped together in front, a question on his face, that much I can glimpse. Feet shuffling, chair moving, last polite coughing and sneezing finally falls still.

He begins.

"My name is Roger Bright. I want to thank you for gathering here today to remember my daughter, Ailen Bright. I want to say a few words in her memory."

Shuffling, sniffing.

My nerves are about to snap. I want to tug at his sleeve, to let him know who's is the singer that he hired. I want to scream, *Canosa is here, Daddy, Canosa!*

"It's a terrible tragedy to outlive your children. My darling Ailen lived a remarkable life, one filled with wonder, joy, and happiness. An obedient daughter, an exemplary student, she had a bright future ahead of her."

He never called me darling in my life, yet I hear bitterness in his voice. I never amounted to anything. I want to hide from it, to run, to scream my head off, but I have to play dead. To keep Daddy alive, to not meddle into Canosa's business, whatever that might be. That much I can do.

Daddy pauses.

A child whimpers, a woman cries. A theater of death performed for the living, so they don't dare to forget.

Impatience prickles my skin. I want to hear those special words. I make myself still and listen, this is what I hear.

A momentary silence between two gasps for breath, and then Daddy's voice rings loud and clear.

"She was Daddy's girl, you could say. She told me one day, she loved me more than her mother." He drops his head and produces a theatrical sigh.

*Lair!* I want to scream. *I never said that!* But the effect is immediate. A wave of compassion rolls through the air in stifled sobs and nods of approval and shakes of the hats on their heads.

My face a mask of pretense, concealed surprise. Not Mommy, leave Mommy alone! Don't touch her, Daddy! My gut sears with pain, every ounce of strength deserts me. I wait. I wait for him to say it.

How much he loved me. How much he misses me. And still it doesn't come. He talks of what I could be, of my shiny future that never came, of how proud I could've made his as a father. Him. It's all about him. The speech. The funeral. The guests. The attention.

I'm out of the picture. I'm not even here. He lied, again. And I fell for it, again. I fell for it like I always do. Like Mommy did before me. Lies, all lies and beautiful empty words. He waited to dispose of me, like he disposed of her, like he

disposed of sirens, the women made for one purpose only. To haul water on their backs. That's it.

I realize, there no happily ever after. But I chase the thought away and cling to hope, imagining that I'm wrong, telling my mind to shut up.

I wait some more. He finishes his speech. Nothing else. It never came. Not a tear. Maybe it's because he knows I'm alive, as alive as a siren can get. I cling to this thought. That must be it. He steps off the platform, comes up to me and bends for one final kiss.

"Sorry for being late, sweetie, I had to arrange our voyage. It's all taken care of, just endure this a little more." Guilt turns me inside out, how could I think he doesn't care. He does.

"Canosa is here," I breathe as quietly as possible.

He doesn't hear me, steps aside and gives way to the shuffling crowd. I strain to feel anyone in there that I know, from Daddy's family or from my school. Yet they all seem like hired strangers, for show, streaming towards me in a line, lean one by one, burning my forehead with a mandatory kiss, whispering something that means nothing to me but perhaps means to them they did their good deed of the day. They move on. Last, Canosa kisses me with a kiss that doesn't burn because it's cold like me, then shuts the lid and leaves without a word.

Surrounded by darkness, I freeze, if it's possible to freeze even more in my state.

This funeral service strikes me as odd, as if done in a rush, without properly rehearsed.

Same four men who carried me inside, come in and lift me, walking out of the Chapel, into the parking lot and then across the street, along the path zigzagging down to the water, the boat bobbing in the lake, guests already on board, ready to depart for my burial at sea. They place me on another table inside the cabin. Canosa is nearby, I can feel her.

I have to tell Daddy.

Last person steps on the boat. The captain shouts the signal, the ropes rumble off, engine starts. I hear Daddy talk, direct people around, chit-chat with caterers.

As if on command, people hastily make their way about to find a free spot and sit down expectedly, ready for another dose of the theater and free food, their souls in discord of mild fear of open water and a pinch of childish curiosity at the fantastic and the impossible.

The boat grumbles its slow way into the open sea. It will take another two hours of it to reach the ocean, plenty of time to eat, drink, and be merry.

All at once thunder explodes and I feel the sky dims behind heavy clouds that roll in at an abnormal rate, spraying the

windows with angry foam of new rain and sea. There is a general pause that I can only attribute to people glancing round. Several women now cry out, some soothe their children, men swear, and the yacht speeds towards the open sea with a terrible speed, manned by, what appears to be, Canosa's song and her insatiable hunger.

I have to warn Daddy.

Lighting strikes. People gasp, the imminent explosion of terror in their bulging eyes, their gaping mouths, quickened heartbeats, ready to spill. I don't need to see it, I hear it all around me. Their fear imprints in my mind like a single frame taken out of context, a snapshot of dread.

Dread of the unknown. Dread of death.

"Let the feast begin."

I hear Canosa's voice and understand just exactly what price Daddy paid for her to leave him alone. This is no funeral, no burial at sea. This is a slaughter of twenty innocent souls, to be snuffed out for the benefit of one.

## 34. Strait of Juan De Fuca.

Twenty people are about to die because of me. That's Death magnified twenty times. An ultimate understanding of what dying really means grips me. My suicide was never meant to be real, it was a cry for help. I never intended to die, I was stupid. A fake, a hot head, through and through. A lover of a good show. I wanted to do it for the spectacle, to make Daddy run to me, make him say he's sorry, see pain on his face, have my last laugh, be right. And hurt him. Hurt him the only way I can. Turns out, it's not worth it. Turns out, I'm afraid to die. Turns out, it's death I ran from all along, balancing on the precipice of dare, always one foot on the ground, never tipping so as not to upset the balance of the game, never crossing the line. Perhaps it's time I face it, for real. And it's time I choose to stop running and stand for what I care. What I lost. Stand for love.

I feel the expanse of open sea in every direction. The boat slows down and Canosa starts her deadly song. It rings clear, soars in one voice, then ten, then two dozen, amplified by her rage and hunger, reaching a crescendo. Five seconds is all it takes. Glass shatters, relieves the pressure of anticipation into shouts and cries, first disjointed, then pulsing to a

deathly rhythm. Souls whisk into oblivion amidst the forming fog. Canosa is on a rampage. She grabs a man out of the crowd, shouts in his ear. He faints. She gobbles up his soul, moves on to the next. People cower, scream, ribbons of their souls escape them to the rhythm of her song.

I wait a few more seconds, wait for Daddy to grab his sonic guns and blast her into nothing. He doesn't do it. That confirms it was part of the plan all along.

And I'm done playing dead.

I hit the casket's lid with terrible force and make a deep dent. The casket jumps up on the table perhaps a half an inch. That produces more cries of terror from people. The song stops.

"Make one more move, silly girl, and he's dead." Canosa says through the lid, sweet as a charm. "Lay still and enjoy the show."

I want to scream. I want to yell, *Daddy. I know you knew you struck a bargain with her and you're not going to stop her. If this is the payment for her to stay away, it's a terrible price to pay for your cowardice!*

The song turns to a throb of a single living being, an awful choir, as if a conductor directs a handful of tenors to contrast with the sopranos and the altos of the victims, creating an accompaniment to the feast, accented by cracks of thunder.

More rumbling. More rain. I boil with panic, unable to make a move, terrified of Canosa killing Daddy, crying in pain of witnessing the massacre of funeral attendees.

One more soul pops with a sickening splatter in the air. The song rises to a shrill, with a snap and laughter. The sinister happiness of my kind, full to the brim, on the way to satisfaction at last. No, she's not done yet, about a dozen people still left alive on the boat.

I hear the little girl's cries, the one who asked her mom if my Daddy was late. She clutches the coffin's edge, her heart beats a million times a minute. Canosa jumps at her.

"NOOOOOO!!!"

I holler and break the coffin apart like an exploded bomb. Pieces of steel fly around me and settle on the floor, shreds of nude crepe lining float around me in torn wings of some otherworldly creature.

I sit.

There is momentary silence sprinkled by a layer of settling dust, pulsing with frightened soul concerto. I'm surrounded with the chill of shock. Shock on girl's face, on people's faces, on Canosa's face, on Daddy's face. He stands at the far end of the salon, right by the teak access door, hands in his pockets, nonchalantly watching chaos unfold around him, as if he's in front of a Hieronymus Bosch painting, in Palazzo Ducale in

Venice, Italy, on vacation and bored out of his mind. As if bodies of dying people are nothing but images painted onto the canvas of his curiosity.

He's hiding something.

His face shifts as a film of water.

Across the distance of twenty feet, bypassing frozen grimaces of terror, I look deep inside his eyes and there I see yet another weak old man, sorry and unhappy and scared. Years deeper, in the corner of his empty chest, sits a little boy who doesn't know how to escape his misery except to play in an imaginary world. Inflict pain on others to relieve his hopeless pressure by witnessing suffering he's unable to glimpse while standing in front of a mirror. He's been hurt and learned to be numb. This helps him unravel.

Knowledge pierces my bubble of hate and anguish in a fraction of a second, and I relate to my own father fully, as if to a friend. He's just a scared little thing. Like me. Like all of us.

"One minute of fantasy is better than nothing, Daddy? Is that right? Is that why you did this? Is it?" I say.

Before the crowd erupts in continuing yelling and screaming and panic, I speed into past, into time when I wanted to learn to sing so bad, when I went to choir practice every day and worked myself up to a sore throat. When I invited Daddy to my

first performance, but he never came. I thought he forgot, I thought he didn't care. I wanted to sing as beautifully as Mommy. Maybe then, I thought, I'd sing him out of his misery, if only for one minute, to make him happy, make him smile. He never smiles. Never did, never will.

Now I understand why.

I want to reach out and hold him in my arms, tell him it will ok, that no matter what he suffered and who did it to him, there is still love all around and all he need to do is to allow others give it him. Allow me to love him and stop pushing me away. I realize, I've been chasing the wrong goal. I wanted him to give me love, but love doesn't work that way. It only works if given freely, without expecting anything in return.

A vial of water to the one dying of thirst, when you haven't had a drink yourself for a week. A warm bath to the one clad in filth, when you haven't had a chance to wash for a month. A warming embrace to the one who is frozen with hate, even if it means cutting our your heart and placing it in his hands, watching him thaw as you yourself wither into nothing.

This is how sirens die. I've read it in books. A siren dies if her song falls on deaf ears, and the one she intended to charm moves along, unperturbed. I've been afraid to die and all I sang to Daddy were lethal siren attempts to make him cease to exist. That was my mistake.

I needed to sing from the place of love.

"I forgive you, Daddy." I say, and by the sudden widening of his pupils, I know that he heard me. At that point chaos returns to its boiling point.

"Mommy, she's alive!" The little girl screams, others pick up her call. I see a few people break out on deck and dive into the open ocean, others shriek uncontrollably, one woman faints. Canosa lifts her arm to pin me down. Like in slow motion, I watch my leg lift and hit his square in the chest so that she flies into the wall and crashes on top of a dead man.

I stand on the table. "You never came to my choir performance, but I forgive you."

He takes a step back and hits the wall. Canosa hisses.

"You never bothered to hear me sing, never heard me when I talked to you, never listened to what I had to say. But it's ok, I get it. I understand and I forgive you."

I spread my arms into the thicket of mortal noise.

"Ailen Bright, the girl who can't follow simple rules. I thought I told you not to meddle into my business." Canosa's screech mixes in with the screaming of remaining people. I ignore her.

"You told me I'd never amount to anything. You were right. I didn't, and I'm sorry."

He just stares.

There is a bridge of newfound communication between us, slung across the game-board called life, death watching us with eager interest, woken up for her usual slumber.

"You beat my mother. You beat me. We were things to you, useful only for carrying water, like you liked to tell me at every opportunity you got. You never even noticed I was there. It took for me to die, for you to see me. But it's ok, I get it, and I forgive you."

Canosa darts across the salon, probably with the intent on jumping Daddy. I step off the table and pin her to the wall, grab her by the hair and fling her across the salon to Daddy's feet. He doesn't move, as if a frozen statue.

"This is my gift for you, Daddy. My song. I love you."

I inhale and let out a note of pain, pain so penetrating and overpowering, so full of grief and hurt and longing, it rises steadily over the massacre, thick with urge, guttural, hypnotic.

Those remaining on the boat turn their faces to me and gasp in obvious admiration. Their faces clear, oblivious to thunder, thickening clouds and the eye of a storm hanging directly over the boat.

They listen. Even Canosa pauses her pursuit, props herself up on one elbow, enchanted. None of this matters.

I realize it doesn't matter if Daddy hears me or not. It's a gift and it will find his heart he he decides, it's not up to me. What I have to do is give.

And I do.

I keep pouring into my a capella. There is so much of it, I simply can't stop. No instrumental accompaniment needed, replaced with a flood of memories, rare cherished moments between us weaving into a song, and I see something new in Daddy's eyes, a mist in recognition. I push my voice an octave higher, then another and another, overpowering the noise around me, silencing even the mad weather.

Accelerando. Agitato. Colossale.

The little girl grabs my arm, someone else pulls on me from behind. Hands begin tearing at me, looking for a piece of that sweetness, that something to quench their thirst, their yearning for knowledge that they, too, belong, in this careless existence that we like to call happiness. The one that sirens are bred to induce. The fake one, to lure them to die. As food.

Hunter's words ring in my head.

*They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped. They search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What's creepy is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

"Get off her, she's mine!"

Canosa dives through people, a streak of saliva trailing from her open mouth, and then she sinks her nails and teeth into my flesh. I don't flinch, giving myself away into the song. For Daddy. Nothing else matters.

"You belong to me, silly girl. To me alone."

She utters a growl of a satisfied animal, eating at last. Others join into a tangle of disarrayed hair and shriveling bodies. Limbs reach to me in unison, like dozens of frog tongues flicking at their catch, missing, wanting more. I spread my arms to the sides, give myself away, reach for the air to keep singing. There is still lot of pain left inside me, and they eat it all up.

Ailen Bright, the center of the feast.

The main dish, the desert, the works.

I fall on the floor under the weight of greediness. Hands work its way up to my face, my torso covered with them like with shriveling leeches, gorging themselves, sucking on the sugar, drop by drop. Thunder strikes again, boat shakes, the crowd collapses on me in a wave, biting, tearing, wet with feeding frenzy. No blood seeps out of my torn veins, only sea water, clear and salty. Like tears.

I feel my core open, and I choke on the song.

"Daddy!"

My throat torn apart, my voice still rings, "Daddy! Can you hear me? Help me, Daddy, please. I'm dying, I'm dying!", until someone, something, takes it out. The very source of it. My vocal cords. Gone.

My voice dies.

Ailen Bright, to be buried at sea.

The mass of arms leaves me on the floor, an empty useless shell, a discarded mollusk, my vocal cords their pearl, their promised treasure. It's what produced their hunger, their elation. It woke them up. It made them feel.

They forget all about me, fighting for a string of twin infoldings of mucous membrane that used to be stretched across my larynx. Used to oscillate at five hundred times per second, controlled via a vagus nerve, my own private conductor.

I raise my head and see him one more time. Daddy. He stands aside from the crowd, his lavender shirt perfectly ironed, his face lifeless and ashen, staring at me in a paralysis, his mouth slightly open and unmoving.

*Did you like it? My song, did you like it?* I want to say, but no sound comes out. I have no voice left. Yet perhaps it was a final note to melt him.

As I drop my head back on the floor, he shouts "No!" and darts to me.

"No, baby, no. Oh, what did I do... My Ailen, my little girl, my sweetie." He drops on his knees, careless, oblivious to his fine wool suit getting dirty in the rumble, cradles my head in his lap, strokes my hair, kisses my forehead. His lips are warm against my skin, and I like it. There is none of that creepy feeling I got whenever he touched me before. This is different. This is worth dying for.

"Baby, don't go. Daddy is here, hold on to Daddy. Don't you dare going, Ailen, don't you dare."

He holds my hands, he kisses my fingers. He presses his cheek to my forehead, and it's real. Pretense is gone, and I feel it.

"Daddy loves you. Daddy always loved you. Don't you ever forget it. Oh, Ailen, what have I done." I blink to make sure I'm not dreaming. This is too easy. Have I finally succeeded in getting through to him? Impossible to believe. Tears roll down his face in two feeble lines. I've never seen my father cry before.

"Talk to me, baby. Talk to me."

I can't answer. My voice is gone. I can only stare, no tears left inside to spill. My eyes, they hurt. I close them.

I think of a game we used to play with Hunter. If he was here, he'd ask me, *Was it worth it? You know, killing yourself, was it worth all this trouble and pain and angst?* And I'd say,

*This moment, this right here, right now, is worth dying for. I'd die for it twenty times over, if that's what it took.* And he'd just nod, he'd understand. And we'd sit like that, silent, for hours. Smoking a joint after a joint, floating in a cannabis daze, on a cloud of euphoria. Weightless.

Daddy rocks me, back and forth, back and forth. I fly. He kisses my forehead. I soar. He sings me a lullaby. I dream.

Chant of the crowd dies. Souls scatter towards the abyss of death, one by one. Until all sound fizzles out. Cacophony of shrieks stops. Thunder vanishes. Boat levels and swings slightly side to side. Only Daddy's lullaby blankets the silence.

I weep inside, happy.

I think I'm falling asleep, for the first time in four days since my jump. My last conscious thought is, *But sirens can't sleep, can they? And sirens can't...*

I dream. About Hunter. About our lake and flat stones that we send scattering against evening sun. I dream about Mommy and the way she used to sing to me, to chase the nightmares away, her soft hands in my hair, her smile, her warm smell, a mix of cinnamon and freshly washed hair and hot chocolate that she used to make me when I woke up in the middle of the night, scared.

I don't know how long I sleep. Hours, days?

Dreams end and I open my eyes.

A jolt.

Air shifts to send off a sense of a barely detectable draft, a shadow of a wave, tiny at first, then larger, reaching the yacht, lifting it a fraction of an inch. Then I hear skin shuffling against the hull of the boat and a resounding shudder comes through the floor, rumbling under me in a mini earthquake.

CRACK!

*Canosa!* I want to yell, my heart pounding fast. *She breached the boat!* Water gushes into its belly with a roar. *We're gonna sink Daddy, where did you go?*

A song reaches me. My song. Canosa's song. She sings with my voice. Louder, louder. I attempt to lift my head, struggle to move my arms. *Daddy, where are you? Can you hear her?* How I wish I could speak. I manage to lift myself up on one elbow, with full permission of a little girl who is scared, then back on the floor, exhausted. Transfixed, I stare at the ceiling.

*Daddy, it's Canosa!* I want to scream. *She'll kill you for sure, unless you kill her first!* I roll over on my stomach and see him standing on the deck as if enchanted. He holds two sonic guns, one in each hand, his legs far apart in a warrior stance. He looks like a true siren hunter, ready for battle.

*Daddy!* I want to scream. As if he heard me, he turns and smiles at me, then puts his finger to his lips, as if to say, *it's ok, baby, I hear you, don't worry.* I want to crawl to him, to warn him, but I'm too weak to move.

Vibrations penetrate the air, coming from below the boat. Canosa seems to be working her way around the hull, punching holes in it as she goes. Slowly, I understand what Daddy is waiting for, what he's about to do. I pull myself up and forward an inch, then another, not knowing why, only wanting to reach him, to help him.

*If only I could sing, I'd send a storm her way, I'd hum us all the way to Italy, like we wanted to, to go to opera every day, remember? Just you and me. I want to say.*

Then all noise stops.

Sun streams through broken yacht windows. Sky is clear. Clouds dot the brilliant blue of September afternoon, crisp and chilly. Wind dies down to a gentle breeze, sifts through torn curtains, past jagged glass, into wall gaps. Rain escapes off the roof, drips into puddles.

I don't like the silence and the waiting.

Drip. Drip.

Calm stands fresh and still, ready to be taken by those hungry for relief. Every drip of the water rings loudly against the quiet of the sea, gigantic mirror that reflects the absurdity of life, if you dare to look. Dare to discover.

*Daddy? I want to call.*

He stands, waiting. I keep pushing myself forward, towards the door, feeling as if tiny creatures crawl all over me,

miniature crabs that knit my muscles back together, mend my bones, close my skin, searing my throat over empty larynx.

Ailen Bright, mute.

Wind picks up, clears off vapor of death from the salon. Horror overcomes me, sends goosebumps from top of my head all the way down to the tips of my toes, as I cross the threshold and see a line of bodies, all piled up in a neat row. I listen for any sign of Canosa, any movement in the water, any trail of a song.

Complete silence. Then it all erupts at once.

Canosa leaps into the air and screams at me, her hair flailing like a cape behind her.

"Ailen Bright, we meet one last time! The girl who thinks she can get things for free. Everything comes at a price, silly girl. The more exquisite the product, the higher..."

She doesn't finish. Daddy starts firing.

BOOM.

My eardrums protest in pain, convulsing in tune to the blow. I grab my head with both hands.

BLAAAAM!

Canosa drops on the deck, writhing in agony. The boat creaks and dips further down. Daddy's sways forward and barely regains his balance. She is at his feet, he directs both guns at her face and fires again.

A thousand thunders explode in my skull, bouncing off the walls. Closing eyes doesn't help me escape it, pressing hands doesn't shield me from the racket. I decide to look and try to ignore the pain.

The detonation is so powerful, that Daddy shakes his head, perhaps to shake off blast overpressure. It travels at supersonic velocity, it must affect his internal organs. In the momentary pause, Canosa twists on the floor and lifts her head to look at me, and she's beautiful. Her hair hangs in thick clumps, kissing the boat's floor like a magnificent white wooly blanket. Her eyes open wide, irises shrunk to silver outlines of two large black pools.

"Ailen Bright. What are you doing here? Go away, silly girl. It's not your turn, remember? I told you, it's not your turn yet."

I open and close my mouth, unable to speak.

"Shut up, bitch. This is what you get for hurting my daughter." Daddy fires again, and my whole body sears with hot pain from the sonic boom wave.

Canosa's body shimmers for a few seconds, as if expanding into a million water droplets, then converges back into itself. She blinks and opens her mouth to speak again.

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. Who makes up the rules? I do. You take turns."

"And it's your turn to die." Daddy emits another blast, double strong, firing both guns precisely at the same time. Canosa disintegrates into a foggy impression of herself, but before she floats away, her foggy face opens up in one last remark. "Go away, Ailen. Move along now. Go play." The Daddy blasts into the air and the fog bursts into a mist, a rainbow in the sun's rays, until even that is blown away by the wind.

"Goodbye." He says and turns to me, his face awash with exaltation, as if drunk or high on battle fever, eyes ablaze with light.

The boat groans and dips backwards.

## 35. Burial Yacht.

We sink. Gurgling water deafens me. There is no crew to man bilge pumps and usher the water back out. I want to ignore its flow like white noise. I want to think I'm in a dream. All of this is not happening. It's not true. I'll pinch myself and I'll wake up, as simple as that. Because this has gone too far. This is not fair. I've just found my Daddy, he can't simply die in the middle of the ocean because I'm too weak to carry him to the shore. It would be an ultimate punishment, to watch him sink into the waves while I breathe in water with my gills, floating, unable to help. Anemic. With no will left to live.

Floor tilts and then the nose of the boat rises up a few feet at once. Daddy drops both guns and grabs the rail. I hear his laborious breathing and the squeaking of his fine Italian shoe soles on wet deck, as I slide down into salon through the door and bump into the overturned table which displayed my casket a few hours ago. To those who are now dead. Whose bodies roll over each other and bunch up by the salon's wall.

There is another crack and the gushing of the water intensifies, with a powerful sway the boat rights itself back into horizontal position, level with the sea.

Daddy makes his way across the deck, grabs the door for balance, and lets himself inside. I see a look on his face that frightens me. He intends to leave me, like everyone else did. First Mommy, then Hunter, now him. And it's all my fault. Canosa told me not to meddle into her business, but I didn't listen.

Daddy kneels next to me.

"Did you sleep ok?" It's difficult for him to ask me, I see a hint of physical strain on his face, an effort to be nice.

*Sirens can't sleep, Daddy, I want to say. And we're sinking, we need to get out of here! We need to call for help! Don't you have a cell phone on you or something? Please!*

He turns my head, brushes the hair off my face, picks at the individual strands and peels them off my wet skin, one by one, until my forehead is clean to his satisfaction. Then he strokes it until it's perfectly slick, maybe for his own comfort rather than mine, a mechanical task that passes for a loving gesture. His every movement mimics the gentle bobbing of the yacht, slowly sinking into the ocean, with no shore to be seen for miles, no captain to get us back, no helicopter to come to our rescue.

I grunt in effort and raise my hand, point to my throat, finger the spot where my vocal cords used to be, make cutting motions, then my arm drops on the floor. I hope he understood I mean to say, I wish I could talk to you.

"Yes, I know." He says, looking not at me but at something to the left of me. I follow his gaze. Pieces of the casket are strewn all over the floor, looking over us as if in understanding. It's all that's left of the funeral procession.

"Look, Ailen." He rubs his eyes, then hangs his head, unable to say something important. I want to stop the clock, right then, freeze this moment, because I think I know what it is. "I'm sorry it ended like this." Then, after a pause, "And thank you for the song. It was beautiful. Beats any opera, you know." He cracks a smile. Not one of those stretched grimaces he typically produces to make people believe he's polite, but a true genuine smile.

He heard me. He *heard* me. Can this be true?

I purge all thought from my head, I try to forget that we sink, to be here and now, to allow myself to feel this overwhelming thirst for closeness and pain that inevitably comes with it, try to accept the fact that one is inseparable from another, like life is inseparable from death. Two ends of one stick, like that of a casket.

"Come," he leans over and scoops me up like a baby.

We pass the pile of bodies. The boat is perhaps a mere foot away from its deck being level with water. Daddy steps out onto the deck, careful not to slide on the tilting floor, to the warm afternoon sun, so wrongly bright and welcoming. It burns my

skin, but I don't care, don't flinch, don't even utter a moan. All I do is press my face into his shirt and inhale, trying to memorize this moment.

Daddy stops by the rail, dark against the brightness of the sea, uncertain, as if all words escaped him. The ocean waits, so does the sun, so do I. Breeze quiets down to an occasional gush of air, waves calm into ripples. Horizon shimmers, blurs its line into a breathing mirage.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Roger Bright, and I'm the last siren hunter." He says to the ocean, then looks at me. "I want to say a few words about my daughter, Ailen Bright. I want to say how much I love her, and what a fool I was not repeat it every single day."

I touch his hand.

"I want to ask her for forgiveness." His usual polished politeness falls off, and I see Daddy the way he was perhaps a few cherished moments of my life. Loving.

We both ignore the whooshing of the water and the sinking of the boat.

"My dear Ailen, I will miss you. You're sixteen, you're such a big girl, look at you. My baby, how did you grow up so fast?" And, after a pause, "I love you."

His eyes warm me to the core, and it's as if every word he said sounds like home. Like comfort. Like love.

My heart beats fast, I want to say, *What do you mean, you will miss me? No, you will hold on to me and I will carry you to the shore. I will recover in a few hours, you can float next to me until then. Can't you?*

He reads the thoughts off my face and answers, "It's no use, Ailen. You know I can't swim."

In this moment, boat sinks another foot and water rushes over the deck, sweeping us both into the waves. It takes a few seconds for the ocean to swallow the yacht, all fifty feet of its length, ten tons of its weight, its teak paneling and custom upholstered seating, diesel engine and latest electronic controls, to be played with by curious fish later.

We float and start sinking after it. Bubbles and swirls stream up to our backs in the wake of a large object driving into a whirlpool. As we twist in the foam, I grab Daddy's arm, straining to flap my feet, to stay afloat, but there is not enough strength in me, and we go under.

The burial at sea, now complete.

No land, only water around us, and evening sun, like a single light bulb above us, piercing the ocean, shrinking, shrinking. I breathe through my gills and watch Daddy smile at me, holding on to me and sinking with me.

*NOOOOOOO!* I yell inside my head. I hear my voice ring as if a ribbon of thought passes through water, through space, and

folds neatly into my skull, into my thought stream, splatters brain surface with masterfully twisted pebbles, plop-plop-plop, one by one. My scream uncoils and I feel every syllable tinkle.

Plop-plop-plop, in.

Water drips, tasting of salt, like tears.

Plop-plop-plop, in.

The world is a shimmering bridge over the constant flow of thought. I open my mouth and throw out words, one after another, without any coherent structure, at random. They sink into nothing. I'm mute. I watch Daddy let out a stream of bubbles.

*NOOOOOOOOOO! I will carry you out!*

A sudden realization fills me to the brim of my emotional capacity. It pushes so hard, I want to burst. All weariness of my predicament forgotten, I'm a little girl again, at the moment of an amazing discovery, and I want to share it.

*Daddy, I don't want to die anymore. I want to live.*

I say it in my head, again and again.

*I want to live, I want to live, I want to live. I want to laugh. I want to run around, holler, be silly, dance under the rain. I want to break into a song, I want to explode into a myriad of bells, at once.*

A surge of strength throws me into action. I kick in and begin swimming up, my strength returns with every stroke. I pull Daddy behind me. He's slippery and heavy and my fingers begin to

slide across his shirt's sleeve. I grip him harder, but he keeps slipping out. I want to look back down, to make sure he is ok, when sun shines brightly at me from above, through feet and feet of water. It blinds me with its intensity, so white, so smooth. I think that if I reach out to it, I'll touch it, it's so close.

*Live. I want to live.*

I reach the surface and burst into air just as Daddy slips through my fingers and is gone. In panic, I clasp my hands on the edges of the sea. It shrunk into a mere puddle, and my movement causes gigantic waves. They roll over each other, slink into tiny swirls and drip over the rims, onto tiled floor. My arms clutch the bathtub, my legs shiver. I gulp down water, tasting strangely like chlorine, then draw a sharp breath, again and again and again, short for air.

"Daddy, I decided I want to live." I shudder and gasp as I breathe, shaking all over, hyperventilating. I'm so happy I want to cry. "I'm alive and I can talk." I say, announcing this fact to believe it's real.

I'm back in the bathroom, the only room in the house that locks. Its ceiling reminiscent of Roman baths, Daddy's beloved antique clawfoot cast iron tub held up by... I clasp the edges and frantically bend down to look. There they are, four enameled sirens, serving as tub's legs, looking out into nothing with painted eyes. I hang out of the tub, face to face with one of

the creatures, looking at her upside down. Blood rushes to my head and I reel with dizziness.

The siren winks her iron eye at me. *I must be really stoned*, I think and blink. She's back to cold iron. I sit up so fast, my head collides with the miniature statue wrapping the faucet. I flip around and gaze at it intently. Canosa, cast in bronze, holds the faucet's spout in her delicate left hand, as if it's her zither, her right hand raised over her head in a moaning sign, her hair wrapping curls around her body in tapered sophisticated lines. I reach out and touch her. She's solid bronze.

I look at the clock on the wall.

It's been three minutes exactly.

"Ailen, open the door this second!" Daddy's voice comes through the door.

I study my palms, warm and pink, with real blood running through them. "This is fucked up. Hunter, what the fuck did you give me?" I lean over the edge of the tub. A stub of a joint lies on the tiled floor, somehow defiant, as if it knows something I don't, as if it flips me a finger.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder.

I pull myself up and out of the tub. Water drips from my sweatshirt and jeans. I strip, pulling hard at sticky jeans as they cling to my skin, not letting me out.

"I can breathe. I'm ok." I keep talking to myself, to assert myself. Another rush of dizziness sweeps over me and I lean on the wall.

"Towel. I need a towel."

Door groans under Daddy's fists. He shouts "open the door" on repeat, slamming it, slamming it.

"I'm dressing!" I say.

"Well, what takes you so long!"

"Sorry."

I blot my face, my shoulders, my belly, arrest an urge to vomit, gagging. I lean over and squeeze my wet clothes over the tub with shaking hands, reach in and pull out the plug, let the water run, watch it swirl, then look at myself in the bathroom mirror.

"Ailen Bright. What do you know, you're alive after all."

A startled face looks back at me from the mirror, wet dark hair sticking out to all sides in a crazy halo, deep purple circles under the eyes, skin devoid of any color, looking deathly pale. But my eyes shine.

"I'm alive." I say one more time, wrapping the towel around me, tucking in its end so it won't fall off me, and unlocking the door.

"Daddy!" I'm so happy to see him, standing on the other side of the door, meticulously dressed in his fine silk pajamas,

deep maroon with barely visible rosy stripes, his hair smooth as if he didn't climb out of bed minutes ago, a dab of perfume from yesterday's grooming still wafting off of him in a delicate smell of his signature #10 Aqua Pour Homme Marine Cologne for men by Bulgari.

He opens his mouth and I hear a string of swear words and accusations and warnings that one day, you just wait, one day you will turn out just like your mother.

"Daddy," I say, "I'm so happy to see you."

He doesn't hear me, he never hears me. He yells back, waving his arms, froth at his cleanly shaved mouth, a shadow of stubble protruding right around the contours of his lips.

I step into the carpet, reach out, I grab him by the shoulders and shake him up.

"Listen to me! Did you hear what I said?"

The utter shock makes him freeze with his mouth open, his pupils wide, about to erupt. I talk into the next few seconds of silence, letting my arms fall back to my sides.

"Daddy, I love you. But you've got to stop screaming at me all the time, ok? It's my birthday today, have you forgotten? I'm sixteen, I'm a big girl. I'll be fine, I'll turn out just fine, don't you worry."

"What did you say?" He doesn't grasp it, his face ashen, fingers on his hands spread in incomprehension, as if willing to

grab something and strangle it, yet not sure what it should be, perhaps for the first time in his life.

I look into his face.

"I'm sixteen, Daddy, I'll be fine. I'm ok. No need to freak out and control me. I'm my own person, and you've got to stop this. Today."

"Oh..." He says and takes a step back, bewildered, then takes a step forward. "How dare you talking back to me, you little..." He begins and raises his arm to hit me. I grab it with both my hands mid-air and instead of a blow, we perform somewhat of dance, a movement that brushes my hip and dissolves.

"Daddy, if you hit me one more time, I will hit you back, I promise you that."

He falls silent, locking his gaze with mine, and I hold it. I don't avert my eyes, I don't hide, I have no fear. He sees it and glances to his feet briefly before raising his eyes back again, as I tell him.

"I won't let you do to me what you did to Mommy, ok? I love you, Daddy."

He grunts and studies the floor, mumbles to himself. "Always knew it, same genes, what would you do. Just like your mother, crazy, crazy."

"No, I'm not crazy, and don't you ever call Mommy that word, you hear me?"

He shrinks before my eyes, and I realize he's scared, scared of this absence of fear I'm displaying, unsure what to do with it, kicked off his feet and shocked at the transformation.

"I don't want to spend my morning listening to..."

"SHUT UP!" I yell.

I think for a brief moment I see a little boy standing in front of me, terrified, unable to move or breathe, then he's back to usual self, except shaken and pale.

"You will listen to me, because I'm your daughter talking and I have something to say."

"I have to use the bathroom, I will be late." He nearly whimpers, and I pause, astounded.

"No you won, it's fucking early and you know that." This is the first time I openly swore at him, and as if a lid flies off my suppressed feelings, giving me freedom to talk, to say what I meant to say for years.

"I have a question for you. Do you know what women were made for?"

Daddy's face floats between shock and anger. His eyes bulge, veins push against the skin of his neck, he opens and closes his mouth like a beached fish.

"Answer the question." I say.

"Don't you start talking to me like that, young lady. I'm your father, and you do as I say." But I see glint fade in his eyes, and I give it to him.

"Women were made to love and to be loved."

"Where did you get this idea?"

There is a knock on front door.

"Here." I tap my head. "Oh, and I smoked a joint, it was good weed, you know. Fucking awesome. I think you should start doing it, Daddy, it might do you good." I tap him on the shoulder, and before he has time to react, flee down the stairs, to the front door.

"Hunter!" I yell and throw it open.

There he stands, wet from the rain, droplets zigzagging off his rain jacket, bright blue, my favorite color.

"Happy birthday, brat." He grins, wiped his wet nose with one hand, hands me over a wrapped box with another. It's a bad wrapping job, with tape sticking out to all sides, but the color of the paper is blue, and so is the ribbon, crumpled from sitting in his pocket too long.

"Thank you, oh, thank you! This looks beautiful. Did you wrap it yourself?"

"Sure thing. Come on, open it."

"Come in." I say, and step aside, blushing under his stares at my chest, right where the towel started sliding off. I yank it up and scowl at him.

"Sorry!" he raises his hands in defiance, I shut the door and hold the little box in front of me.

"I think I know what it is."

"Oh?" His eyes open wide, he lowers his hood and dog-shakes his head. "Good morning, Mr. Bright. How are you? I wanted to be the first to wish Ailen Happy Birthday, is that ok with you?" He tells Daddy, who stands at the top of the stairs, gravely looking down, then turns without a word and slams the bathroom door shut behind him.

"What the fuck?" Hunter asks quietly.

"I'll tell you later, I say, and begin jumping up and down, holding on to the towel with one hand, holding the present in another. Hunter follows me with his eyes, mimicking my movement with his head, nodding up and down.

"Open the present already, and stop jumping. Jesus, girl."

"I know what it is, I know, I know." I say, grinning from ear to ear, short of breath, feeling glee spread through my limbs and unable to stop.

"Oh yeah, what is it then?"

"Two tickets to see Siren Suicides tonight!"

He gasps. "What the fuck, girl, how did you know?"

"I saw it in a dream. Ok, I'll explain. I had a bad *bad* trip, I've got to tell you all about it. What kind of shit did you give me, it was fucking strong!"

"Shhhh!" Hi presses a finger to his lips. "Your dad will hear."

"Oh, I don't care anymore, I told him this morning."

"You what?" Hunters face contorts in a puzzlement akin to a puppy that's been chasing its own tail and can't understand why it's so hard to reach, pausing for breath, his tongue lolling.

There are so many things I want to tell him, I'm barely controlling my self.

"Hey, remember this game we play? Have you ever? Can I ask you a question?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah. Have you ever lived?"

"Are you ok, Ailen?" He reaches out to touch my forehead.

"I'm fine, just listen. I mean, not like pretending to live, when you smile politely to others and say hi and bye and thank you and stuff like that. Make good grades, do what your parents tell you to do, you know, but you secretly hate your life? But for real. Have you ever lived for real?" My hands shake from excitement and a surge of adrenalin, my feet feel cold on the stone floor and I stand on tippy toes.

"Hmmm." Hunter thinks.

"Have you ever soared above it all, when nothing mattered, nothing at all, except now, except you and this feeling of weightlessness that you hope will never end? Have you ever felt like there was no yesterday, no tomorrow, but only today? Have you?"

"You're stoned." He grins.

"No, no, I'm not, I swear. Well, I was, but not anymore. Anyway, I'm sixteen today, and I want to start to live. But I don't really know how, I've always only wanted to—" I stumble, afraid to say the word *die*.

"You always wanted to what?"

"Nothing. I need your help. Will you help me? I mean, I want to figure out how to live in the moment, you know, find out what it means, how to make friends. Cause I feel so lonely sometimes, it hurts. I'm, like, always around people yet feel as an outcast. You know, whenever I..."

I pause for air.

"...whenever I go to school and..."

He says, "How about I help you to shut up, for starters?"

Before I can say anything, he's kissing me, his wet jacket pressing towards my skin, his warm hands cupping my face. I try to mumble, to finish the sentence, and I can't, drawn into the kiss. I lean into him, into the outline of his body, melting into his contours, letting myself being carried away, letting

myself be loved, all the while staring at the front door,  
remembering the morning Mommy left me, realizing I might never  
find out for sure what happened to her or her body, and letting  
it go.

Closing my eyes.

Saying in my head.

*I will never ever try drowning myself again or attempt any  
kind of suicide, I swear, I won't. I will live, because life is  
beautiful and it's full of love, no matter what anyone says.  
It's all right here, in my heart.*

*One day I will die. We all do.*

*But until then, I will live.*

*I promise.*