

Kiera Cass

The Siren

THE SIREN

KIERA CASS

iUniverse, Inc.

New York Bloomington

THE SIREN

Copyright © 2009 by Kiera Cass

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse

1663 Liberty Drive

Bloomington, IN 47403

www.iuniverse.com

1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any Web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

ISBN: 978-1-4401-5423-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-4401-5424-9 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

iUniverse rev. date: 7/7/2009

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

For Liz-

Because she's the kind of girl that songs should be written about, poems should be composed for, and books should be dedicated to.

CHAPTER 1

Wanting to cry doesn't mean you can. Or at least not in any way that can give you some sort of satisfaction. It's a luxury really. The same goes for songs and laughter, or the words whispered in the ear of a friend.

I had taken these things for granted. How was I to know that out there, in the world I had once truly lived in, something as simple as an afternoon greeting could cause unimaginable devastation?

A solitary tear traced my cheek as I stared out the second-story window of the house we were borrowing. On the cobbled streets below, a couple walked. It was a young pair, not much older than me. Or, rather, than I had been eight years ago. She was a bronze-skinned beauty, but not necessarily because of her features. No, it would have been because she was all too aware of the way she looked in the eyes of her partner. The boy—equally tanned, but far more muscular—held her hand intertwined with his own. As they walked, he looked into her eyes, lifted her hand, and kissed her eager fingers.

What must that feel like?

Wiping up the lonely tear, I closed my eyes and imagined it. The sun would be drawn to my chocolate hair, its gentle curls lifting and falling with my steps. He, whoever the faceless man in my head was, would have fingers too large to fit comfortably between mine. But that wouldn't matter. As he held my hand, I wouldn't feel the strain of my fingers being pulled wide. All there would be was his skin on mine. Without making the decision, my elbow would bend in time with his, happily following any direction he gave. Unexpectedly, warm and familiar lips would meet with my hand. I would reward him with a smile.

The sounds of Marilyn's approaching footsteps drew me from my daydream. I dabbed under my eyes once again, removing any trace of tears. Marilyn worried for me so; I

couldn't let her see me sad. I pulled the window shut, and we were truly alone.

"Are you alright?" Marilyn asked, pausing at my side. Her hands, moist with the same coolness as mine, brushed my forehead.

"I'm perfect." I smiled brightly, shrugging my shoulders as if I had no reason to ever be sad. Being an actress was part of the job. Not towards my sisters necessarily, but sometimes it had to be done.

"Could you hear Her earlier?" she asked. This would be why she sought me out now: to pass on wisdom.

"I think so. This morning, right?"

"Yes! Now, what did She say?" Marilyn was beaming. How could I stay down surrounded by such enthusiasm? I sighed and tried to remember the exact wording. I dreaded getting this wrong.

"Well... I think She said that it could be in a day or two, that She was still waiting, but to be listening?" I mumbled.

"Perfect! Really, Kahlen, that was spot on. It's been, what, eight years now? You should be able to hear Her clearly by this point. Now when I'm gone, you should stay near the Sea. She's easier to hear that way, and you can get to Her faster. Besides, there's plenty of time to see the more remote parts of the world."

I couldn't deny that. Time I had. Marilyn smiled and ran into the kitchen. Time for an indulgence.

Marilyn was a red-head and had a spirit to match her hair. But that was an acquired trait, or so I understood. This meant that, in general, we were a good pairing. My personality was naturally cheery, though I had been admittedly somber more and more often over the last few years. I was grateful to have my sister with me, but I still felt isolated. It would have been nice to know more than one person in the entirety of the world. Well, two, but for all intents and purposes, Aisling was no part of my life.

But friendship with just anyone was not an option for me.

I can't remember their names, but I used to have plenty of friends. And a family, too. Though the voices are gone, I clearly remember the action of us huddled around our dinner table talking. There were so many things in this world I longed for with an ache so big it surprised me. Most of the time, the desires of my heart were overshadowed by the day-to-day dullness of living in silence.

There were rules. All I had to do was obey— do my duty, pay my dues— and then all these little daydreams could be my reality. I could have my hand held. I could be kissed on the forehead. I could live a life of my own. I just had to wait.

The waiting was torture.

The silence was worse.

Thank God for Marilyn. Besides being easy to talk to, she was full of endless wisdom. Her sentence was coming to a close, so she knew everything I would need to do in order to pay my debt in secrecy. That was the key: to not make mistakes. Otherwise, this was all for nothing. She drove those thoughts into my head as we ran around South America. I wasn't sure which country we were in anymore; we had been to so many. But when Marilyn explained that going back to America wasn't wise in the beginning, I asked to go some place with color.

It was certainly full of color here. The trees practically glowed green, and the sky was a shade of blue I didn't know existed. The people were colorful, too. In Ohio I had seen a whole lot of white and a fair amount of black, but here people were brown, mocha, honey, and olive. I didn't know so many skin tones existed.

We were currently borrowing a home that must have housed at least a half a dozen daughters. That was lucky for us because we needed the clothes. And though we couldn't read the signs or notes around the house, we had no trouble deciphering the words we heard through the windows.

Language was never a barrier for us since we never had to speak it and could always understand it. Marilyn, for example, was from England, but when she spoke I never heard her accent. It must have been in there somewhere, but it never visited my ears. The only real clue I had to her nationality or era was the phrases she used from time to time. I sometimes wondered if my voice managed to pick up a British accent on the way to her ears.

This was part of how it worked. I think it was because sisters came from all over the world, and we had to be able to speak to one another since there could never be anyone else. And when we sang, the sounds encompassed so many languages, it seemed natural. We must have been infused with every possible dialect. I never did ask about that, so I could have been wrong.

Maybe it's simply that our voices weren't our own anymore.

Marilyn reentered the room with a bowl full of fruit. She chewed a piece of melon slowly, truly enjoying the taste. I could understand the draw. Once she left us, would she ever taste anything from this corner of the world ever again? Would she somehow long for it, but not even know what it was?

I loved Marilyn. It was an easy thing to do. She had been vulnerable and honest with me from the very beginning, and that made adjusting to this life easier. She hid none of her own struggle from me, so I hid nothing from her.

Marilyn was seventeen when she became a siren. She had discovered that her fiancé was having an affair, and when I say "discovered," I don't mean through overhearing gossip or discovering a love note. I mean that she actually endured walking in and seeing the man she loved in bed with another woman. He wasn't even sorry. He told her to get out while the other girl laid there and laughed.

She was just too young to know what to do with herself. She felt betrayed, unwanted, ashamed and couldn't bear the thought of facing him or her family. Having tied rocks to her

feet, she jumped in the Ocean hoping to never be found. Her clothes alone could have done the job.

As she sank, she felt the stupidity of her actions. She wasn't the terrible person, he was! She shouldn't be suffering, he should! Regret washed over her. She wished that she had been stronger and had really done something with her life, and with that in her heart she cried out to live.

The Ocean consented.

Everyone in her family thought she had died. And it left her former fiancé free to marry the other girl— not that he even really wanted that.

It's hard to stay away at first; that's why you just go somewhere else. You miss the ones you've left behind, of course, but what's worse is knowing they miss you for no reason. You're still there. You're stronger than you've ever been. You're sturdier than they are.

But there's nothing to be done. Rules. After a while, there's no one left to go back to. That makes it a little better. And a little worse.

The only remnant of that life was Marilyn's engagement ring— a token she kept to make herself calmer, braver, better.

My story was a bit different than Marilyn's. I don't remember much, but I'm sure it was 1921. And I think the month was June.

"Where do you think you'll live once I'm gone?" Marilyn asked casually. I hated to talk about it. Of course, I was happy for her, but I didn't know how I would tolerate being even more alone than I was now.

"I really haven't thought about it. I might stay around here; I like it here. I'll be sad to be alone, but I don't think I'm prepared to live with Aisling." I rolled my eyes.

Marilyn laughed. It was contagious. The release of sound lifted my whole body. The longing of my earlier voyeurism disappeared in the lightness of my voice set free.

While Marilyn was full of spirit, Aisling, our other sister, was bitter. She had a deep regret of this life, but wasn't brave enough to cross the Ocean in such a way that the deal would be revoked. Aisling still had some time to go— less than I did, but much more than Marilyn. Marilyn was set to leave us within the year, and I would desperately miss her. Aisling had kept to herself, and I only ever saw her on those times when the Ocean called us together. It had been more than a year now since we had to serve last. I wasn't looking forward to the reunion.

Aisling was beautiful, of course. She was blonde and pale and exquisite. Marilyn told me once that Aisling was Swedish, but I had no way of telling myself. While we were all somehow graceful, she pulled it off the best. She, like Marilyn, had glorious blue eyes, like tiny jewels on her flawless face. And something in those eyes that I could never name... it made you long for unknown things when you looked at her. But she was mean-spirited. I think it was our first encounter that left such a horrible impression. I admired her for all of five minutes when I saw her, and then she spoke to me.

“Don't waste your time; you can't pull this off,” she had said.

“Aisling, if you're going to be like that, just leave,” Marilyn told her.

“I think I will. After all that noise, I need some quiet. Nice knowing you,” she said to me, as if she expected me to give up once she left and would never see me again. It seemed like Aisling forgot awfully fast how she felt when it was her turn. Hate is a very strong word, but it wouldn't be too far of a stretch to say I hated Aisling.

“No, I don't think you have the patience for Aisling,” Marilyn said. I think if it had been possible, she would have choked on the bit of fruit in her mouth.

“Hey, I can be patient! I'm fun to live with, aren't I?” That was pointlessly defensive; I couldn't stand Aisling. But it felt good to sound that way. I felt like a teenager.

“Of course you are, dear. Best roommate ever. But I’ve lived with Aisling, and it’s enough to drive you mad.”

“Exactly when and why did you live with Aisling?” The thought was revolting.

“In the beginning, just like you. It was *so* different. I didn’t even make it a week with Aisling. Think about that: we have years and years, and the two of us couldn’t survive a week! Could you imagine if I left you alone after your first week?”

I trembled. “Oh, I would have been completely lost! Why didn’t she want to stay with you?”

“I don’t think it was *me* exactly. I think she just wanted to be alone. She made it very clear that she wasn’t enjoying being watched all the time. She yelled at me and threw a fit if I got too close or said too much. She just didn’t like it.” Marilyn shrugged at the memory.

“What did you do?”

“I left. That was what she wanted. Aisling asked me to explain everything to her one more time, and then said she’d stay close to the Ocean and ask Her if she was needed until she could understand on her own. Stubborn as a mule!” Marilyn concluded with a laugh.

I laughed along with her. “Who do you think was ready to leave first?”

“I think we were both pretty tired of each other. I tried to stick it out, honestly. But I went south, and she went north, and it’s better that way. I’m not sure if one sister has ever tried to dispose of another, but we weren’t far off!” The thought of trying to destroy another sister was something that was truly laughable. I don’t know how that would even begin to work. “Seriously, I broke a plate over her head one night.”

“What!?” I exclaimed. That sent us into another round of giggles.

“She called me something, I forget what, and I just grabbed a plate and hit her on the head!” The laughs continued. “I

mean, it didn't hurt her, but I think she got the picture.”

Only Marilyn would come up with something like that. I loved her so much. I was going to miss her.

I soaked up the moments of laughter. It was a beautiful and private sound. I had discovered that breaths weren't harmful—like a breathy chuckle— but if a drop of our voices leaked into the sound, there were problems. Sighs, sniffs, and huffs were all benign. But laughing, speaking, crying, and even whispering are music in their own ways. These were to be guarded. So we bound them up tight before we ventured out for the afternoon.

I was always desperate for distractions; I was more myself when I was active. Just walking on the beaches helped me to feel more normal. The boys whistled at us as we passed. We must have seemed exotic here. Between Marilyn's red hair and my pale skin, it was obvious we weren't locals.

In the wee hours of the night, when no one was there to see, Marilyn and I would sometimes sink into the surf. The Sea must have felt how much I distrusted Her but never bothered to address it. The waters here in the middle latitudes were constantly warm and teemed with life. Fish swam past with fluid grace, practically dancing in their underwater world. Out, just past the lengths where a normal human would feel comfortable traveling, the sands gave way to jagged rocks covered with skinny strings of seaweeds that looked like they were waving to me each time I passed. I would go out there, grateful for the change of scenery, and stay under the water facing belly up. The moon wiggled as waves passed, and I felt the truth of this life: We all depended on Her.

But it was too early, too bright for any such excursion. Instead, we did as the natives did. We found a little band playing in a courtyard and went to listen. I loved the music here, it was all so fresh. We sat on a bench at the edge of the courtyard, just watching. A canopy kept most of the sun away as people rested in chairs. Flowers bloomed everywhere, filling the air with their perfume; it was still so exotic to me.

The band all wore similar shirts in a light cream color, but still looked very casual— like everything else here.

A few couples were dancing in time to the music. There were children holding hands and hopping in a circle. An older man danced with a girl who must have been his granddaughter. I could hear him quietly telling her she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. I was glad to have been close enough to hear that. There was no one here to ask me to dance, so I settled for the next best thing. I grabbed Marilyn's hand to pull her up to dance with me. I finally tugged hard enough to get her to comply when we both heard it.

The breeze blew Her voice in, that voice that I was just starting to hear like Marilyn could. But it wasn't the same message as this morning. If I heard right... She said something about the Sea of Japan and another sister. We were to hurry.

Marilyn and I looked at each other. We couldn't speak here, but that message was a strange one. Another sister? Obviously to replace Marilyn, but I was still so new. There wasn't time to think about what it all meant.

My mentality switched in a serious second. I was no longer the girl dancing under a canopy. I was a siren. I had a job to do. I had to obey.

We couldn't just dive into the Ocean in front of all these people. We weren't planning on resurfacing, and that would surely raise questions. We sprinted down the coast looking for an unoccupied stretch. People's heads turned as we ran past, kicking up sand as we moved at top speed. Our borrowed skirts of bright yellows and pinks danced around in the wind. I noticed Marilyn edge close to the water as she ran for a moment. With her feet in the surf she could explain: We were on our way. There were just too many witnesses.

The words the people on the beach spoke should have been in Spanish, but every syllable was crystal clear.

“Look at those girls run!”

“Nice legs, honey!”

We ignored them, running on and on without stopping. One of the benefits of not really needing your lungs was never being caught breathless. A habit more than a necessity.

It seemed to take forever to find a bend in the beach. I was worried. The Ocean knew we were coming, but our new sister did not. I hoped she would be alright for the handful of moments it would take to get to her. When a cluster of trees jutted out shielding a section of beach, Marilyn and I slowed to look back and make sure no one could see. Without another hesitation, we jumped in, not bothering to take a breath.

We didn't swim exactly, not when She had a specific place in mind. It was more like we were propelled. A weaker body would have caved from the force, but it almost tickled me every time. Usually, I felt a sense of dread when I moved this way, fully aware that I was about to assist in a massacre of sorts. I tried to take comfort in the knowledge that I wasn't the one who wanted these lives. Along with the worry, I felt a strange surge of strength and beauty. I was, at least for a few people, the last thing they would see or hear, and I knew that on both counts I would be hauntingly perfect.

As we moved through the water, our clothes disintegrated. The speed, I think, was the cause. Buttons and zippers held up against the beating pretty well, but with nothing to hold onto, they sank like tiny pebbles. Marilyn's engagement ring took the pounding with no sign of the wear. I came into this world without any jewelry of my own to test this force with.

There were no signs of location or time to what we wore when we were together singing. We were united, equals. As our clothing stripped away from our bodies, the Ocean would release all the salt in Her veins. These tiny particles would affix themselves to our bodies creating long, flowing dresses. They looked something like sea foam. Light and dazzling, they were never exactly the same, but always somehow similar. The colors were all Her shades— greens, blues, tans— a rainbow of Herself. We bathed in them. The dresses were timeless and wonderful and sensual in a way. Probably the only perk I had found so far of the life I was leading.

Sometimes I would wear my dress until it fell apart. One little grain at a time, it would dissolve, and I would watch with sadness as it turned into salt on the floor. I adored them. And certainly, as we stood there on the open waters with such a costume, it would cause a man to forget what he was doing was insanity. Once we were at our final destination, the bare parts of our skin would shimmer in the light from the salt. And when we opened our mouths in song, there would be no resisting the temptation. Whatever danger our beauty was masking would be noticed far too late.

The Ocean was full of dangers. I, like the rest of mankind, had assumed the worst were icebergs or hurricanes— a collection of natural disasters. The truth was these things were avoidable almost all the time. The true danger was the voice shielded under my unbreakable skin.

Take, for example, the Titanic. Headlines credited this ship's foundering to ice in the water. I attributed it to Marilyn and Aisling, who sang the ship into its deadly course. Long before people were able to go see it, I went to find the wreckage myself. Marilyn refused to go with me, so I went alone. This was only a few months into this life, before I had to bring down a ship myself and couldn't quite understand her aversion. I didn't know how it would haunt me later. The Ocean took me there with ease, gently guiding me to the wreckage. I was surprised by Her willingness, by the care She took with me when I asked for something so obviously bizarre. I was intimidated by Her, but my curiosity won out.

I expected to be in awe of the ship somehow, but I was mistaken. It was a horrifying sight.

The ship was broken in half and strewn all over. I was drawn to it by its name, by its place in the memory of the world. But this was a silent graveyard of metal and debris. A porcelain doll. A pair of shoes. A dinner plate. I was suddenly aware that if I searched the Ocean's floor, I could find what was left of my ship. Things that belonged to me were scattered around on the sand like this. This wasn't an experiment in engineering. This wasn't a headline. This was what was left of

the lives that we had a hand in taking. One of hundreds of unmapped ghost towns at the bottom of the Sea.

But I wasn't off to cause destruction like that. Not today. Today I was off to the side of an unknown friend. How old was she? Where did she come from? How did she end up in this position? And then, a more serious question arose. If the Ocean was in need of eating, as She had told us this morning, why did She spare this girl? The Ocean would have heard that question as I thought it, but it didn't seem like She was going to give me any kind of answer. I was bothered by the way the Ocean seemed to warm at my thoughts.

I could commune with Her like Marilyn did, but I wasn't sure how close I wanted to get at this point. Of course, I saw Her unspoken answer the moment I laid eyes on the tiny creature. As we coasted up to the shore, only barely lit by the sun, I saw our new sister.

She was beautiful. Striking. She was so petite she looked fragile. Her black hair was hanging by her shoulders as she sat hugging herself. Her face was a quiet kind of beautiful, with smooth features and dark eyes. Her addition to the image—and I supposed the sound as well— would be irresistible. She was gently crying as Marilyn and I approached, taking careful steps out of the waves. We didn't want to add to her obvious fear.

Aisling wasn't there yet. I guessed she was intentionally dragging her feet. That would seem about right based on the way she welcomed me. I walked to the girl as quickly as I could without being frightening. We could already see the fear in her eyes as she watched us... but also, a sort of awe. I knew the feeling.

I was out of the habit of speaking to people, so I jumped a little bit when Marilyn addressed her.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Miaka,” the little girl whimpered. Her head jerked involuntarily with one of her sobs.

“Miaka, you don’t have to be afraid. We’re not going to hurt you. We’re here to help you.” Marilyn’s tone was that of helpful teacher. Miaka looked at her with apprehension in her eyes. I couldn’t blame her.

“Are you angels?” she asked. Marilyn and I both choked back the laughter. Between the dresses, the glowing skin, and the general aura we sent out, I guess that’s how we would look.

“No,” Marilyn said. “You’re not dead. We aren’t angels.”

“I don’t understand. I was dying... I felt it. I couldn’t breathe.” As she spoke the words, it all came back to me.

With strange clarity, my mind went to that first and last second, the minute it all changed. I could remember my muscles aching from struggling in the water, my lungs feeling like they were on fire from the pressure. I heard the sound of a ghost-like voice calling from somewhere in the dark. A swirl of dark water, my mouth forced open, and numbness driving away any taste of pain. At ease in the water, I knew something was wrong.

“Yes, you were dying,” Marilyn said. “But you asked to live, didn’t you?”

Miaka looked shocked. “I did! I did! I begged to live, and then I heard a voice. I thought it was my ancestors calling me home.”

Marilyn continued to try and ease her. “You have survived. You have been given a second chance, Miaka.”

“I’m alive? Are you sure? I should feel pain, but I don’t. And you look like angels... I must be dead...” she trailed off, speaking more to herself than to us.

“No, sweet Miaka, you survived,” I said. I liked her already. She was so small and in such desperate need. I could take care of her; she would need someone like me. I didn’t know yet if sisters took turns, but there was no way Aisling was taking Miaka from me. Marilyn and I would watch over her.

Miaka searched our faces for a hint of a lie. Right then, when she fully looked at us, I saw the extent of her beauty. I had the feeling it had been looked over before now. She stared at us for a long time, and then seeing the genuine looks on our faces, decided we must be telling the truth.

“I’m alive!?! Oh... oh, that’s wonderful! Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!” she squealed, thinking we had somehow saved her. “Oh, please, can you help me? Can you take me to my father?”

I couldn’t speak. I felt the longing in her voice—it was my own. Lots of details had already started disappearing, but I knew one of my brothers had survived. I longed to go peek in on his life, but I wasn’t sure if something even that small held any consequences, if just looking in would be trouble. I couldn’t risk it.

“No,” Marilyn said simply.

“But... but he’ll wonder where I am. I fell off the boat while I was fishing with my brothers. I can’t swim... I am usually much more careful. They didn’t see me fall, and I couldn’t breathe enough to call them. They’ll know I fell over, though. I don’t know where they are now.”

“They’re very far away, Miaka. And you can’t go back to them. I’m sorry,” Marilyn said sweetly, but with authority.

Miaka’s face fell. “...Why?”

“We told you the truth when we said you had survived. You asked for your life back, and you have received it, but at a price. You have to pay for your second chance,” Marilyn said.

“You certainly do.” Aisling had appeared behind us. She walked over sinuously, showing off her grace. “Did I miss anything?”

“Hello, Aisling,” Marilyn said. “Meet our newest sister. This is Miaka.” Marilyn gestured down to the small girl. I saw little Miaka’s eyes race at the word “sister.”

“Hello, Miaka,” Aisling said, looking and sounding completely unimpressed.

“We were just about to explain her new life to her. May I continue?”

“Why bother? She doesn’t look like she’ll make it. I’m betting on, hmm, three days. Five tops,” Aisling said, walking away. It was meant for Miaka, but it stung me.

“Don’t let her bother you,” I whispered to Miaka. Aisling was the least of her worries. At least she should be.

“Aisling, do something helpful and stand in the surf.” Marilyn was firm.

“Fine,” Aisling said. She walked down to the coast to be our connection to the Sea, and we turned our attention back to our new sister.

“Miaka,” Marilyn began, “Aisling, Kahlen, and I are sirens. Have you heard of a siren before?”

Miaka shook her head.

“We are singers. There are legends about us. There was a time when people believed in us, or at least suspected our existence. But now, we are a sisterhood of secrets, hidden away from the world. We belong to the Ocean. You see, She’s a very large creature, and She gives endlessly to the earth. To be strong enough to sustain this planet, She has to eat. We help Her eat by singing for Her. It’s not very often, but it is our duty, and this is what you must do now, if you choose to.”

I watched the questions form in her head. I wondered which would be first.

“What does the Ocean eat?” she asked.

“People,” I said quietly.

“People?!” She looked horrified. I saw her face start to collapse in fear, the whimpers of fright hiding just below the surface.

Marilyn acted quickly. “Yes, but we do not assist in this often. Once a year, maybe less. People end their lives in the Sea all the time, and that helps. I tried to on purpose, and you almost did by accident. But when there aren’t enough, we help Her.”

Miaka absorbed that. Her onyx eyes darted around, either searching for her own questions or waiting for the next explanation. It’s no small thing to discover the planet has been hiding something from you.

She was much more composed than I had been. I had stuttered and interrupted and flailed my hands. Miaka obviously had been trained to be reserved. When she saw that we were giving her time, she looked up at Marilyn to ask one of the dozens of questions she must have had. She wasn’t calm exactly, but at least not in hysterics.

“You said... you said ‘if I choose to.’ What if I don’t?” Miaka asked. I didn’t ask that one. She believed faster than I did; maybe she was just generally smarter.

“I’m sorry, Miaka, but if you don’t become one of us, we have to give you to the Ocean. You were meant to die moments ago, so we would have to let Her have you. But if you choose to stay, we can explain how you must live now.” Marilyn said all of this sweetly.

I prayed Miaka would stay. I wanted her! And I couldn’t disobey the Ocean if She asked me to drag Miaka into the water, but I didn’t know if my heart could stand me doing that with my own hands. I hoped the expression on our faces would make it clear that we wanted her. Well, at least two of us did.

“Just walk into the water, honey, you’ll never make it,” Aisling called. She was meandering aimlessly in the water, completely uninterested.

I threw a look at Aisling. Now *there* was someone I wouldn’t mind hurting. “Really,” I said to Miaka quietly, “don’t let her get to you. You won’t have to see her often.”

Miaka looked at me. Our eyes met in a serious gaze. It was greedy, I know, with Marilyn about to go, but if there were only to be a handful of us, I wanted her here, too. I smiled at her, and I hoped she could see my affection for her. She looked from me to Marilyn.

“Marilyn, right?” she asked. Marilyn nodded. “Can I know how I’m supposed to live... before I decide?”

“Yes,” Marilyn said, and then repeated the words she told me eight years earlier. “If you join us, you have to leave everything behind. You can never go back to your family. You would be the fourth siren, and that’s all there ever are at once. While the Ocean doesn’t need our services, we are free to live wherever we like. There are a few adjustments to make, but I can explain those later. You can choose to live alone, as Aisling does, but in the beginning it’s best if you stay with someone else.

“Your body is, for the most part, frozen. You won’t age, you cannot get sick, and you cannot die while you’re a siren. When your time is up, your body will pick up at this moment, and you will continue to grow older. You can get married, have a family, do whatever you want. The life you live *now* is the Ocean’s, but *that* life will be completely yours. And you will be superior to most other people because you will have had time to perfect yourself. It’s almost like an extra gift. Your character will be outstanding, though how it came to be that way may be a mystery. For instance, I am much braver than I used to be. When I leave this life, I may not remember the experiences that made me that way, but it won’t change that characteristic; it’s just part of who I am now.

“But until that time comes, you must never do anything that might expose our secret. This means that, in general, you cannot form close bonds with humans. Besides the fact that they will all grow old while you remain so young, you won’t be able to speak to them. Your voice will call them into water and make them want to drown themselves. It’s the essence of who we are. Even if you’re far away from water, they might do something as simple as stick their heads in a sink. You can

speak to us, and you can always commune with the Ocean, but you are deadly to humans. You are, essentially, a weapon. A very beautiful weapon.

“I won’t lie to you, it can be a lonely existence, but once you are done, you get to *live*. Whatever you grow into now becomes ingrained into your very being; your passion stays with you. All you have to give, for now, is obedience and time,” Marilyn concluded.

Miaka had listened intently to all of this. I respected her cool head. She had just practically experienced death, been separated from her family, and been told she was lethal. Still, she was rational. The tears that glistened in her eyes didn’t affect the thinking behind them.

She was braver than I was; she was actually considering if it were better to let the Ocean have her. Each second that passed, I worried that the reasoning in her head would tell her that anything, even death, would be better than this. I tried to mentally will her into staying. She looked at Marilyn and braced herself for the answer to one of the most essential questions.

“How long?” she asked.

“One-hundred years,” Marilyn replied.

She fell back into thought. I wondered what she was debating. I had been too emotional to think that much. It was silent for a long time. Even the Ocean was patient while she decided. Miaka bit her lip for a moment. Finally, she looked up at us.

“I am not afraid to die. I don’t want to hurt other people. But I do want another life. A different one than I had.” She stood. “I’ll stay. I’ll join you.”

Aisling did nothing. Marilyn sighed in relief. And I closed the gap between us so I could hug Miaka. She accepted me easily.

“Welcome to the sisterhood of sirens,” I whispered in her ear.

CHAPTER 2

I held Miaka, swaying from side to side in our hug. She laughed. It sounded faint, as if it hadn't ever really been used.

"I've never had a sister before," she remarked.

"I hadn't either," I told her.

What an extraordinary day. Though the life I lived was sometimes cruel beyond reason, this moment of holding a new sister in my arms felt good. It was simplicity in the middle of chaos. I had someone else to love! I had never been so grateful to the Ocean.

But the celebration was cut short by the Ocean's labored instructions. We were to act now. Looking at the water surrounding Aisling's form, I could see the signs. The waves should flow silkily, but they seemed like syrup, dragging themselves up the shore. The incoming crests were heavy and shallow. She could survive like this briefly— and the people depending upon her could survive slightly longer— but if we didn't do something, She would fail.

"Did you hear Her just then?" I asked Miaka.

"I did hear something. What was that?"

"That was the Ocean. I know it sounds like mumbles now, but it gets clearer with time."

"Were there *words* just then?" she asked.

"Yes," Marilyn answered her curtly. She was undoubtedly our leader in this, and she had gone into business mode. "There's no time to discuss it. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but we have to go now. I'm afraid it was coming to this anyway, but letting you go has sped up Her appetite."

"Now!?" Miaka exclaimed. "But I don't even know what to do. I don't... I don't know..."

"All you have to do is follow. It's a very easy task; it's all already inside you." Marilyn's words startled Miaka who grabbed her stomach to see if she could feel this unknown

thing that existed in her body. Actually, if there was a thing inside, I suspected it would be closer to our lungs.

“We’re going to the South Indian Ocean. It’s almost Antarctic. You’re young, so you may feel the cold a little bit, but it can’t hurt you. Nothing can. Just follow our lead.” With that, Marilyn walked towards the Sea, leaving Miaka and I behind. Aisling was already waist deep in the water waiting for us.

“Could we hurry this up?” she whined at us, the only one eager to go do this horrific job.

I held Miaka’s shoulders in my hands at arm’s length, suddenly full of authority. “Stay close. The Ocean will take us where we need to go. You don’t even have to think. When we get there, don’t do anything to draw attention to yourself. When She tells you to, open your mouth. If you can’t hear Her, don’t worry. I’ll be right beside you. The song will just come. Don’t stop until it’s over. Do you understand?”

She nodded, looking at me with a mix of terror and trust.

It was surreal to be explaining to another person how to save her own life by taking those of others. During the quiet days in the warmth of South America, it was almost possible to forget what I was. But now, with the task so imminent, I hated myself. And I pitied Miaka. I had been taken in the middle of one of the Ocean’s feedings, so it had been a while before She needed me. I had some time to adjust. No such thing for Miaka. Still, when it was over, Marilyn and I could comfort her, and she wouldn’t have to think about it for a long time. Becoming an older sister made me quietly surer of myself. I could be anything Miaka needed.

We walked towards the water. My feet were in the tide, but Miaka had paused a few paces shy. Her face looked terrified, and her chest was heaving shallow breaths. She was afraid of the Ocean. She couldn’t swim, and she had just drowned. These were small worries in comparison to what was coming, but she couldn’t know that.

“Don’t be afraid of the water. The Ocean is your ally now. She’s not going to hurt you.”

Miaka stayed frozen.

“Miaka, trust me. I’m going to take care of you. Come into the water.”

Hesitantly, she edged her way into the sluggish surf. In the distance, Aisling and Marilyn submerged themselves fully, and I heard Miaka’s little gasp.

“See. They’re safe. And you will be, too.” Gently pulling, Miaka’s hand stayed in mine as we sank into the Ocean. She actually held her breath. I didn’t mean to, but a laugh escaped.

Miaka squealed a little as we started to move, but calmed each time I squeezed her hand. She grabbed fleetingly after her clothes as they tore away. They were nothing special; in fact, they were practically rags. But it’s still frightening to be naked in front of three strange women. Of course, as the gown that matched ours formed slowly and perfectly on her body, she was immediately in awe of herself. I saw the look in her eyes as we were jettisoned forward. She was enchanting. Her hair whipped around wildly, and she looked mysteriously elegant. She smiled, completely unaware of what she was about to do. I didn’t want to ruin that joy; the Ocean could do that. I didn’t want to have a part in it.

But I was a part of Her. I felt it. As we swam, I could feel the stabs of the Ocean’s hunger pangs. It was like a longing in our own stomachs, the only time I felt hungry. Miaka actually clutched her abdomen, feeling the strange desire. It must have been difficult for the Ocean to pass up Miaka. The one small girl wouldn’t have satiated Her though. She knew that. It was lucky for Miaka that she had not brought more down with her. Lucky for me, too. I let the joy of my new sister fill me again.

I sensed that the Ocean didn’t like Her diet any more than we did, but I wasn’t sure. It was a condition She had to bear, and we carried it with Her. In the same way that none of us wanted to see a massive lion devour a baby gazelle, we felt

sorry for the small creatures She took. We ourselves were tiny gazelles who just happened to be in the lion's protection. But what would happen to the lion if she starved? And, even more grave in this case, what would happen to all of those who depended on the lion?

She often waited to see if the natural and unpredictable conditions of the world would give Her what She needed instead of hastily acquiring it Herself. But this time She had pushed Herself too far by waiting. The world was in danger of losing Her support without even knowing it.

Around the globe, fish were dying, tides were becoming erratic, and weather was slowly going amiss. A fisher might notice, or anyone who really studied weather patterns. The rest of humanity moved and slept and didn't know their precious world was slowly becoming useless. Now She was pressed—we could all feel Her urgency. It was so heavy, we knew She was about to act out of character.

We slowed as we reached the place She wanted us to wait. Once the speed passed, our bodies became more vertical, and we walked up to the surface like stepping up a flight of stairs. We stood on the rippling water that seemed as solid to us as hardwood. I was used to this phenomenon by now, but it was fun to see the newness of it surprise Miaka. I held her hand and looked around. It was darker now, but my eyes took in the surroundings by the light of the rising moon.

Something was missing.

There was no storm in the distance. We were in far too deep for rocks. The water was definitely cold enough to do harm, but the people would have to be in it first. None of the usual foreboding obstacles were nearby. What was this? Where was the danger we were meant to mask? Was it nothing more than what we were standing on?

The Ocean told us to face west. I saw Miaka whip her head at the noise and then turn in understanding as we all faced the same direction. I squeezed her hand, and she kept her eyes on me for a sign of what to do. In the moonlight, I saw that all of

our dresses were dark blues today. No greens or teals, just a mirror of the inky color of the frosty liquid.

Aisling bent and settled down on the water. She lounged there, propping herself up with one arm while the other rested on her curves, the picture of ease. Her sparkling hair fell around her shoulders, and she licked her lips one time to make them glisten. Marilyn knelt behind her, sitting near Aisling's legs and fanning her dress out so that it fell gracefully on the surface, moving up and down with the steady pulse of the Sea. Her red hair rose in the wind, like delicate strings of fire. I moved Miaka slightly in front of me and wrapped my arms around her. To the oncoming eyes we would look like we were in a loving embrace, but it was just so that I could sing in her ear. Not that she would be confused once it started. The four of us there would look like a dream.

We would be a nightmare.

A few moments passed as the Ocean waited for the right moment to enact our voices. The doomed ship had to be close enough to hear, but not see. I didn't know how far our voices traveled, but it had to be quite some way. The song had to have a chance to grow. It had to be enough to confuse, then urge, then kill. We were something to crave, to hunt. We were an unknown aural treasure; we had to be found.

She told us to sing. I nodded to Miaka.

We took in breath and opened our mouths as one. The song came without worry or knowledge. It just existed. Our song was a mix of languages, the only time I couldn't understand what I was hearing. French spilled into Swahili, German into Latin. For the ears that heard this distant song, it would be a tangle of syllables that seemed both familiar and foreign. It would sound like a comforting lullaby from your youth, except somehow you weren't sure if you'd ever really heard it before. You'd have to get close to be sure.

Our harmonies wove into a beautiful knot that no human ear could unravel. Pitches and octaves laced themselves together into a fabric of unimaginable sounds. You couldn't

help yourself. You wouldn't be satisfied with the blessing of hearing it and not knowing the source. You had to find it. Every inch that closed between us, the poison, the pleasure in your ears would grow. For some it was slower than others; they were the ones that really suffered.

Reason ceased. You'd be prepared to drown. And if She asked us to stop singing and your logic resumed, you were already well beyond hope. Only a handful of people ever made it out.

A few moments passed. The outline of a large boat came into view. Slowly it crept closer and closer until we could finally make out its shape. It was a steel ship with five large masts and billowing sails. My arms were around Miaka, and she gripped me tighter, digging her nails into my arms. It didn't hurt. I wanted to reassure her, to tell her to stay calm. But if I stopped singing it would be a sign of mutiny, and I would disappear along with all the souls on the approaching ship.

As it came closer, we could see people on the deck. Judging from the backlit silhouettes, they appeared to be all men. They were straining to see the source of our intoxicating sound. Our skin glittered in the moonlight, and as they drew near, that was the first thing they saw.

"What is that?" someone asked. It was a man's voice.

"Do you see that shining on the water?" another called. This too was a man. They always seemed much more susceptible.

They drew close, and the ship turned slightly so that soon they would pass right in front of us. I looked forward but avoided looking at their faces. I had made that mistake before. I hoped Miaka would know better; I should have warned her. These excursions with the Ocean gave me some of the most evil nightmares I'd ever had. Wet hands would grab me and pull out my hair, drawing me into the darkness to join them. The faces I had seen would stare me down in the night, promising me I would suffer with them. I gave up sleep

completely for months at a time to avoid seeing those faces. To avoid them now, I looked up at the ship itself. On the side in bold letters was one word: *Kobenhavn*.

As they got close enough to see us, some applauded our song seeming to forget the impossibility of how they were experiencing it. A few jumped off the ship, drawn into the water. Like many times before, I actually saw people inhaling it. I looked at the side of the ship, trying not to see a face or specific clothing. I didn't want to distinguish one lost soul from another. I kept waiting. Where was the danger? When was it coming? Some of the men were swimming towards us. What if they got close enough to touch?

And then, so quickly that I almost didn't see it, the Ocean opened up and swallowed the ship whole!

The action startled us into silence. I gasped. Miaka turned her head into my chest. Marilyn and Aisling quickly stood, suddenly surprised by the capacity of what they rested on. Apparently, we had done our job well enough for our sudden silence to not be a problem. The immediate hush seemed as much a shock as what we had just seen. Without our song to entangle their minds, a few of the men floating called out to us.

“Help! Help me!” one called.

“I can't... I can't breathe!” yelled another.

I kept my eyes away from their faces and averted Miaka's as well. That would help some. But always, for months afterwards, I would hear their voices. I carry those sounds like scars. But, as we had to, we walked away on the water, the last horrifying and beautiful image of their lives. I always wanted to look back, to somehow convey my apologies. There was nothing to do though. I couldn't save them, I couldn't explain, and no look would ever do.

I had never seen anything like that, and based on Marilyn and Aisling's reactions, I would say that wasn't something normal. How was this supposed to be explained away? There

was no reason or excuse. A boatful of people had just disappeared on open waters. Their families would never know the reasons, would never stop wondering. I would have sat there in sadness and let that wash over me again and again, but She spoke.

We were to stay together a little longer. She would explain it soon enough, for now we were to let Her guide us away.

This wasn't normal. Usually She let us go in peace. It was the kind thing to do, considering we all had different ways of consoling ourselves. Aisling retreated into her solitude. Marilyn had a glass of wine. We couldn't feel the effects of it, but she said it calmed her all the same. I would sink into my daydreams. I would imagine the life I would lead one day that would make this all worth it. This night had been so abrupt and cruel that I couldn't wait to get away from Her. But obedience, absolute obedience, was imperative. So we went where She told us to. It wasn't a long journey.

When we got to the beach, I looked for signs of a location, but didn't know what any of the things I saw meant. There were no signs and the structures I saw in the distance weren't in any book I'd seen. It was evening and almost pretty. Almost.

Miaka cried, and I held her while she wept. I wanted to cry myself, but now I had someone to be strong for. If I broke down, how would she cope?

"I-I hurt those people," she managed to get out between sobs.

I wanted to contradict her, but wasn't sure I could. It *had* been our voices that drew those men into their final moments, but I didn't want for my baby sister to feel that ache.

"Listen to me, Miaka. You only did what you had to do. The Ocean is the one who takes the lives. The dangers are always there, we just make them seem less perilous. You haven't done anything wrong."

As the words came out of my mouth, they tasted like lies. There had to be some truth in there somewhere, but I couldn't feel it. Still, I tried to will Miaka into believing it. I refused to let her suffer.

I felt awful for Miaka. Not only was it far too soon for her to sing, it was the most shocking ending we'd ever imposed. I couldn't get past the lack of an alibi. No concern at all. We were supposed to hide Her secret, but where was Her effort in this?

Earlier I had felt immeasurable gratefulness to the Ocean for giving us Miaka. Now I was fiercely upset with Her for hurting our newest sister. How could She be so unkind?

Aisling paced up and down the shore. The waves looked better now, stronger than they had been. I could see Aisling's eagerness to leave. She kept looking out over the Sea as she paced and then looked down to the sand. She seemed more frustrated than usual. I wished she would calm down; her angry strides made me nervous. We all wanted to get out of here, but we had to wait. What did she have that made her more important than the rest of us?

Marilyn stood silently and gazed out over the open waters. She took measured breaths and let her arms fall at her side. I only saw her profile, but there was no sign of anxiety in her expression. She had already made her peace. I hoped that I would find that one day, too.

We were as quiet as the open sky. Only Miaka made tiny sounds here and there with her sobs. We waited. Who knew how much time had passed? Time was something we never ran out of, so there was no point in trying to count it.

Finally, once She had absorbed everything She needed to, the Ocean came to us. Her cadence was slower and stronger now. The calm tempo of Her speech helped me release some of the stress. At least She was alright now. She apologized for making us endure that, but She had waited too long. She vowed to be more careful in the future. I passed all of this on to Miaka in hushed tones, stroking her hair. The look on her

tiny face expressed the unfathomable moment when you wake from a nightmare only to realize you were never really asleep.

The Ocean started again. She had asked us to stay together for this: Marilyn was being released.

We all looked at Marilyn who seemed confused. We all knew it was close but not this close. This announcement hit me like a punch in the gut. Did it have to happen right now? Couldn't she stay just a little bit longer? But it was unfair of me to even think that. It would hurt to lose Marilyn, but I couldn't wish anymore of this life on her. If I had wanted to cry earlier, it was nothing compared to the sorrow I felt now.

My sister was leaving me. But I loved her too much to have her see me sad. No tears. I'd smile for my Marilyn.

Everything changed so quickly. I wasn't going to back to South America. Miaka was here now. Marilyn was leaving me. Maybe it would always be like this: as soon as you adjusted, this life would shift beneath you.

"I thought... I thought it was longer," Marilyn stammered.

Perhaps it was, but the Ocean would not need Marilyn again before her time was up. It seemed fair to let her go tonight.

"What happens?" That was an interesting question. Marilyn should have seen this before, but for my and Miaka's sakes, I was glad she asked. I longed to know how this all ended. Was it as strange as the start?

Apparently there was a reason Marilyn didn't know. The Ocean explained that they would discuss that privately. For now, Marilyn was simply reminded that her body would soon be breakable again, and she was to be careful with it. Marilyn could also rest assured that the Ocean would never seek her out again either to protect her or harm her, but that She could not promise complete safety.

A moment passed. Marilyn had spoken with the Ocean so often. It seemed wrong that she would be confused on this

point. They both knew it was close. Hadn't they talked about it?

“Will I remember *anything*?” Marilyn asked.

This was unclear. Marilyn might remember sights and sounds of the last few decades, but beyond that, there were no certainties. Most everything would probably seem like a dream. The Ocean never spoke with former sirens to find these things out; it would only complicate matters. But She was sure memories of the life Marilyn had before becoming a siren would disappear. Upon hearing that, Aisling halted mid-stride. I guessed she had something in her she couldn't wait to forget. Whatever awful thought littered her head, she kept her back to us, silently rejoicing at its eventual absence.

Marilyn looked at the rest of us, tears touching her sparkling eyes. “What about my sisters? Will we know each other? Will we meet again?” At these words I choked. I was losing her forever, I knew it. I was aware of how much she meant to me, but I never stopped to think about what we meant to her. Marilyn had introduced all three of us to this life and had guided us through the hardest parts of it. She was very motherly in a way. The thing she had dedicated the last hundred years of her life to was now gone. I suddenly wondered if there was a chance I might miss this.

It wasn't impossible for us to meet again, but it was unlikely. And, of course, we wouldn't be able to communicate with her if we did. So, for now, it was time to say good-bye.

Marilyn steadied herself, strong as ever. She went to Miaka first. Surely that would be the easiest.

“I know you're scared, but you just listen to your big sisters. There's something special about you, Miaka, never doubt that. You wouldn't still be alive if you were anything less than one of a kind. Use this time wisely, and it will pay off. I wish you luck,” she said, her eyes full of honesty. Miaka was still so overcome from everything that she only nodded her head. Marilyn's eyes met mine for a moment, but she

backed away, heading over to Aisling. It was merciful; it gave me another moment to check my tears.

“Aisling... you are the truest survivor I have ever known. You stand up to every challenge, you’re tough, and you never back down. I admire that about you. I hope that in this next life of mine, I take some of that strength with me. I hope to cross your path again someday.”

Aisling had listened to all of this with a mixture of emotions on her face. For a moment it seemed like she was actually sad to see Marilyn go. That look of loss passed over her face so quickly that I was sure I imagined it. Then I knew I was wrong when Aisling chose to answer Marilyn’s last wish with, “I don’t.”

Cutting until the very end, Aisling walked past Marilyn closer to the surf, still waiting for her chance to leave. Marilyn only sighed, still full of endless patience, even for someone hurting her in what ought to be a glad moment. She blinked her eyes, turned her head, and met my face.

We both crumbled. How was I supposed to do this without her? Did everyone I loved have to be separated from me? We ran to one another and embraced.

“Oh Marilyn,” I managed to mumble. But my weeping overtook any other words I might have had.

“Kahlen. Oh Kahlen, just don’t give up. I know it’s been hard on you, but you have to hold on. You’re capable of so much; I’ve felt it from the beginning. You can’t stop trying to live. You can either sit here and mope, or you can let this be an adventure for you. It’s an amazing ride if you just hold on. Think of Miaka. You’ll mean so much to her. You’ve meant the world to me. I think once it all disappears, I’ll still manage to miss you. Try to make the most of this time. Breathe in all the wonders around you. Take a deep breath, Kahlen. Hold on tight.”

I wept and wept. I wanted to express how much what she said meant to me, and how I would do it all. I would be strong

and brave. But the only thing I managed to get out was, “I love you.” All I could think of were those two sentences, my eternal command: *Take a deep breath, Kahlen. Hold on tight.* It was the second time I had heard them, and both were the last time I had heard the giver’s voice. Marilyn knew that. She said those words to me on purpose. She knew I wasn’t very brave or strong. She knew I’d still need help. But this was all I was going to have.

“I love you, too,” she told me. She kissed my cheeks and hugged me tight and then walked away. She went to the edge of the surf, pausing once to look back at us all. And then she was gone.

That was the last time I saw Marilyn alive. She didn’t mention where she would go, but I guessed it would be back to England or America. I was right. In one of my more restless years, I ran across her obituary on microfiche from an Edinburgh newspaper. It had her picture next to the write up. She was radiant with age. Behind the wrinkles, I still saw that classic sparkle in her eyes. The hair might have been gray, but it still curled wildly. She did marry. She had a family. Her life was a quiet one, but it was good. I was happy to have known her.

I wouldn’t have known this detail except that the article mentioned this, and it made me wonder for a long time after. She had her ashes scattered at Sea. Maybe there was absolutely no reason behind it, but I couldn’t help but contemplate the other possibility. For years afterwards, even though she had passed on, I felt a comfort in the water because I knew Marilyn was there.

The Ocean had no more instructions for us, and we were free to leave. But there on the beach, Miaka and I simply held each other. Miaka was still reeling from the events that had just passed, and I mourned losing Marilyn with so much strength it overwhelmed me. This day seemed to drag on and on. I couldn’t believe that it was only this afternoon that I had watched the young couple walk happily down the street.

Aisling walked past us into the gentle waves, muttering the word “babies” under her breath as she disappeared off to wherever it was she hid. I couldn’t believe her.

After an immeasurable moment, we calmed. I looked over at Miaka. I heard people say they had a tough first day on a job before, but she would put them all to shame. She had withstood it all with a level of grace that surpassed me. I had seen grown men collapse under less strain. I hoped I would be able to comfort her now.

“So,” I finally said, “I guess you’re stuck with me, huh?”

She laughed a little at that and nodded.

“Where would you like to go?”

“Oh... I don’t know. I’ve never been anywhere but Japan. Can we live there?” she asked.

“That’s not the best idea for now,” I said, summoning all of Marilyn’s wisdom. “You don’t want to accidentally be seen. And it’s better if we go where we can be alone— it’s hard to get used to talking to only one person. And it’s easier for your family if you just... just vanish.”

She quietly let that sink in. There was no struggle in her to get more than I could offer. I guessed she had lived her life in submission until now. I think it was my position as a favored child that made me think I deserved more than I currently had. But Miaka was meek. If she could hold onto a little of that timidity, she would do exceedingly well at this job. Still I hoped there was more to her than that. She looked out over the blackness that surrounded us.

“Could we go somewhere with a lot of lights?”

CHAPTER 3

If I was on a honeymoon here, how would it be?

My husband would take my hand and spin me around in circles. I would laugh out loud, my voice glowing brighter than the lights around us. We would be dressed in casual and crisp styles; he'd give me anything I wanted. He'd pull me in, his face lingering inches away from mine. Whoever he was, he would be too beautiful. Sparing my eyes for a few moments, I'd look up and examine the crisscrossing metalwork above us. How many hands had made this structure? His fingers would find my cheek, pulling my gaze back down. Without warning, I'd be lost in a kiss.

A romantic thought. As it was, no handsome stranger held me. Instead, I walked the streets of Paris with Miaka. She'd said she wanted lights, and these were the best I knew of.

Time passes slowly when you have a lot of it. The last of the 1920s and the beginning of the 30s found us in France. Paris wasn't exactly Ocean-front, so we had to check in a lot. I often questioned the Ocean's timing with us in my head; we were both so young. I didn't know much about the history of sirens, but this seemed to be a bad idea. She was lucky She chose responsible girls back to back; otherwise, we would have been helpless.

We borrowed apartments from strangers. It was easy to get into empty flats, and after watching for a few days we figured out where some furnished but temporarily uninhabited ones were. We quietly moved in, listened to the tenant's music, lounged on their beds, and disappeared. Things like that are simple if you just have your eyes open. I think this ability is wasted on thieves. And us.

This was just how we lived. We didn't need a place to cook food or sleep the night away, but after so long, being outside was boring. At night all the shops closed and there was nothing to see, so we retreated inside. The Ocean was too far

away for us to go and be with Her. Besides, I didn't really care for the waters here.

From Paris, we silently skipped around Europe enjoying the sights until the War. I longed to visit London, but kept my distance. The place, the very word haunted me. I wasn't sure I'd ever go there. Maybe I would once I was living my own life. That city held a sort of unanswered promise for me. But it, like so many other things, would have to wait.

War made me uneasy— as did anything unpredictable while we were such strangers to this world— but I had to be grateful. The War kept us unemployed, as it were, for a while, which none of us complained about. Well, perhaps Aisling was wherever she was hiding. With so much time on our hands, it really did take the reuniting with our sisters to distinguish between years and decades. Those moments of destruction were so striking; they were the only real things we had to mark time. Sometimes we tried to keep up with the seasons to celebrate holidays, but that was for the sole purpose of being entertained. It was like life happened all around me, but not *to* me.

I could watch mothers, but not be one. I could see women as sales clerks or students, but not become one. We had to lay low, so we perfected people-watching. Sometimes this was fun for me. Watching children in particular lifted my heart. They always had so much energy. Children who already existed brought me unimaginable joy. But sometimes, when I saw a woman who was glowing with the fulfillment of pregnancy, I had to turn my face from Miaka and cry. I wanted to be strong for her.

If I saw too many couples, their actions would dissolve into my daydreams of faceless partners who held me and kissed me. Sometimes, in my dreams, I was still like this— a creature of destruction. Somehow, I found someone who loved me beyond my condition. Other times, I was the girl of my last life, and I picked up where my own story had left off. It made me yearn, and since I couldn't speed up time, I had to quietly endure it. Besides my own emotions pulling me, nothing was

remarkable. So the 30s and 40s were quiet for us, with only being called upon to serve a handful of times.

Living with Miaka was quite a shift from being with Marilyn. Where Marilyn was as talkative as I was, Miaka rarely spoke up. I kept reminding her that it was alright to talk to me, that it couldn't hurt *me*. She just said she wasn't used to speaking first. So I started asking her questions all the time. First, I learned everything I could about her past; her memories were slipping faster than mine. And then I made an effort to get her opinion on everything, or even get her to have an opinion at all. We bonded slowly. Miaka and I had vaguely similar backgrounds. Like me, she was the oldest of three and the only girl. But where I had been loved, Miaka was only accepted. Her parents needed boys. She couldn't do the work they did, so she just wasn't as valuable.

Those were the exact words she used: not as valuable.

They got her to do small tasks on their fishing boat with her brothers since her mother could handle the housework. They didn't care that their daughter feared the Ocean. Tiny Miaka cried every time they put her on the boat for years. And then, seeing that it made no difference for her and only angered everyone else, she learned to control that. She couldn't swim and was very soft-spoken. She fell off her boat on a particularly choppy day, and no one even noticed. Now she was lost to her family because they refused to listen to her. I had to imagine that, even if she wasn't the most favored child, this would still bring grief to any mother. And how strange that now the Ocean she had feared for so long was like a parent of sorts, protecting her from everything else.

I tried to show her things and teach her about the rest of the world. Miaka had no idea it was all so big. She had such a hard time saying how she felt that I would ask her thoughts on things that had no value at all. What did she think of that woman's dress? Aren't those stones in the wall pretty? Did she see any shapes in the clouds that day? Anything to get her to open up. I think asking all these tiny, detail-oriented questions eventually struck a chord in her. She knew I was going to ask

them, so she started paying attention to everything. She started noticing things that my eyes missed.

“Look at that shade of yellow,” she said one day out of the blue.

“What yellow?” I asked. We were talking low. We could hear the movements of people above us and were trying to be extra careful. Gazing down on the street from our safe and empty apartment, the city was moving through some haphazard dance of errand running. The people who usually lived here must have been performers of some kind. There were tons of books and paints and musical instruments. It was the most interesting place we’d stumbled upon yet.

“In the sky. See how the sun is breaking through those clouds? It’s making the most interesting shade of yellow.”

“It’s really beautiful.” I smiled at her speaking so freely.

“It’s more than that. Look, it’s bright and muted at the same time; it’s shining, but it doesn’t hurt your eyes. It’s a miracle that such a color should be.”

I stared at her in awe. I had no idea that she thought this much or even had the words “miracle” or “muted” in her head. Soon after that, Miaka started to describe small things from her past life when she could remember it. She remembered her house very well, but then there wasn’t much of one to remember; it was minuscule. She used phrases like “the walls were weak with time” and “so brown it seemed the earth had given birth to it.” I was amazed. Once she chose to speak, she said the sweetest and loveliest things.

It was divine that we ended up in France first. Miaka came to love art. Since she could not describe things with words, she did it through paintings. Her delicate hands worked fast. Not needing to rest, she would sit in front of a canvas for days straight. I would pass every once in a while and watch as blank papers would blossom with images. She had a gift resting in her and had never even known.

It only took those first few years to get her to open up, and then I really started to see who she was. Miaka was polite and funny and warm. She was smart, without a doubt, and incredibly graceful. Each year I grew more and more appreciative that the Ocean had spared her. Not only was I thankful to have her company in particular, but I was happy that Miaka had a chance to become who she was now. None of her finer qualities would have been discovered in her tiny village as the lowest in her family.

Together, we took in everything we could. We went to museums and art shows. I marveled at the statues and oil paintings. How could human hands create things so divine? What took Miaka days must have taken their slower bodies months. Miaka saw even more in them than I did and tried to write me notes about what she saw in the paintings, but her notes were in Japanese, and I couldn't understand them. That meant that once we got home, I'd have to brace myself for her onslaught of words. She would not pause until every detail she'd enjoyed had been thrown out into the air. In that creativity, Miaka became satisfied.

I was jealous that my desires were not so easily met.

We also enjoyed an array of food. I didn't know how many different kinds of cuisine there were. Using French translation books, we would go to cafes and point to phrases to ask for what we wanted. We were lucky that most of the waiters we came upon were so understanding. Cake was by far my favorite indulgence, but I loved the little tarts and pastries we discovered there, too. I vaguely remembered American food, and I had already experienced the spices and brightness of Spanish food. French food was savory and designed to be enjoyed slowly. So we took our time discovering it all.

And when we couldn't walk around anymore, we went to see movies—that was our favorite. Later we would gush and gush over actors and actresses and favorite scenes. By now movies had sound to go along with the action, and this made them so much more enjoyable than what I remembered of the movies in my old life. I couldn't get enough of a good love

story; it was my own personal escape. Always, afterwards, I'd live through the whole thing in my head with myself as the heroine.

Maybe, when I had my second life, I could be an actress. I already had several years of experience under my belt at acting normal, average. Maybe I could act out other things, too. Then again, maybe not. Not even a third of this life had passed, and I was tired of acting.

I couldn't say it then, but all that time I was bitter with the Ocean. I knew She was the crux of this life I led, but I didn't want to have anything to do with Her. It was so tedious. The world I got to see was interesting, but I didn't just want to see it; I wanted to be a part of it. And then the boredom of my wanderings was marked by moments of acting in the most revolting way I could— as a killer. I tried to distract myself, but it was all so empty that I never got very far. For all those years, there was nothing more for me in my life than being a beautiful, poisonous nomad. There aren't words to explain it. I never imagined the toll loneliness could take on a soul.

Even with Miaka there, I felt like no one could touch me. Though I was attractive, I felt utterly repulsive. The Ocean was there to guide if I needed Her, but I felt like I was adrift in confusion almost all of the time. I knew it wouldn't be like this forever. But still... what year was it? 1945? Seventy-six more years. Seventy-six years of silence and killing and loneliness. It was like being in the bottom of a well, seeing the light and knowing fully there was no way to get to it. Not yet anyway.

We left Europe for good in the late 1940s to see what we could of the mysterious lands of Egypt, Morocco, and Greece. These locations were classic. History seemed to hold them in place as time ushered their existence along. During this exploration, something worth mentioning finally happened: We got another sister.

Her name was Ifama, and she came to us from South Africa in early 1953. Miaka and I were glad to take her with us. Aisling didn't even suggest taking her in herself. Ifama was

beautiful in a whole new way. She was physically and emotionally dark and strong. I couldn't help but be drawn in by her. There was something regal about the way she carried herself. Maybe it's because she was a mystery. Ifama did not want to share the reason she was swept out to Sea, and we didn't push her. As with all of us, the Ocean admired Ifama for some reason or another; we assumed it was her pride. Even sitting on the abandoned coast after the Ocean had saved her, she wasn't bawling the way I had. She didn't even have the steady jerks of Miaka's moment. She did cry, but it was one desolate tear at a time. She didn't want them to escape, but one by one they hinted at her sadness. I got the feeling that when she asked to live, she didn't know what she was getting into. But who of us did? I explained the rules to her. When she agreed, she seemed reluctant. Hesitantly, she came.

Ifama didn't speak. Whereas Miaka had been standoffish because of her meek nature, Ifama had no desire to engage in conversation with us. We did everything we could to include her. I tried the technique I used on Miaka; I asked her questions about her family so that she would remember them.

"I had a father, a mother, and a sister. We loved each other. Now I am gone."

She finished her sentences with such absolution; there was no way to follow up. It seemed she just didn't want to think about the life she had left behind. I couldn't blame her for that. It was hard to move on. So I started to ask her about trivial things.

"What do you think about that woman's dress?" I asked one day.

"It is a dress. We are more than our clothes," she replied.

So final. Maybe that was just who she was. Maybe she just didn't need small talk. But all of us needed something, right? Maybe she just didn't know how to relate to *me*. After failing again and again to make Ifama comfortable, I went to Miaka.

“I’m worried about Ifama,” I told her one night. We were in Sumatra. A small house near the edge of a tropical rainforest had been abandoned, and we made it our own. Ifama was inside, doing and saying nothing. Miaka and I were balancing on a fallen tree.

“I am, too. I don’t know what to do.” Miaka was sweet. She would want this as much as I would. It hurt to even think this, but, for the sake of us all, I had to try.

“You know how you were shy at first? Maybe Ifama is that way, too. Maybe she feels uncomfortable with us both here. Maybe if I let you try to talk to her alone...” I trialed off. Either Miaka would dread it or she would love it.

“Do you really think I could?” She seemed astounded that I believed in her.

“Of course, Miaka. You’re a big sister yourself, now. And you’re very kind and warm. I’ll bet if it was just the two of you, she’d open up.” I let the offer hang. Miaka sank into thought.

“Where will you go?”

I put on the classic brave face. “Oh, I don’t know. Anywhere I want, I guess. But I promise I won’t stay gone for very long. Two weeks maybe. Or a month. Then I’ll come back to you and your new best friend. Probably won’t even want me around anymore.” I winked.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll always love you.”

And with that, it was settled. I left the next morning, giving the excuse that I wanted to be alone with the Ocean. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but I didn’t want Ifama to think I didn’t want to be around her. I hoped she would think this was something I did regularly.

When I was far enough away that my sisters couldn’t hear, I cried. I hated being alone. It went against my very makeup to be by myself for more than a few hours. I needed people. And I needed people to need me. But for my sisters, for the only

thing I had in this world, I'd sit alone for years and cry. I loved them.

I didn't leave Sumatra. I didn't even tell the Ocean what we were doing. I went to a northern part of the island and stayed up in a tree. I don't like to think about that time.

It was all I could do to make it those two weeks. I hoped that had been enough time for Miaka because I needed to come back to her and Ifama. Walking in the door, I knew she had failed. Miaka was using berries to smudge color onto thin papers. She looked up at me, half smiled, and inclined her head to show that Ifama was in the other room.

I went into the second half of our tiny structure. Ifama was sitting like a princess on a stump we used as a chair. She was gazing out the window with a secret smile on her face, as if she was completely content to be still and simply admire the air. She was always in thought and never seemed troubled. We couldn't know what she was thinking, what she had probably been planning from almost the very beginning.

We were out on the Sea, standing at the ready. When we were told to sing, Ifama refused to open her mouth. The Ocean actually warned her and gave her a second chance to join in the song. The rest of us were already caught in the moment and couldn't stop to urge her on. I saw Miaka pull desperately at Ifama's arm. She just stood there on the water, her jaw set.

She only made the quietest of gasps when the Ocean jerked her under.

The rest of us sang with tears on our faces. Aisling was in front of me, so I couldn't see her face. I did see her slowly shake her head. The song carried on in the three-part harmony it had for more than two decades. No new voice added to its splendor, and no amount of tears shook its steadiness.

It was particularly hard for Miaka. She felt like she failed Ifama, that Ifama could have stayed and grown like her if only she had done a better job somehow. Miaka carried that guilt. We took lives regularly. Death was nothing new to us, but it

always left us pained. That pain was so much worse when you knew the person, admired them.

I didn't take the loss much better than Miaka myself. I couldn't quite pinpoint it at the time, but it was more than losing a sister that way. Ifama's departure was equally as abrupt as Marilyn's, but it held an entirely new feeling. It took me days to distinguish why it was so distressing. It wasn't just that another sister was gone. It was the sister herself. Ifama had planned this. She kept her distance on purpose. She never had any intentions of hurting another person. It was her actions that left me weak.

A few days after Ifama left us, I had to leave, too. I thought about how being alone in the forest only months before had been a self-inflicted prison. Now isolation felt like a lifeline, the only thing that would get me through this disaster.

"Please don't leave me alone," Miaka cried. I didn't want her to ache any more than she already had, but I couldn't take her sadness on top of my own.

"Miaka, I love you. I just need to think some things through. I need to be alone for a little while."

"What are you thinking? You're not going to die like that, are you? Please don't do that to me!" Her face fell into her hands. She had always been such a sweet girl. Miaka had adjusted to our job because she had to, but anything beyond that was too much for her disposition.

"No, no. I would never do that to you. I need you as much as you need me. I wouldn't leave you alone. Not like that," I said, holding her and trying to calm her down. I couldn't tell her that the thought of doing exactly what Ifama had done had crossed my mind. Briefly, anyway.

"Then why do you have to go at all? Stay with me. We can go to some place new if you want. I'll go anywhere you want."

"Look at me, Miaka." She did. "I just need some time to myself. I will come back to you, I promise. I know you don't

think so, but you probably need to think through some things, too. I won't be gone forever. I promise."

It took going through that conversation several times before Miaka would let me leave her sight. I tried not to be frustrated with her, to remember she was used to being unwanted. I went to the Ocean and headed towards America. Surely this was a long enough time to wait to go back to my native country. It wasn't too long of a journey; I asked to go fast and didn't bother saying another word to Her as I traveled. She must have known what I was thinking; I wasn't disciplined enough to hide it. But She let me be.

Ifama's disregard for the rules left me heavy. And I realized it came down to one thing: She was braver than me.

I tried to reason with myself that I wasn't all that bad. I was obedient. I went without the things I wanted and never failed in my duties. I was here, which meant someone else didn't have to be. I gave up myself. But Ifama... she lost her life refusing to take another. As many times as I looked at it, she always came out the hero.

I spent months by myself mulling this over again and again in my mind. I didn't have the slightest clue what to do with these emotions, so I sulked. I was depressed. It seemed the only way for me to right this was to go to the Ocean and ask to die myself.

But I couldn't do that. Not because I was afraid, though I was. But because I had already given Her thirty years, and I didn't want to waste it. Because it would break Miaka's heart. Because Aisling would call me a traitor or something worse. And because it would mean I failed Marilyn. And if I failed her, because of her words, maybe I failed my family, too.

I just couldn't do it. I wasn't brave enough. I would never be brave enough to really put myself on the line if it meant someone else was safe.

I wandered up and down the eastern coast of the States. I hadn't been back to America since I set sail all those years ago

on that pointless adventure. This whole thing with Ifama made me want to be somewhere that felt like home. Floating around America was the best I could do.

I knew I had lived in Ohio, but I didn't remember where exactly. I wondered if my brother Alex was still alive... his name was Alex, right? No. Alan. No, it was Alex. Maybe visiting him would make me feel closer to that old life—the one that was simple and good. I didn't know where to look for him though. I was alone. I had no family anymore.

I had Aisling, who was terrible, and I had Miaka, who was just too sweet to understand. I had the Ocean... but, to be honest, I wasn't sure how I felt about Her. I debated for months... maybe it was time to talk to Her.

After quietly jumping from state to state, I was spending some time in a beach house in Pawleys Island in South Carolina. I was enjoying the uninhabited rooms of a Mr. and Mrs. Patterson. Like so many others, they were away for the winter season, and I was staying unassumingly in their beachfront home. They had terrible taste in furniture. Thank goodness I wasn't expecting company.

The America I'd left and the America I came home to were very different places. I'd seen the world progressing through Europe, but it seemed to happen a lot faster here. It was good I could hide away. This world was becoming so fast-paced.

I would walk along the sand in the day, trying to work up the nerve to talk to the Ocean. Marilyn used to do it all the time, so it must not be a big deal, right? But I wasn't sure we could be friends. The only time I ever went to Her before was when we needed to do something that required money. You would never believe all the money that gets lost in the Ocean. And She would give it to us generously whenever we had need. It washed up on shore, as much as we could carry. We didn't have homes or cars that could prove it, but we were secretly rich.

By night I holed up in the beach house afraid to go to Her. For some ridiculous reason, I thought She might be resting.

Not possible. So I stared at Her out the windows.

I had spent so much time avoiding Her, distrusting Her, and blaming Her that I didn't know how to go and talk to Her now. I was afraid I'd end up screaming at Her and make Her mad. I wasn't sure She would even want to talk to me. I just waited for something to happen.

Pawleys Island was beautiful. If I was going to hide, this seemed like a good place to do it. The Patterson's house was the last one on a road that stretched down the coastline and ended in a small parking lot. The beachy coast made a crescent shape, like the sands were trying to give the Ocean a hug. I couldn't help but wonder if they were. Yes, I had a hard time dealing with the life She dealt me, but the rest of the world was grateful.

It was a secluded little area, and this time of the year it was particularly private. Some nights younger couples would drive up to the dunes in their cars. They'd turn out the lights and fog up their windows.

I was jealous.

There was one night when I had wrestled with my anger all day— anger with myself, anger with the Ocean— and then these teenagers show up and while away the hours kissing in their cars. I was so upset, so envious, that I was seconds away from speaking just to get rid of them. I was grateful my senses kicked in before I could act. I definitely wouldn't have been able to live with myself after something like that. That was a long year, and some days were just worse than others.

I just ached to be loved so badly. It was the last and most powerful desire of the life I lived before becoming a siren, and it carried over heavily. I didn't know if Aisling had anything she longed for, but I knew Miaka had always wanted to create. She was exploring those ideas in full force now. And Marilyn wanted to live a life above being the walked-on girl she had always been, and she accomplished that fully. So many things faded, and there was no way to hold onto them— like wind in your hands. But some things... some things got deeper and

bigger, and made your heart hurt from taking up so much space.

So when these kids came around, it physically hurt inside my chest. And I was aware that teenagers making out in the back seat of a car didn't necessarily constitute true love. But I knew it was just as, if not more, powerful than what some people felt later. I'd seen it: men and women sitting at their dinner tables with miles of silence and unfamiliarity between them. Seems to me that with how free the kids were that they might be onto something. But if I was being honest with myself, I would have taken the second option, too.

It was just one of many things bothering me through this season of my sentence. In my world, the world I was raised in, I was on the edge of married life. And now that life was on pause for a century... so for a hundred years I anticipated it.

But more pressing was this growing depression. Ifama's stand had left me doubting my decision. Still I was fully aware that the only way out for me was to wait. So I needed to talk to the Ocean. And this time it was going to be different. It was going to be personal. And what if She was tired? Or busy? Or just didn't like me? I had no reason to believe otherwise.

Finally, after months, once I was resigned to the possibility that She would probably just turn me away, I walked down to the coast. It was an overcast day so no one would be around. Not that we'd be talking out loud.

Though She was essentially in everything, I needed to be in water to talk to Her. Rain would work. Or a river. Even a good mud puddle. Things like sink water and showers were detached— that was different. It was the organic versions of Herself that were bound together. Still, this was a serious conversation; I wanted to be close to the source.

So I stepped in the water, letting it come up to the middle of my calves.

Hello? Even in my head I sounded ridiculously timid.

Yes. It's me.

No, no. Nothing's wrong. I just... well, actually I was wondering if I could talk to You?

She was... elated. I hadn't been expecting that. She hadn't had anyone talk to Her since Marilyn left. It never occurred to me that She might be lonely, that She might be feeling isolated, too. A little bit of my anxiety melted. Not all of it, but some.

How are You?

I felt Her happiness. I was so absorbed in my own feelings when I was around Her that I never noticed that if I let my guard down, I could feel Hers, too. It made Her happy to have me show even the smallest bit of concern for Her. No one bothered to worry about how She was. She said She was well, and hopefully months away from needing us.

That's good...I really appreciate the warning. My words caught in my head. Listen... I know I may be crossing over a line, but I wanted to talk to You about our lives and how we live, how You live. Would that be possible?

She asked if I was struggling.

Yes. I started to cry. Yes.

I wasn't the first, and I wouldn't be the last. She told me I was free to ask Her anything. I worked to calm myself and spoke.

How did it all begin for You? This life?

She apologized for having to deflect my first question. There are some things that She had to keep to Herself.

I understand. Have You always had sirens from the beginning?

No, but She could not elaborate on that either.

How many of us have there been?

There had been two hundred and sixty-eight sirens. That included the three of us serving now, and ones like Ifama who had not chosen to stay their whole sentence. I don't know if

She meant to or not, but She steered our conversation exactly where I wanted it to go.

Are there many who don't stay the whole time?

Not many. Of course, very few are actually happy with this life, but most girls will push through it to get a second chance.

Why so long? A hundred years is so long...

It was. And that was a number chosen by convenience. The longer girls serve, the fewer there are. The fewer there are, the less chance of the reality of Her diet escaping. If it did, it would cause a riot. She didn't want that panic or, more importantly, for people to avoid Her altogether. That would be a disaster. And it takes a while to settle into this life. If She let sirens go too soon, She would always have untrained girls serving Her, which was a danger to people.

I hadn't expected Her reasons to be so selfless. She just wanted everything to work.

About Your diet... how do You feel about that?

That was hard for Her to explain. She didn't like to hurt the humans She was created to serve. Sometimes She felt taken advantage of, but then again, how do you thank the Ocean? Usually, She felt conflicted that She had to take from people to save them. Like breaking a rock to keep it in one piece, it didn't seem right somehow. But Her only other option was self-destruction— stagnant waters that made neither wind nor rain nor current, the life within Her failing, the lives of everyone else failing in consequence. Was it so awful to take the lives of a hundred or so each year if it meant that billions could live?

How do You feel about me? About us, I mean?

She didn't understand that question.

I mean, how do You feel about needing us, I guess...

She was suddenly tender. How could I have been with Her all this while and missed this?

She said that if She could do it on Her own, if She could spare us, She absolutely would. No one should have to see the things we do, and that bothered Her. At the same time, She enjoyed being able to spare someone every once in a while. It was like finding a treasure someone else had missed. And, when we interacted, She enjoyed our company.

It took me a moment to think of where to go now. I wanted to talk about Ifama and the others, but I could talk to Her about so much now. And She wanted me to talk. I could feel it now— She missed me when I was away. She missed all of us. We were Her companions, but we blamed Her for making us so. I had all but hated Her. She would have known that. She would have felt that from the start. The start...

Maybe this is rude somehow, but why my ship?

That was an easy answer: it had the least number of people on board.

You can tell that?

She could. She felt the weight of the lives in Her.

That was unexpected.

I know there's really no point in asking... but why me?

That was funny. To me, at least. She thought my final thoughts were sweet and unselfish. I had thought of myself, of course, but also of my family. She said She could feel all that love going through me for them, and it seemed like a waste to lose such a heart. And She thought I was beautiful.

Thank You. What about the others?

Of course, Miaka for her sweetness, so small and adorable. I missed her suddenly. She also made another confession that I thought was shocking: She kept Miaka for me. She knew I didn't like to be alone. She would have seen that question in my head before; She was just waiting for me to ask it.

Aisling, to no surprise, simply had the will to live. She wasn't giving up. Aisling was always up for a fight, wasn't she? Ifama had a certain respectable dignity which was

admirable, and it was foolish to think she might give that trait up when she was taken. Ifama was very proud and felt no hint of regret at her death.

Can I ask how Ifama came to You in the first place?

She said that if Ifama chose not to share that, then neither could She.

But she was completely at peace? In the end?

Yes. The Ocean suffered more at that moment than Ifama did; She didn't want to take her.

What about Marilyn? She always seemed so calm after we... You know...

Marilyn had come to terms with her own life and death. She understood that every life came to a close, hers included. She did not add to the number of lives that would end, because they all would. Every soul passed through that gate. It was a truth I had not thought of until now: Everyone dies. I wish I had thought to ask these questions to Marilyn before she left.

I realized that it wasn't just the death of others that bothered me, but my own. I needed to make the most of my time. I had seventy more years for sure, though admittedly what I could do with them was limited. Still, being angry and sulking about every little "what if" would only make my days less valuable. In seventy years, my body would become breakable, and I wasn't guaranteed another day. I needed to live. I needed to make peace. This was only a season. For now, that meant being a weapon. But a weapon that didn't *want* to kill or added to the loss of life— not in the end. It was a hard reality for me, but this was my life.

I just cried for a moment. And She didn't rush me. She let me be sad. I couldn't stand upright anymore. The weight of all my worries fell down on me one last time before they washed away. I sat in the surf and rocked myself.

Do You think I'm a monster?

She soothed me. She called me “sweetheart.” No, She was the true monster, She said. That She subjected anyone to this life was cruel. It was simply what She must do, and so She would. She was sorry I had to endure it with Her but asked for my patience. There was more to this life if I only let myself see it. She wanted me to enjoy the body I had, the knowledge I had, the time I had. Though She was sad I had to harm others, there was a small glimmer of joy in the fact that I, along with my sisters, would have another chance at life. She saw our value more clearly than we could, and we would be amazing people one day.

She said that I was beautiful. She saw that I didn’t love people halfway. She felt the encompassing love I had for my family when I lost them, and even now that desire to love burned in me. In truth, She confessed, Marilyn was sad to lose that love when she left me that night; she wasn’t sure anyone would care for her so easily.

This heart of mine wasn’t going anywhere. I would still get to use it all one day in the way She knew I wanted to. For now, I should just continue to generously give my love to Miaka and any other sisters who came along. If Aisling would ever take it, I should give it to her. And then, almost timidly, the Ocean said that if I was ever at a loss for someone who needed it, She would always take it.

If Marilyn had told me a day like this would come, I wouldn’t have believed it. But here I was, aching to be in the Ocean, to not be separated from Her ever. Because She loved me like a cherished daughter, like the daughter I once was. And She helped me understand Ifama’s peace and Marilyn’s, too. And I didn’t have it all right now, but I would. One day, I’d be at complete peace with this choice. I wasn’t a horrible person. I’d use this body and mind that I had for only a season to the best advantages I could. This body and mind and life that She generously and specifically chose me for...

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...

I sat then and wept openly in Her arms. She let Her waves
rush over me, and for the first time they didn't feel like chains.
It truly felt like an embrace.

CHAPTER 4

After that day, the Sea and I were kindred. I felt that I must be for her what Marilyn and who knows how many others before me had been: a friend. As time passed, I felt how deeply She loved me. I was special to Her, more so than the others. Not that we weren't all valuable, but I was desperate for Her affection. I should have told Miaka to be closer to Her, too. I should have explained the Ocean's need, but I liked that our relationship was the only one of its kind. At least, for now.

I had gotten to know Her, and She doled out the best of Herself to me. I had, in abundance, what I had missed for years: motherly love. And through Miaka I had sisterly love, too.

I never spoke of how deeply I longed for a different, dangerous, unthinkable love. I had to be satisfied. For now. It was an anxious wait, but it was a little easier to control now.

I stayed by myself. With speaking to the Ocean so often, I never felt alone. Though I forgot so much of my life before being a siren, She remembered everything. She remembered every siren by name and knew the years she stayed and little details about their stories. She carefully chose which ones She told me about. It was strange because all of the stories were exactly the same and yet completely different.

I understood more about why the Ocean chose certain people. It wasn't one particular quality that made us eligible; it was more like having something that set you apart. I had always been passionate about the people around me, but I'm not sure I noticed it until it was pointed out. That was my gift. We each had something to give, and our individual qualities blessed our sisters. It was true; I gained so much from this tiny sorority. Marilyn helped me to be patient and wise. Miaka was creative and thoughtful. Even Ifama had brought something new to me though our lives touched so briefly. Still, I wondered at the day when I might appreciate anything about Aisling.

The Ocean and I had a strange sort of honeymoon. I left Pawleys Island shortly after that first conversation and flitted around America before leaving for another long stretch. I wasn't sure when or if I'd ever go back. The Ocean took me to places in Her that only She knew about. The Ocean gave me an island. It was a tiny, tropical place, the likes of which I'd only ever seen on post cards. I was absolutely enchanted. When my dress fell to pieces, I lived there naked—a feat I was sure I could never have done without complete privacy. I rested under the lush shade of giant palm trees and tasted the mysterious little fruits that grew around me. I assumed the awful tasting ones must have been poisonous.

I explored the forest, unafraid of bites or scratches. I found the highest point after a two-day hike and climbed to the top to see what I could. I was in the middle of the vastness of the Sea. Nothing could have ever touched me here. Even though I knew boats crossed through Her all the time, not a single one could be seen from here. It was a joy that no detail of my duties followed me to this place.

My island was a sanctuary.

But more beautiful than the island itself were the waters surrounding it. The sand was pale and powder fine. Sometimes I would go into the water and half bury myself in it, the Ocean using Her currents to help in the job. The sun shone so brightly that the water was warm, but the sand stayed cool—it was an experience for the senses. I'd seen so many shades of water by now, I was sure there was no way She could possibly be hiding anymore. But here, in this hidden place, the Ocean was a shade of blue I'd never encountered. It was the color of ice and honey and sky and rain mixed together into a sheet of flawless glass with broken frothy edges that tickled my feet at the shoreline.

This was what She gave me. It was a place where I could forget what I had to do and what She was capable of. Here there was only Her generosity and beauty. Here I could sing at the top of my lungs and no one suffered. Sometimes I'd

scream for the pure joy of it. Though it ought to have been the sound of terror, I laughed afterwards every time.

When I wasn't playing in the warm waters, I let myself relax and daydream. I was lost in a hundred different worlds. I imagined coming here again with the love of my life. We could forget the world and be lost together. I imagined getting married and coming here on vacation with beautiful dark-haired children. Wouldn't a child running down this unspoiled coast be absolutely beautiful? It was the perfect place for my mind to release all the worries of this secret world. It was unfortunate I couldn't stay forever.

I spent more than a year alone with the Ocean. This getaway would always be here for me, but I couldn't forget the reality of my obligations.

In the summer of 1956, I returned to Miaka. It turned out that the time alone had done wonders for her, too.

I never would have found her on my own. My first thought was to go back to Italy; we had lived there briefly before Ifama left us. But the Ocean told me that Miaka had moved on and checked in every once in a while to let the Ocean know where she was.

Miaka was living in India, pretending to be a deaf mute and making art on the streets. Her talent had managed to grow in my absence. She made her art under the Bombay sun, just as happy as she could be. People would stop to watch her work and sometimes bought her pieces. We didn't exactly have bank accounts, so she tucked her money away in different parts of the world— under rocks, buried in people's back yards. We didn't really long for money; as I said, the Ocean gave us more than our share. But it was nice to not have to ask all the time—to buy something we didn't need, play with it until we were bored, and “forget” it in front of a deserving home.

After Paris, fashion became one of our favorite indulgences. When we traveled to any place that seemed concerned with up-to-date styles, we would naturally comply. We had to fit in, right? So when we had the extra money, we shopped. Clothes

were fun. The clothes in India were long saris covered in prints. They were beautiful and colorful and easy to wear. It was easier to wear than, say, the popular jeans of the States after living in the freedom of the island. It was an easier transition for me, though I did enjoy a good dress more than anything.

Just before the Ocean gave me the island, I was living in Virginia. The Ocean had given me money without me asking for it. I don't think She did that as a rule. Eventually even Her stores would run dry if She did. But at that moment, She just wanted me to get out and enjoy the day. The first thing I did was buy a dress. I returned the plain, ill-fitting clothes I had borrowed to the hamper of the empty house. Shopping in someone's closet wasn't nearly as enjoyable as walking into a store. The clothes smelled like the person who owned them, which was strange. And I was an individual stuck in someone else's style. I hated it.

So I bought a dress. And I loved that dress. It was wholesome and had cherries printed all over it. I sat outside in my new dress and had ice cream and just enjoyed the day—like She wanted me to. I had nowhere to keep it, so it was the dress I wore as I traveled to the island. It tore to pieces, of course. It was a spiteful thing to do. I could have just left it somewhere, but if I couldn't keep it on me, I at least wanted the pieces of it to be somewhere I always was. I adored that dress. It was the one thing in years that had actually been mine. And I just couldn't keep it.

Ten years of silent wanderings led Miaka and me through nothing special. Though little of consequence happened, this period was different for us. I was more content these days. If nothing happened to distract me all day long, I wouldn't be restless at night. If I saw too many couples, I'd escape to a daydream and not bother with tears. Miaka would create all day, and I would praise her talents. It wasn't a remarkable life, but it was good.

Miaka and I spent that decade together except for the few times I would run away to be with the Ocean. I wouldn't even

bother staying near the shore to come and go at my leisure. I would just live *in* Her. My skin didn't mind the water like all the other frail humans' did. Actually, I think being in Her made it prettier somehow. I would float and just let Her guide me through the waters, ending up no place at all. I saw arctic seas full of floating bits of ice. The cold blue was fresh and beautiful. In some places the ice made mysterious frosty webs. It was a shame that most of the world missed this. There were other coasts covered in mossy rocks, organisms living off a diet of Ocean and sunshine. Sometimes, I felt like that was the way I lived, too.

I couldn't go for more than a few months without going back to Her. Those first thirty years were full of rage at Her for what She made me. Now I knew Her more intimately than any of my sisters did. She confessed I knew Her better than anyone ever had. I had finally come to terms with what I was, the temporary nature of my situation, and the truth that something better was coming for me one day. So I could let myself love Her. And I loved myself. It helped. It still wasn't the life I wanted, but it was very close.

Finally, in 1966, we were granted another sister. Elizabeth was like nothing I had ever encountered. Upon meeting her, I was most surprised by the fact that she wasn't crying. Even Ifama, who had put up a good fight against the tears, had cried. Elizabeth was disoriented, but listened to everything we said with this look on her face like she had happily stumbled into a fairytale. I had seen the world slowly change. Girls were different now— not all of them, but some. The ones like Elizabeth.

She was a defiant kind of lovely. Her gently curling hair made me think of honey— not quite blond, not quite brunette — and she had mysterious eyes that were so blue they were practically violet. Her whole appearance was a collection of almos

She had been enjoying a trip abroad between semesters at college when we brought down the *Heraklion* near Crete. The ship was traveling in the Aegean Sea, which was one of the

Ocean's unpredictable areas, particularly in the winter. The storm was there and would have happened anyway; we just guided the captain a little too close. The ship went down in the wee hours of the morning. Elizabeth was one of the few near enough to the top decks to make it into open waters. Mercifully most of the passengers were unseen and trapped in their cabins. Elizabeth had braved the rocking of the boat to, of all things, smoke a cigarette. At two in the morning. This was our first hint at her personality.

We were right on track. The Ocean obviously enjoyed Elizabeth's sense of humor. She did eventually ask to live, but her first thoughts as she began to sink were "Damn! This is inconvenient!"

She was a welcome addition as far as we were concerned, but I was afraid that she'd be disappointed since she'd left so much behind. Like all of us, Elizabeth lost her family, so we all felt that with her. But she was in the middle of being educated and had been in a serious relationship when she joined us. She said no man was better than having all this time to see the world. I wanted her to like me, so I didn't bother disagreeing.

She was absolutely sure of herself, carefree. Miaka was jubilant to have such a welcoming younger sister. We were so excited by her fresh enthusiasm, we even invited Aisling to come stay with us. She said that she would rather chew sand, asked the Ocean if she could leave, and disappeared without a goodbye.

"She needs to get laid," Elizabeth said after Aisling left. Miaka and I looked at one another with shocked eyes and blushed. We came from an era when things like that just weren't said. But then we both laughed at the probable truth and great impossibility behind that statement.

Elizabeth was a sign of the changing times. What I had suspected as an observer in this era was made real through the living example of our newest sister. We were glad to have a better view of the world through her eyes.

Miaka and I peppered Elizabeth with questions. She was the first woman in her family to go to college. She was looking at twenty different majors when she came into our sisterhood. She hoped this time would give her more clarity, make her focus on what she truly loved. But before she worried about any of that, she wanted to live it up. I could tell she was going to have silence issues. Elizabeth was American like me. Our common unity of the English language would make note passing easier.

Elizabeth had experimented with *certain substances* in college and said it was something she was going to miss since those kinds of things had no real effect on us. Beer, too; she would miss beer. I was shocked. Prohibition had been in effect when I was a teen. To see someone enjoying these things and not meeting her doom made it all seem like a silly waste of efforts.

Her family had ignored her somewhat and gave preference to her three older brothers. This seemed to be a common theme in our sisterhood: the lone daughters, either prized or ignored. She was an unexpected addition to her family, and it appeared that they ran out of steam as she grew. But this lack of attention drove her towards success. She had been hell-bent to prove to them that she could be just as successful as any boy, her brothers in particular. Elizabeth was bothered that they wouldn't see her do it, but she was sure that time would make her flourish in anything she truly committed herself to.

“In the end,” she said, “who cares if I have an audience?”

I asked her questions about small details, wanting her to hold onto to her old life long enough to share her incredible yet common stories with us. She liked to shock people. She had already caught Miaka and me off guard a dozen times our first day together. But she would do things like spell out dirty words in a game of Scrabble with her mother and all her old friends. Really, anything to raise an eyebrow was her idea of a good time.

“I don't understand. What's a scrabble?” Miaka asked.

I was drawn to Elizabeth's openness. She was blunt and funny and warm. I also envied her for her ease at relating to men. To put it delicately, she had already been with a man. A few. And she was my age! How times had changed. I wanted to ask her a thousand questions about that, but the lady I was raised to be won out in that round. Maybe down the road I could ask her, if I could ever reach half the boldness she had. There was no denying we had the time.

Miaka showed Elizabeth the ins and outs of our life, and I was free to sit back and enjoy them. Since there were three of us, I could easily disappear to be with the Ocean without them feeling neglected. It was the beginning of a new time for us. I added all the time up in my head. I had spent thirty-two years bitter, wondering if I had made the wrong decision. I'd spent nearly a year alone wallowing in my sadness and anger with the Ocean and myself. I'd spent another year truly being introduced to the Sea. And I'd spent the last eleven years peacefully existing, communing with my sisters and the Ocean. Forty-five years in all. Plus the nineteen before that. That's a lot of life, but I was not prepared for this new era.

One of the most shocking changes was the response to our times of service. I was never sure how Aisling felt. I assumed she wasn't bothered based on her coldness. Miaka had gotten a little better with it as the years passed but was always a little down afterwards. But Elizabeth was tough in a serious way. She wasn't daunted by the actual act of taking lives. It's not that she prided herself in being cruel, but she was... I don't know, desensitized. It just didn't faze her. Elizabeth's personality was so influential that Miaka followed suit and began to take the whole process with a grain of salt. I was alone in my ache. The Ocean understood this part of my nature and always gave me warning, and afterwards, I would have to be alone, away from the unnatural calm of Elizabeth and Miaka.

I didn't begrudge them this. If they could find peace in this life, I was happy for them. But I just couldn't do that. It hurt me, cut me to the core every time. Aisling had her solitude,

and Marilyn used to have her glass of wine. Miaka used to paint, and now she and Elizabeth would just watch a movie if they could or do nothing special at all. I just took it differently. So for a few days, I would retreat into my mind and build myself a world where things just didn't have to be the way they were. I tried to keep these thoughts away from the Ocean; I didn't want to offend Her. And, for fear of seeming weak to my sisters, I didn't tell Miaka or Elizabeth.

After one of our times of service, I left for a few days to be on my island. The Ocean was always very giving with me, not bothered by how hard it was for me to talk to Her right after those moments. A few years after She gave me the island, She gave me a present to go along with it. Someone had either lost or thrown away a hammock, and She had found it. When it washed up on shore I bounced around like a child; I was so happy. There was a set of trees on the western coast of the island that was just perfect for it. When I arrived this time, that was the section of shore I went for.

It was late afternoon, so I just climbed into the hammock still wearing my heavy dress, and watched the sun fall away. Normal eyes can't stare at the sun without going blind, but mine could. It was brilliant, and its radiance was a comfort to me. It mesmerized me, sinking lower and lower, until it disappeared behind the Ocean's wide back. I was asleep immediately.

I don't know what took my mind there, but I dreamed of the day when I became a siren myself. So many of the details are gone. Our memories are like faulty cameras, and we can never be sure if the image we're trying to capture is actually clear at the time. But the murky moments of my humanity focused into perfect clarity, and those final seconds assaulted my mind...

The ship steering sharply, away from the sunshine and into the distant gray. Lying on the floor, trying not to get sick from the storm. In our life vests on the deck, covering my ears from the screaming. Grown men jumping off the boat, ready to die. A wall of water so huge there was no point in running, and nowhere to run to anyway.

Take a deep breath, Kahlen. Hold on tight.

Ripped from my lifejacket under the water. An unknown body hitting my legs. I was dying. I was losing my family. I was losing everything.

My eyes snapped open to the dark of the island, a light drizzle was falling over me. Though it was warm, I was convinced I was still drowning. I screamed.

Her voice came to me off the breakers, caressing my shaking body. She heard me, of course. The rain. I was sobbing, my body jerking with gasps. I stumbled out of my hammock and towards the shore. I sat down in the edge of the surf.

I had a nightmare. I'm fine.

If She was paying attention, She might have seen the source of my tears. But either way, She let me have my privacy. The memory brought up all the reasons I had to be angry with Her, but I had decided to let that go. Every person dies. Every soul passes through the gate. I brushed it away.

A week later I returned to my sisters.

I couldn't stay sad with Elizabeth around. She opened herself to us immediately. She was just casually comical. After our first day together, we decided we'd have to live somewhere very remote. Elizabeth was full of one-liners that caused Miaka and me to unexpectedly erupt with laughter. We couldn't contain it, so we stayed away from the ears that those moments would harm.

She was just silly. When we were hunting for clothes, Elizabeth would intentionally make the most bizarre pairings — rain slickers with shorts, a too-small bra, and a beret— and then lounge around the house like that for days. In places big enough for it, she would organize epic games of hide and seek or tag. They may have only been children's games, but they were endlessly entertaining for us.

I knew that Miaka, in all her grace, had been chosen as a companion for me. Sometimes, I wondered if Elizabeth was a

gift for me, too— if the Ocean knew I needed a constant comedian in my life. When that thought struck me, I decided to let myself be up for most anything Elizabeth suggested. Besides, she was my sister, and she was like no one else, and I loved her.

Over the next twenty-four years, we had enough adventures to fill the lives of fifty people. With the exception of our days of singing, we became the happiest drifters in the world.

We ran with the bulls in Spain not once, not twice, but three times. It was easy enough given our talents. It also helped that it was impossible to break a bone. Afterwards men would buy us drinks to toast our bravery. I tried to get away from these attentions, but Elizabeth was a magnet for “dangerous” men. It really wasn’t an issue; we could hurt them beyond anything they could dream of doing to us. So on these three occasions, and several others, we ended up in bars. The men would try to talk to us, but we would just shake our heads and pretend we couldn’t understand a thing they said.

The most recent time, one guy tried to drug us. That didn’t work, of course, but it pissed Elizabeth off enough to “get drunk” and “accidentally” drive his car into a pole, which she easily walked away from. But it landed him in the hospital with two broken ribs. She did all this in such a way that there was nothing out of the ordinary about it. So the Ocean wasn’t even bothered when She heard that story. In fact, She was amused. She was glad we could defend ourselves. Elizabeth was clever. I never would have tried that out on my own.

That was the first time I was aware that maybe there were ways around the rules.

We rode elephants across the desert in Africa. The heat would have been unbearable in our weaker skin, but this new one made it easy. I later thanked the Ocean for this temporary body because I had seen the most beautiful sunrise and knew I would have missed it if She hadn’t chosen me. She was flattered by my gratitude.

The land itself was barren and parched, but still so beautiful. I was amazed at how little water this place needed to survive; it was heightened by the fact that I was usually at home in an abundance of water. Even here, She stretched out and provided. One day, I realized that this dry land was still dependent upon Her, and that by serving Her faithfully, this beauty existed. Usually the world we saw seemed so over indulgent, but this place found joy in its minimalism. My job was a somber one, but if this could be here because of it, I could find satisfaction in that.

We walked the Great Wall of China. This was a particularly exciting thing for us because it was so old. It seemed like it should have crumbled to bits long ago, but it was well-crafted and well-kept and it lived on and on— just like us. We admired it. It rolled with the land and was strangely beautiful, like poetry made out of stone. I thought of the resources and the hands that it took to create this beauty. We took our steps slowly, savoring the labor that held it up.

We went to dozens of weddings. When we saw a hint that one was happening, we'd hide out and start counting guests. If the number went over a hundred and fifty people, we'd scrounge up a dress and go. With that many people it was easy to get lost, and if we timed it right, we'd be able to sit away from most of the guests. We'd stick to ourselves and stand in the back at the receptions. Without meaning to, we would often end up attracting the photographer. We ended up in tons of pictures. We laughed thinking about what couples would think when they returned from their honeymoon to see pictures of strange girls dancing at their reception, toasting to their happiness, and eating large amounts of their cake.

I wasn't sure if it would work, but I tried to mentally log things that I enjoyed, like a particular dress or cake. I didn't know if I would remember any of that for my own wedding one day, but it didn't hurt to try.

Once, we stole a car! That was the joyride of a lifetime! Elizabeth knew how to drive and taught Miaka and me so we all had a turn behind the wheel. Neither of us dared to drive as

fast as Elizabeth did; we didn't want to wreck it. But Elizabeth was fearless. We'd find an open road, and she practically flew from the concrete. It was so much fun we couldn't help laughing out loud in the isolation of the cabin. We returned the car to the exact same parking spot the very next day having washed it and filled the tank with gas. It was a beauty, and it remained completely unharmed. If we were wanted women for that crime we never knew. Nobody disappears like we do.

All of these were Elizabeth's ideas. She was the eternal prankster. She reinvented the life we were living, making us step outside of our comfort zones every other day. Her favorite — something we ended up doing quite often— was streaking. I was so bashful about my body that I only watched the first few times, and I blushed just *watching* them run. I remembered my days on the island; that was a different kind of naked. It was for my personal freedom; I was no exhibitionist!

Finally, years down the road, Elizabeth and Miaka talked me into it. Still, I refused to go unless it was nighttime and we were alone. The best places for this were on the beach, which made it less frightening. Beaches were the gateway to home for me. And once I did it, I was glad I had. It was the only way of showing off the perfect bodies we were all but forbidden to share. It was hard to do it without giggling out loud, but that made it better. Each time one of our feet hit the water, the Ocean would see us and laugh in our place.

What had evaded me for decades came crashing down in abundance— joy! True happiness. I wasn't a coward. I had no regrets. I may not have been alive, but I was living. That was all the difference. We lived our lives like children, seeking out the best and simplest of joys.

The best parts of myself came to the surface. I didn't feel so bound up all the time. I was still sad when I had to sing, but the ache passed, and I was back to life with my sisters within days. And, no matter how crazy it seemed, I indulged in every adventure.

Elizabeth got us into a mansion once... while the owner was home. I don't know how she did it. I felt like a thief sitting in a house while someone was obviously inside, but I supposed that was unreasonable as we lived in other peoples' houses all the time. I tried not to let it bother me. She didn't tell me where she got the stash from, but Elizabeth's pockets were full of chocolates. So in the giant house, on the king-sized bed, we ate our chocolate and spoke quietly.

"Elizabeth, are you happy?" I whispered to her. Her head was by mine, and Miaka was turned around so her feet were facing upward. It was as if this whole place belonged to us.

"What kind of question is that? Isn't it obvious I am?"

"What I mean is, how are you so happy? You had a hard time with your family, you lost a lot of things, and every year you have to lure people to their deaths, but you seem to not be bothered by it."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course I don't like it. But, you know, you girls weren't living like I was. I watched a lot of TV. There are bad things happening in the world every day. Worse than what we do. And at least our singing has a purpose. Do you know how cool it is that we regularly help save the world? I tried to be an activist before, and this is the closest I've come."

Miaka sat up to listen closer. Elizabeth continued.

"I don't like to kill people. But we don't, She does. You say it all the time. And while it's seriously heavy, I just can't let it bring me down. I take suffering in the world seriously. I do. But if I let myself wallow in every bad thing that ever happens... that's not much of a life, Kahlen. So I don't worry about being sad. Instead, I spend my time making you two idiots laugh. Miaka makes me think about things and study stuff. And you, you make me feel like I could do the stupidest thing in the world, and you'd still like me how I am.

"Instead of worrying about taking, we should worry about giving. We can't stop the take. But we can do a hell of a lot

about the give.”

It was muddled up and perfectly clear. Elizabeth was complex and simple. Giving was incredibly rewarding. I lay awake that night, listening for maids or other houseguests getting too close to our room. None ever came, so while Miaka and Elizabeth slept away on the plush bed, I stayed up and planned. What could I possibly give?

That was 1990. A conversation that had lasted less than five minutes had given me incredible inspiration.

I wanted to work with children.

I told this to the Ocean who liked the idea, but thought it was too risky. I told her that I wanted to work with hearing-impaired children. I could be close to them without being too much of a hazard. I knew that there would have to be some people around who could hear, but I was used to silence now. It would be safe. I could speak in sign language and teach. Really, I was prepared to do whatever they wanted me to. I had had my years of sulking, my years of peace, and now my years of playing. I wanted to contribute now. It was still hard for me to face everything I stole from humanity, and it was time for me to give back somehow, before I forgot I had a debt to pay. Besides, I lived to love.

She couldn't argue that. She had her doubts, but, because She favored me above the others, She consented. The Ocean dug within herself and found an identity for me to borrow. My borrowed name would be Katie Landon. I went to libraries and watched instructional videos to learn how to sign. It wasn't a spoken language so it didn't just come to me. I practiced with Miaka and Elizabeth who learned some as well— it turned out to be much easier than writing notes in public places. How had we not thought of this earlier?

And once I was ready, I went to volunteer at a school for the deaf in the Southwest. And I felt at peace among these beautiful children who were fully protected against the most dangerous part of me. I thought there was no way I could ever possibly feel more joy.

CHAPTER 5

My life was full of the next-best versions of things. I couldn't have my true mother, but at least I had the Ocean. My brothers were gone, but I had sisters instead. I didn't own my clothes, but I could borrow someone else's. I had no real home, but I lived in a range of houses all over the world. I couldn't go to college, but I could teach. I couldn't have babies, but I could be a surrogate to the children at the schools. I couldn't fall in love...

Try as I may, there was never a situation that made up for that. I kept thinking time would erase that desire, or at least make it easier to bear. Nothing made it better. The only option was distraction.

Learning sign language had taken only a few weeks. I devoted every waking moment to studying my new skill. Arriving at my first school, I signed up as a volunteer. That was easy. There was less paper if you volunteered. And paper made things difficult since I was every bit the nineteen-year-old now as I was in California. And Washington. And Texas.

I was adored everywhere I went. I showed up eager and friendly and obviously fond of children. And these children were miraculously fond of me! In the reception area at the school in Texas, a little girl came up and hugged my leg as I was standing at the front desk. Her name was Madeline, and we became fast friends after she looked up at me and smiled. These children were so easy to love. It seemed that so many were passed over, but how could anyone not see how beautiful each one of them was?

It seems to me that we value individuality, but only to a point. When what sets one person apart from another is beyond our understanding or becomes too much to handle, we dismiss the quirk and the soul that accompanies it to give ourselves the greatest comfort. What does that accomplish?

Take myself, for example. It was no great achievement that I was friends with Miaka or Elizabeth. There was no challenge

in that. The true standing of my character ought to be measured in my ability to love Aisling. Of course, that would be much easier if she was willing to let at least one of us in.

I stayed for a few years volunteering at each school, becoming practically indispensable. I had patience beyond the norm and was never exhausted. I thanked the Ocean for both of those gifts later. The staffs depended on me, and the children took me in easily. But eventually I'd invent a reason to move. I'd say that my father was moving abroad or there was a serious illness in the family— any reason that would make it clear I was bound by something big, that I was needed.

They always threw going away parties for me, and I always got a cake. They were pretty good. Not as good as the ones in Paris, but still cake.

It was hard to leave. I had never been more fulfilled. Yes, I regularly aided in keeping the world from running dry, but I had never felt more useful than I had these last few years.

I was endlessly grateful to my sisters. Miaka and Elizabeth had encouraged me with uncontrollable enthusiasm. Before I left for my first school, I had gotten a serious moment of cold feet. I was terrified that I would still somehow hurt these people. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to be far away from my sisters. But they pushed me out, insisting that I try. This turned into one of the most rewarding experiences in my life.

If I had a hundred more years, I would devote it to my sisters to thank them.

Eleven years had passed this way, with me hopping from campus to campus. My current post was at a school in Portland, Maine. The weekend had arrived, and as if She were the air itself, I needed to be with the Ocean. I told Her of my most recent updates. I had been at this school for a while now, and I was comfortable. The walls were familiar, and I knew every corner of the play ground. The library was a sanctuary, full of books beaten in with affection. And I even had a small office space. I didn't really need that, but when it was offered,

I didn't want to be rude and turn it down. But that space was only a small comfort for me.

Nothing compared to being lost in the Sea. She was shelter; She was family. The Ocean felt like a cradle for me, a strange haven that gave me strength and comfort. No one should feel this at ease in Her. These depths were meant for suffocation, and yet, here I was rejoicing in what ought to be my grave.

I swam in circles, happy as ever, updating Her on the lives of some of my favorite students. I preferred to work with younger children, elementary-aged children. But this particular school needed volunteers to work with the teenagers, and that's where I was placed. I got along well with teenagers, which I guess I should have expected. I was, after all, still a teenager myself.

It was a hard concept to grasp, even as I lived it. My past life included, I witnessed the succession of eighteen presidents. I observed as wars progressed across the globe, avoiding them as best I could. I watched as one generation fell in love with the Beatles and then the next compared their favorite bands to the Fab Four like it would legitimize them. I saw the transition from records to tapes to CDs. I watched the world grow old in front of me and knew that I was no part of it. At heart, I was still just a girl on the edge of life.

As such, I understood these students' worries and fears, and they were all so open with me. I appreciated the view of the world from their eyes. I still sometimes saw the world as darker than it actually was. With these children, I could be the carefree version of myself that I had been before I knew about the secrets the Ocean kept, the person that sometimes Elizabeth drew out with her playfulness. So I loved these kids. There were a few here that I was particularly close to, and these were the ones I updated the Ocean on regularly. I got so excited about them, I tended to ramble. She never minded.

Micah is going Ivy League. He just got his acceptance letter this week. We all knew he would, of course. He's so bright.

And determined! I can't imagine anything that would slow that boy down.

So, from what I understand, they have this new technology they'll be using to help him. The professor wears a special microphone pinned to his shirt while he speaks, and then it takes the whole lecture and translates it through a computer somehow. It's really amazing! It looks like Micah will have to do more reading than most, but I think he'll be just fine.

You should see how excited he is! He's already used to living away from home now, so going away to college shouldn't be a problem. I heard his parents were sad he was going out of state though. I think they just want him to be closer if anything happens. I thought that would have changed by now. So many other things in society seem to be loosening up, but parents are still pretty serious about their children. That's how my parents were; they never let anything bad happen to me if they could help it...

We were quiet for a moment. We were both thinking the same thing. I suddenly needed to be closer to land. I swam towards the surface while I continued to speak.

Jack has already decided he isn't going to college. He's been working in his dad's auto shop on the weekends and over breaks; he's getting really good at mechanics. He's also falling in love with motorcycles. I think he thinks that if he's around motorcycles enough and can prove to his parents how responsible he is with them, he'll be able to talk them into letting him have a bike of his own.

She laughed. Jack's disposition was a little like Elizabeth's: playfully rebellious. They never meant any harm, but you never knew what they'd wind up doing.

I swam my way up to the surface, peeking out of the waves to see if the coast was clear. It was empty enough where I was that no one would notice me. The clothes I wore when I had jumped in earlier were still intact since I had been moving so lazily—soaked through and dripping, but still intact. I sat on the same beach I came to Her from this morning with my feet

in the water, staying connected so we could still talk. She knew I was saving the best for last.

I had helped plenty of children since this idea had struck me so many years ago, but I had never been so attached to any of them as I was to Jillian. Jillian was smart, but very isolated. I was assigned to her in a big sister type of program, and we hit it off immediately. Everyone thought she had poor social skills, but Jillian was just shy. As we realized how much we had in common, she opened herself to me. And then, when she was comfortable with me, she opened up to others. The transformation was remarkable. The girl I met two years ago and the girl I knew now were different people entirely.

Jillian was funny and warm and easy to be around. I think she had been shy because she didn't think she was very pretty, but when I showed up and someone asked if I was her sister, she started holding her head higher. I took that as a compliment. Once she convinced herself she was worth noticing, she started trying more and more things— writing and making art— and discovered she wasn't half bad. Even with areas she was unsure about, she at least gave it a try.

We spent lots of time just “talking.” Jillian had grown up in Maine, and loved it here, but she ached to see California. I told her about my brief experiences in the Golden State, saying I had just come from there, skipping the states in between. I told her about how it was sunny almost all the time, and how if she went to the Getty, she could see the mountains and the Ocean at once. That fact thrilled me at the time.

Jillian loved movies and magazines and boys. The latter was the subject of so many conversations. Maybe that was the root of it all: We were just so much alike. She was like a sister in a different way. Where I was pushed to be close to Miaka and Elizabeth and Aisling, Jillian and I chose one another's company and were so similar it was like we should have been together all along.

We were both romantics. One day when we were talking, I realized that the boys at the school here, and at all the schools,

were about my age. Maybe I should find them attractive? Wouldn't that be a strange twist—the siren dating someone all but immune to her? But they all seemed so young to me. When I told Jillian I had never dated, she didn't believe me. I kept saying that I was still waiting for the right guy. That was the most honest answer I could give her.

She thought Micah was absolutely wonderful. He was only a year ahead of her, but she knew she had no hope of getting into the same school as him—not exactly a studious girl. I told her not to worry about that, that she'd still have a chance with him. And that even if he did go to some fancy college, if he passed her up, he'd be the dumbest man on earth. She laughed out loud at that. I loved the sound of her laugh. It was the only sound she intentionally made. It was misshapen, but lovely.

And, of course, Jillian.

Her interest piqued.

She is so worried about Micah going away. He's mentioned her a few times, too. I think that's a big deal for a guy, but I'm afraid to tell her about it. What if I'm misreading that? I'd feel so bad if it was just a simple friendship and then her feelings go even deeper because of something I said. I couldn't do that to her.

She doesn't even realize how beautiful she is though. I've caught a few guys looking her way. Why aren't boys braver? What's the big worry? The worst she could do is say no... they act like she'd be cutting off an arm or something.

The Ocean giggled. She spent Her time with daughters, She had no comprehension of sons.

Boys! I sighed. Jillian's art is getting so much better, too. I'll bet she could go to art school. Maybe I'll suggest that to her.

The Ocean asked if she was as good as Miaka.

Is anyone in the world as good as Miaka?!

She listened to my descriptions with interest. I was telling Her that my plan was to finish out this school year, take the summer off, and then stay the next year until Jillian left. After that I would have to go somewhere new. Three or four years was about the best I could hope for. It would give me time to say good-bye to her properly; I wanted closure there. She was the human I loved the most, but I couldn't stay for too long.

I hope she'll remember me later, You know? I hope I've had a good impact on her.

The Ocean was sure I did.

I wish I could give her something to remember me by.

A moment passed in thought. I hesitated, but went along with the idea anyway.

You remember where my wreckage is, right?

She was suddenly somber, like we both had been earlier when I mentioned my parents.

She knew where everything in Her was.

Maybe... maybe next year, before I leave, if You could find something that was mine? For Jillian?

She was surprised. I'd never asked for any of that for myself, though it was rightfully mine.

It was true, this school had provided a room for me to keep things in. I didn't "live" there, but I kept some clothes there, now that I needed a wardrobe. And I didn't have any personal items, except for arts and crafts the kids made me. That's what decorated the room. If ever, now was the time for me to keep something that was mine since I had a place to store it. But, still, it just seemed wrong.

Maybe later I'll take something for myself. But, next year, would You bring me something for Jillian? A necklace or something?

Of course She would.

Not sure where else to go with that idea, I changed the subject. We started talking about my plans for the future. It was only nineteen years until I rejoined the human world. I was counting down from nineteen to zero, and then from nineteen on until I ran out of years, years that were mine. What had seemed like an eternity was suddenly dwindling. I couldn't believe it was so close to the end.

I sat there with Her asking about what others had done before me, and She gave me examples, options. It was strange, after all this time, to start thinking about the end.

I wasn't sure how much I would remember of this life, but I thought there was a possibility I would miss this— having Her as a constant companion. No matter where I went, I could sense Her. When it rained, I never ran for cover, knowing we could have staccato conversations in the middle of a storm. When fog would sink down and inhibit the view of world, She and I were whispering secrets. In the humidity of the rainforest, She would saturate the air, drawing me in for the gentlest embrace.

I loved Her. I hated what I had to do *for* Her, and sometimes I hated what She had done *to* me, but I loved *Her*.

The paths the others before me had taken were small in range. Marilyn had gone to a trade school under a new identity that the Ocean had provided. Money was only one of the many things the Ocean held in Her pockets. As technology improved, it was harder to deceive the outside world. Luckily, we had plenty of time to adapt.

One sister asked to be left by a convent, no doubt atoning for sins she assumed she would feel after she left. One married into nobility a few hundred years ago without ever intending to live that lifestyle. Lots became artists. Something about the Ocean awakened you to your ability to create. One actually became a professional singer. After years of keeping her mouth shut, she let her voice rain down on as many as would take her in. The Ocean gave me her name, and I looked up

some of her scores. I don't know if she had that gift before she was a sister, but if she did, it was no wonder she was chosen.

I had no such aspirations. The only thing I could maybe see myself doing was to continue working with the deaf. Maybe I could be a teacher. I really did find being around the teenagers easier than most, what with all my years of being a perpetual teen myself.

The only thing I was still looking forward to was marriage. Before I was taken, it was all I thought about, what I daydreamed about, what I dreamed about still. My parents were happy together, and I saw the romances in movies. Maybe that's why I gave my affection so freely: I wanted desperately to be loved. With that thought in my head, I looked up...

And I saw him.

Before I could check my thoughts, She asked me who I thought was so handsome. I hated being caught like that. But it was just admiration from afar. Surely that was harmless.

There's this boy on the beach. He's tall and has dirty blonde hair. He's very good-looking.

She wanted to know what was so special about him.

I don't know. Maybe the expression on his face. He looks sad but hopeful somehow. Like he's thinking about a million questions, but knows he has the answer to every one.

She commented that that was a lot to observe in less than five minutes.

I've become an excellent people-watcher.

She laughed. I wondered if She could sense me rolling my eyes.

He walked along in his thoughtful way. Every so often, he'd pick up a rock or a shell and try to skip it on the surface.

Does that hurt?

No, the rocks didn't hurt. They tickled actually. The boats sometimes bothered Her. When She was close to exhaustion, they felt like cuts in Her liquid skin. Which reminded Her, barring some unseen disaster, She would need me within a few months. It gave me a quick chill, but I appreciated the extra warning.

He ran his fingers through his hair. It was long, unruly, and flashed like yellow fire in the wind. He was barefoot. Did he live around here then? Maybe he was on his way back to his shoes, his home. If he lived around here, maybe I could meet him.

She told me to stop that.

Sorry. Just daydreaming.

As he walked towards me, I fully took in what he was wearing. He had black slacks on, a button up white shirt that was partly untucked, and a black suit coat. He looked like he might have left a job interview or church. I had heard that some churches didn't mind you going barefoot these days, but I hadn't seen one around here. He took graceful steps, like he was trying to balance on some unseen tightrope in the sand.

If it was nineteen years until my new life began, that meant that I was now a hundred years old. He was the singularly most beautiful thing I had seen in a hundred years. My heart sped up, and I felt anxious. I actually had to pause and check my breathing. What was happening to me? Didn't I have more self-control than this?

I tried not to stare at him as he approached. When he was a few steps away, he picked up another rock in his hands. I looked up at him. His face was marked with sadness but still very handsome.

"Hello," he said and smiled.

It was a shy smile, but it pierced me. I was so taken off guard that I almost spoke back. But I got a hold of myself and just smiled. Thank goodness! When he passed to the other side of me, I waited a moment before I allowed myself to peek up

at him. When I did, I discovered that he was looking back at me! I felt a tickle in my chest. Our eyes met for a moment, and then he quickly turned his attention to the rock in his hand and threw it out into the water. I was suddenly wishing that I was wearing something better than damp, sandy clothes. What must he think of me, fully clothed, wet-haired, and sitting halfway in the surf?

The Ocean brought me back to reality. Admiring was one thing, but it was a bad idea to let my mind be affected so strongly by a stranger. Who cares what he thinks? I needed to guard myself, She said, or I was putting several people in danger.

You're right. I know You are. I'm sorry.

And She was. No small interaction should have such power over me. And I would have felt so much shame if I had failed Her after She'd done so much for me. Besides, with only nineteen years to go, why risk anything? It would be stupid with the end so close. Follow the rules, keep the secret, and be obedient; I willed myself into finishing well.

Still, I looked up at him one more time as he walked away.

Later, I remembered with clarity that stranger's face. His figure and features came back to me with ease. I broke one of my own rules, one I even had in my days as a human: I let the stranger star in my daydreams for months after that.

I thought about holding his hand, imagined kissing him. I wondered over and over what his name could be, trying to remember what the popular American boy names were right now. He kept me company. His timid, sad smile stayed in my head on those dark nights when I neither needed nor wanted sleep. I did close my eyes, but in my head my eyes were open. And they were looking into his.

Within four months, the Sea called us to Her aid. I knew it was coming, so I had taken a break from volunteering. The summer had come and gone, and I hated leaving for any length of time so close to the start of the school year, but I genuinely

needed it. I told the staff I was taking some time off to visit my family. To make it look more authentic, I packed up the few outfits I had in my room there into a small bag. I'd leave it in the woods somewhere to retrieve later. Or maybe I'd donate them. It was almost time for the seasons to change, so I'd need clothes that looked warmer. I went by Jillian's room on the way out, but she wasn't there. I hoped that maybe she was out with friends somewhere discussing how things were going with Micah. I was pleased to learn he had written her over the summer. I scribbled a note explaining my sudden absence.

Hey Jillian!

I'm off visiting family. I should be back soon. You have fun, and I will, too. Then we can trade stories when I come back.

Love ya!

Katie

I slid it under her door and left to go face my task. I was actually glad I missed her. I had a hard time saying good-bye, even if it was just for a little while. And my job took some mental preparation for me, even now. I was sad for days before and after; I was better off alone.

I went to meet my sisters in the warm waters off the coast of Florida. This was also known as the location of the mysterious Bermuda Triangle. Once this myth began, we used it to our advantage. Though I'd never seen anything to rival the experience of the *Kobenhavn*, here we could take down ships, and this modern world would accept its disappearance as an unanswerable mystery. The simplicity of the mind I was to inherit... I admired it and found it comical at the same time.

Two of my sisters greeted me warmly, swimming into a frenzy at my arrival. Aisling, as always, kept her distance. She looked more and more miserable as the years passed. I don't

know what she had to worry about anymore; she knew how to do this job better than any of us and only had four years to go until she was free from it. Maybe she really just disliked our company. It had been decades, and by now I should just ignore her. She'd be out of my life soon enough as it was.

The Ocean wanted us to go a few miles south of where we had met. After a short swim, we climbed up and stood gracefully on the water. We assumed our provocative positions, the details of our task now like second nature. Aisling always chose to lie on her side. Elizabeth embraced Miaka, much like I had when we met. They were so close now; Elizabeth and Miaka were always on the same page. Miaka had not only come out of her shell, but destroyed it and walked away without looking back. I thought of our escapades. I missed them. My time would be up soon; I should spend some more of it with my sisters.

To vary the levels, I sat on my knees and fanned out my dress. It was aqua today, as tropical as the air that lifted our hair and ruffled our hems. And when She urged us on, we sang. It was late in the day, so the setting sun backlit the boat as it came towards us from the west. *It's on its way out, starting a trip*, I thought suddenly, *just like mine*. I banished the thought and focused on the song though it did not need my attention. Eighty years had passed, and some days I felt as guilty as if my ship went down yesterday.

The boat was a jagged shadow on the Ocean's beautiful curves. It was a few miles away when it started to tilt to one side. It was sinking slowly, but not so slow that a rescue would help. The ship took on more and more water for some unknown reason, and people began jumping overboard. A handful made it to the boats on the far side, the side that wouldn't see the four mysterious women and tell tales later.

I was close enough to see the faces of individuals, but I meticulously guarded my gaze. As usual, some swam towards us, but they started breathing the water and never finished their trek. The boat was a distorted triangle hanging on air, a few moments away from disappearing.

She told us we could stop, so we unanimously ended our song. And once we were silent, I heard her.

The sound wouldn't have made any sense to anyone else, but after years of being around the unguarded mouths of the deaf, I knew that voice was one that couldn't articulate words as well as most. But, more than that, the tone of it, the pitch was familiar. My years as a siren made my ears keen. So even though she had never made a noise like that in front of me before, I knew who it was. My sisters all stood aghast as I walked back towards the boat.

I didn't have to search too hard to see Jillian's face. She was actually quite close to me. She was flailing her arms trying to stay afloat, looking for someone who must have been with her. I guess if an alarm had sounded, someone would have had to tell her. She was screaming out formless syllables, all of her words trapped in her swinging hands. I stood there stunned.

Knowing what was happening was bad enough— she was drowning, and there was nothing I could do about it— but then, as if to torture me for every life I'd ever seen pass, Jillian turned and saw me. She kept trying to stay up but seeing me there standing on the water had made her motions slow. She was trying to focus. Of course it didn't make sense. I said her name, but she wouldn't have known it. How strange— Jillian's inability to hear was something most people had seen as a flaw in her body, but that was the only thing that could have, should have saved her from such a moment.

But it didn't.

She reached out her hand for me. I begged the Ocean. "Keep her! Keep her, please! That's Jillian, that's *my* Jillian!"

She could not. We were at four, and that was Her limit. She had to guard Her secret. And beyond that, Jillian's inability to hear would make her almost completely incapable of doing this job. I didn't see how; I didn't really sing in my past life. How could this matter?

And, more to the point, She said, would I really wish this long life on a friend, even if there was a chance of keeping her?

I thought. That was a cruel way to state it, to turn my own worries back on me in the body of a friend. Whatever suffering there was, I couldn't let her die.

“Please. Do something!” I cried. Tears fell from my face. When I cried out, I saw other people around Jillian sink a little more. My disobedience was speeding up the process for them as it passed over Jillian's perfectly soundless ears.

The Ocean stood firm. If Jillian managed to survive on her own, that was one thing, but She could not interfere, and neither could we.

I looked at my sweet Jillian. Her hand was still outstretched waiting for me to rescue her. Life was just a collection of small decisions, every little left and right bringing you to ruin. If only Jillian had taken this trip a week later. Or if she had flown. And my own decision to leave early— I would have known about this trip if I had stayed just a day or two more.

The Ocean instructed me to leave. Now. But I stood looking on at my beloved friend. Jillian wasn't strong enough. It would be my fault. Stupidly, I took a step forward. The Ocean seemed to audibly growl at me to go, at my sisters to act. To my surprise, it was Aisling who pulled me under. The sight of Jillian's frightened face was burned in my mind.

Aisling scolded me as we moved. “Idiot! She could have killed you then. Disobeying an order. And so close to the end! What the hell is wrong with you? Do you want to waste it all?” She kept on and on until we reached the abandoned shore of a private beach. I didn't hear her reprimands anymore. I was sobbing with nothing to be done to stop it. Jillian was dying, or had died, and I had a hand in it.

My loss. My sin. My fault.

I thought I had forgiven the Ocean. I thought I had forgiven myself. I thought I was fine with who I was and what I did.

I was wrong.

I still felt it all under the surface. I felt the reason why I was never really able to be comfortable, even if I had done a thousand wonderful things. My ache for what I lost when that sunny day turned suddenly black so long ago was as strong as ever. The terror at becoming a part of what I wasn't meant to survive was there, ugly behind my eyes. I pushed it back year after year, but it was there.

No wonder we were wiped clean at the end of this. How was I supposed to exist knowing what I'd done?

Aisling dragged me up onto the abandoned coast with a disgusted look on her face. The tightness of her grip would have left bruises on anyone else. She half threw me on the ground and shook her head. Behind her, I saw Miaka and Elizabeth come running out of the water with their hands full of sea foam dresses. Once they were up the beach, Aisling left without another word. The others came to hold me, patting my head and whispering condolences, hopefully quietly enough to spare any ears that we didn't see. I was so ashamed.

"My fault," I whispered as I cried. "Always my fault."

"No," Miaka said.

"This isn't your fault, Kahlen. You didn't do this *to* your friend. You've told me so yourself: Every soul passes through the gate. Every life ends. You didn't do anything wrong. It's not your fault," Elizabeth said in hushed and urgent tones.

"It is! It always is."

"What are you talking about? 'Always?' What do you mean?" Miaka asked.

"My family."

"What?" Elizabeth asked.

"My family," I sobbed. The memories of my last moments on the boat flooded me. It was fuzzy and broken, but I remembered my family. Their faces were gone now, but I knew who they were. My father was on the trip, but he was

busy all day. My brothers and I— I remembered their names: Alex and Tommy— went around the boat together, enjoying the magic of our floating home. And my mother, my beautiful mother... her face was gone, but I remembered she was beautiful. She was supposed to stay with me when we sank, but I was sucked away. All I have left of her are her last words as the wave came towards us: “Take a deep breath, Kahlen. Hold on tight.”

The same words Marilyn left me with. The same words in every nightmare.

The Ocean knew how guilty I felt about losing them all; the damn trip had been my idea. Because of my insistence, I lost them all. Though Alex made it out alive, his survival didn't make it any easier. I wondered for years what he must have seen and heard as he struggled to just keep living. I was a part of what would have surely been nightmares for him.

Marilyn knew that I would have a hard time without her with me, and she hoped I would hold on for their sakes. She chose her last words to me deliberately, hoping I wouldn't give up. God, how many times had I thought of going the same way as Ifama? But I wasn't brave enough to do that. Instead I stayed and killed the only friend I'd ever chosen. I joined the mob that took my family.

“I wasn't alone when I was taken. My family went down, too. It was my fault.”

They didn't say anything. Though my head was down I could feel them looking at each other. I had never shared that detail with them. When Miaka and Elizabeth asked how I came to be a siren, I kept the story simple. I told them I was on a steamer to London, and I had begged to live, just like them. Marilyn had known it all. And the Ocean knew. She knew everything. How could She do this to me?

“Kahlen... we didn't know...” Miaka reached out for me sympathetically. Elizabeth followed suit.

I shook them off of me and ran into the water. I couldn't bear to be around them; I was too ashamed. I had to get to Maine. Surely, in a few days, there would be a funeral. But maybe Jillian made it. The chances were small, but I could hope until I knew.

I got into the water, not bothering to address Her. I was there because it was the fastest way to where I wanted to go, end of story. The Ocean spoke as I moved. She was sorry that I had lost my friend.

So, that quickly, I found out. Jillian was gone.

She couldn't change what happened and was sorry I had to see that. She asked me to not be upset with Her—it was just something She had to do.

I didn't respond.

She offered to take me to my island. She said I should get away from all of this.

If the Ocean had a face to glare into, I would have shot Her a vicious look. As if I would ever want that thing again. I'd burn the trees to the ground myself.

I didn't respond.

She told me not to do anything rash. Stay calm. In a few years, I wouldn't even have this memory.

I didn't respond.

I didn't believe Her. I was sure that I would somehow always know how horrible I had been, the pain I had caused. The Ocean responded to my directionless thoughts. She reminded me the *She* caused the pain, not me. She was trying to sooth me, but I wouldn't have it. I finally lost my temper.

Get the hell out of my head! Leave me alone! For God's sake, I give You all I have, and You take it, You just take everything! My family, my life, any fraction of hope that I might be a decent person— You've got it all. I have nothing left for You to take, so leave me alone— I hate You!

Water cringing is an unimaginable feeling, but I have felt it. We had been closer than She had been with anyone before me, She had hurt me beyond repair, and now She had to feel it. I didn't care if She dried up. Let the whole earth disintegrate. She was taking it all in fractions as far as I could tell anyway. I moved as fast as I could, anxious to be out of Her. Finally, I felt that the water was the same as it should be near Maine. I got out, but knew immediately I was in the wrong place. I didn't even care.

It was nearly twilight now, and I climbed onto the rocky coast in the orange-pink glow of the fading day. It was quite a climb, and the algae-covered boulders didn't help. I meant to be swift, but the struggle could not be sped up. Mercifully, no one saw me. I didn't want to wear this dress anymore, but I wasn't going to ask Her for money or hunt down something worth stealing, so I kept it on as I ran.

It was a good thing that I couldn't physically hurt. I felt the rocks and sticks prick the soles of my feet as I made it across a street and into some woods. I noted a lighthouse to the south of me as I found a small opening in the growing brush. I stepped, dodging branches unnecessarily and hurtling even more boulders. What were they even doing in here?

I stopped not nearly far enough in. I was about to break down with the weight of my sadness. My body could handle the run, but my heart could not. After a few more steps I saw a large fallen tree that rested on the ground. The ground just in front of it was packed in; this was someone else's haunt. I sat down on this accidental bench, pulled my knees to my chest and wept as silently as I could.

I don't know how long I sat there, but it was getting dark when I looked up again. I knew I wasn't near Portland; I was too far north. I hadn't been paying attention. But, wherever I was, I could lie low here. In a few days I could figure out what to do about Jillian's funeral. Had her parents been on that ship? Who would I need to find? Should I go back to the school? How was I supposed to face them? And Micah! I

wasn't sure about his feelings, but they were deep enough that this would break him like it broke me.

Wait. Maybe I wouldn't be welcome at a funeral. No one would know, of course, but it's not usual for murderers to pay their respects to their victims. And I would probably cry... who knew what I might cause by that? I would have cursed my voice a thousand ways if I'd had sufficient words. But then again, thinking those words would never have been enough. I needed to scream. This moment deserved that. There's only so much sound you can hold inside.

I'd have to find another way of saying good-bye. Going to any sort of funeral would probably produce more harm than good. How much damage could I cause in my lifetime? Granted, my lifetime would end up being at least double what others had, so I had twice the capacity for bad, but still. I was at the end of any plans I could make today. So I sat there and waited for something to guide me out of this place.

"Hello?" someone asked. I put myself on guard immediately. This voice was masculine; it wasn't a sister. It didn't sound frightening. On the contrary, it sounded sweet. But I knew if someone meant to hurt me tonight, they were in for a hell of a fight.

I didn't want to hurt another person, not after what I'd just done. But I was admittedly vulnerable right now. I looked around for the source of this voice, and, at once, all of my emotions melted into calm.

I knew this face.

This was the face I had put to memory to keep me company: the boy throwing rocks. His face was nervous. He saw my tears and was worried about scaring me.

Of all days to cross my path... again.

The last time I saw him, he looked so formal. Here he was in torn jeans and a close fitting T-shirt. Not nearly as tidy as last time, but even more handsome than I had remembered. There was no sadness in his face now, only gentle concern.

I should have moved. I would have, except that I was far too happy to see him. It was the wrong emotion to have at a time like this, but I was relieved.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

I shook my head no. I had never been less alright than today.

“Are you lost?”

If only he knew what he was asking me. And, though it wasn't how he meant it, I nodded.

“What's your name?”

I shook my head.

“Did you forget it?”

I shook my head.

“Can't you speak? I mean... you must hear me. Is your voice broken?”

Yes! I nodded. It was so broken.

“Alright, then. So, you can't talk right now, but you do know your name... does it start with an A? B?”

He went down the alphabet until he got to K. This would be a long game. If only I had some paper. Or if he could sign. I tried spelling my name with my hands, but he didn't understand.

“It's okay. We'll figure it out later. How about, for now, could I just call you Kay?”

I nodded.

“Were you here with other people?”

No.

“Are you hurt?”

No.

“Do you feel sick at all?”

No.

He paused for a moment, out of questions.

“Well, I guess the only thing to do is call someone. See if we can find out who you belong with. Do you want to come with me? Maybe I can help you.”

Despite all the sadness I had felt today, this made me happy. I nodded.

“Okay then. Here, let me help you.”

He walked over to me and wrapped his arm around my waist. He put my arm over his shoulder and helped raise me to my feet. I must have looked weak. I did feel kind of lightheaded.

“You lost your shoes,” he noted. “They must have been something special to go with a dress like that.”

Yes... this dress. What in the world must I look like to him? Wait, wasn't that the same thought I had the last time I saw him?

“You smell kind of like the ocean. Were you at a party on a boat, maybe? Did you fall off? That'd be something! Oh, but you were in the woods... sitting on a log... in an evening gown. No, that doesn't exactly work. You, madam, are a mystery.” He laughed at his own conclusion.

We hobbled along in silence. I was too aware of his hands on my skin and how warm he felt beside me. He looked down at me like he was trying to figure me out. After a moment, his face switched from being curious to an expression that I didn't know. He stopped walking, and with his arm around me I had to stop, too. He stared. I wasn't used to being looked at that way, not up close. I blushed and ducked my head.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, you're right. It's getting late. Better hurry.” But, when he wasn't dodging branches, I could feel his eyes fall back onto me.

CHAPTER 6

Once we made it out of the brush he took me up in his arms. I could walk just fine, but I had tripped a lot with his arm around my waist. I couldn't complain about the new mode of transportation though. I happily rested in the stranger's arms. I'd never in my life, both past and present, been this close to a boy. My heart danced in my chest. He was watching where he was going but looked down to my face every once in a while when he made some ridiculous comment.

"It's nice out tonight. You couldn't pick a better evening to go and get yourself lost. I mean, look at that moon. Perfect night for going missing, don't you think?"

I couldn't help but smile. Who said things like that? Really?

I appreciated that— how he tried to keep me calm.

I studied his face while he carried me, shocked because I remembered exactly how he looked four months ago, and he didn't look quite the same now. His hair was longer, but only marginally. Like he had cut it a few months ago, and it had already grown back out and then some. And his face was darker, tanner. He must have been spending a lot of time in the sun. In his pressed pants and button-up shirt, he didn't seem like much of an outdoorsy kind of guy, but now it was obvious that he did work outside. His hands, which I had felt on my arm as we walked earlier, were coarse. The calloused parts of his skin pulled on the delicate blue fabric of my dress, snagging it.

I was confused. The two images I had of him contradicted one another. Who was he? The same person, certainly. I knew because of his eyes. They were the exact same calm blue as before. The one part of him that was absolutely, perfectly similar to my memory. Except they seemed brighter now, hopeful. How many hours had I spent thinking of those eyes? He caught me looking into them more than once.

My thoughts bounced in my head. I felt overwhelmed. I was still angry and sad over losing Jillian. I had no idea how to

make the amends I felt I must. Jillian's last thoughts of me would be full of horror— a friend standing on water, yelling words she couldn't hear, and then leaving her to die. How could I ever make this right? And my sisters. I was mean to them. I had just been thinking that I should spend more time with them, but I swatted them off me and ran away. Would they understand? Would they forgive me?

I had upset the Ocean. I had hurt Her like She hurt me. I had even disobeyed Her. I wondered in a circle of thought. If She'd thought that there would have been anyone to see what I'd done, maybe She would have killed me there. But there were no survivors. If I had just seen Jillian and gone under and asked Her to let Jillian live without making a scene, would She have spared my friend? Let there be just one survivor in the end? I didn't think so, but still, maybe my actions made it worse.

And this boy. This was bad. I was leaving the silent sanctuary of the deaf schools. Even though I hadn't made the tiniest of sounds there in all these years, those schools were what let me safely interact with humans. There was no guard here. And— even peculiar to me— there was the fact that I had seen him twice now.

I made a point of avoiding the handful of people who took notice of me over the years if I could. Mostly for fear of exactly what had happened with Jillian today: that I would see their faces again in the one place I never hoped to. But it seemed that he didn't remember me from that day. And though it made me blush to think it, I was glad if that was the case. I looked horrible at the time. Here my skin was still glowing a little, my hair was damp and a little curly, and I was beautiful in this dress. I wanted him to think I was pretty. I was surprised by my own vanity.

I was full of conflicting emotions. Sorrow and joy, love and hate, confusion and clarity all fought in my heart at the same time. But I didn't have to think about it for too long.

“And here we are, madam,” he said, striding across the front lawn of a beach house. It hadn’t been a very long walk at all. The house was two stories tall. Not a huge house, but by no means cramped. It was white but faded and had light blue shutters. There was a short driveway with a car in it and a small walkway that lead from the driveway to the porch. I could see lights on inside. The house looked lived in. There was a pair of shoes outside the door and a blanket draped over a chair. A small edge of a garden lined the porch— enough greenery to make it attractive, but small enough to not be too much work. The house was old fashioned, but it still seemed new. It had personality. I felt warm almost immediately.

Looking around, I saw that the backyard must end in rocks by the coast; the Ocean spread out as the backdrop for the little house. I’ll bet he would think that was a beautiful view. Before today, I might have as well. Looking to the left, I saw a patch of grass that ended in a dense wooded area. The road curved back, and there were other houses much farther down in that direction, away from the Ocean. To the right there were a few more houses to be seen before the road turned again. I saw hushed lights in the distance; there must be a town there.

“Julie, put on some coffee. We’ve got company,” he yelled as we walked through the front door. The stranger had kicked off his shoes before carrying me over the threshold and into the house. I was warmed by the familiar rule.

“Who’s here?” a girl’s eager voice called out. We had entered through the kitchen door. In all the houses I’d stayed in, I’d never seen one where the front door opened into the kitchen. Julie wasn’t in this room. She walked around the corner and stopped, stunned. Her eyes locked on my appearance in shock. I should have changed clothes. I wasn’t exactly planning on being rescued.

“Actually, I don’t know her name,” he said. “I found her like this, alone in the woods. She can’t speak, and she can’t remember much of anything. I think she might be in shock or something.”

“Get her in some blankets,” Julie said quickly. “BEN! Get down here!”

I heard someone grumble upstairs. Ben was slow to move, so Julie went to get him while my handsome rescuer sat me gently in a chair. He went over to a drawer and grabbed some paper and a pen.

“I know you can’t speak, but do you think you could write?” he asked.

I nodded my head.

He smiled encouragingly and set the paper on my lap. He sat there, waiting for me to write down something I needed. There was only one need on my mind, a thought that had troubled me for months.

What’s your name? I wrote.

“Oh! Oh, gosh, I’m sorry. I got so caught up there. I’m Akinli,” he said extending his hand to shake mine. I took it, gave a small shake, and took in the feel of his hand. It was warm, rough from working.

Akinli. I liked it. I’d never heard that one anywhere in all the places I’d traveled. It seemed appropriate that this person, who was set apart from the world in my mind, had a name that was his alone.

“And you are?” he asked.

Kahlen.

“Cah-lynn?”

It sounds like Kay- len.

“Oh. Kahlen. That’s a nice name. Hey, I at least got the Kay part, huh? Not bad.” He smiled. “It’s nice to meet you. You gotta last name, Kahlen?”

I shook my head. We only ever went by our first names as sisters. I didn’t even remember what my old one used to be.

“What happened to you?”

I couldn't imagine a good story fast enough, so I just shrugged.

"Are you sure your family or someone isn't looking for you?"

The Ocean might be looking for me. But that wasn't something I could share.

I don't remember anyone else. I just ended up in the woods.

"Wow," he said. "Well it looks like you aren't beat up at least. That's good."

I figured I should be more concerned about myself than I was. I had to ask him something that mattered so I wouldn't seem crazy. I found a legitimate thought.

Where am I?

"Oh, umm... well, my house... is that what you mean?"

I shook my head.

"Maine. You're in Port Clyde, Maine. Does that help?"

I had never heard of it before, but at least it was a starting point. I nodded.

Just then Julie returned with Lazy Ben by her side. He looked me over as Julie had and came to the same shocked expression.

"Dude, what the hell?" he said to Akinli.

"She's lost. I'm trying to help her. What was I supposed to do? Leave her in the woods?"

I didn't blame this Ben guy. He was on the right track. I didn't look as evil as I was, but it was wise to be cautious with me. Ben looked a lot like Akinli. Not nearly as handsome in my eyes, but familiar.

"We should call the police," Julie said. "If she's missing, surely someone will be looking for her, and they would know." I have observed that some women have mothering instincts even in their youth. I've seen little girls guard kittens with the

fierceness of tigers, aware from the start of their lives that they were meant to protect whatever was placed in their care. Julie knew how to take care of others. She would be an amazing mother.

The police did come but couldn't do much after all I had to offer them was a first name. An ambulance came, gave me a once over, and said, except for a funny sound in my lungs, I was perfectly healthy. I knew that already. No one was looking for me, of course, so all of this fanfare was for nothing. I felt guilty for putting this on them all, but I was greedily taking in these few moments with Akinli. I'd have to go away soon. I just wanted to save a few more of his expressions and his voice. Maybe they would help the years go by faster. I'd earned that by now; I deserved some comfort.

I was honestly dreading walking out of these doors. I didn't know where to go next. I lived my life as a nomad, but I usually had a plan. I couldn't go say good-bye to Jillian, so that was out. There was no way I was going back to the school. Thank goodness I had cleared out my room. All I'd have to do now was send a note with some excuse, and they'd move on without me. I guess I could go back to Elizabeth and Miaka. I didn't want to get in the Ocean again though. Not this soon. I'd just hide out somewhere for a little while... until I had a plan.

I don't know if I was supposed to or not, but I heard one of the officers speaking to Akinli, Ben, and Julie in the kitchen. The EMTs had finished their once-over and left me huddled in excessive blankets in the living room. I was the hot topic of conversation.

“What we can do is take her down to the station. We can put her in a cell for the night, and in the morning if no one's looking for her, we can try to set her up with a home in the city. She doesn't know how old she is, so she might not be able to take care of herself legally. She'd belong to the state. At this point, that's all I know to do.”

“Wait. Put her in a cell? Like a criminal?” Akinli said, outraged at the thought. “Or a home, like some abandoned pet?”

“I know it seems severe, but she’ll be alone tonight and perfectly safe. Getting her into a house shouldn’t be a problem, and, confused as she is, it’d probably do her good to be around other people; find a place she can settle.” The officer was trying to calm them.

“That sounds kind of harsh though,” Julie said. She didn’t even know me, and she came to my defense.

“I understand it sounds bad, but there are two things we have to think about. One, we want to keep her safe. This girl might be a danger to herself. And two, we have to protect other people from her. She doesn’t have any identification, and we don’t know how she got here. Who knows what she’s done? We can check her prints to figure out who she is, but that’ll take a while. We don’t want anyone to be hurt by some unknown girl. She needs to be watched.”

So they were going to put me in a jail cell. I wondered if this body was strong enough to bend bars. If they were only going to keep me in there a night, that shouldn’t be a big deal. I could wait a night. Then, whenever they took me away, I’d just run. I wouldn’t have to stop. I’d be halfway across the country before they got out of the state. But in the middle of my scheming, I heard Akinli’s voice.

“What if she stayed here with us?” he asked. I couldn’t see it, but the silence let me know they were all staring at him.

“Dude, the cop just told you the girl could be nuts. Yeah, why don’t we just let a psycho move in? Great idea.” Ben had the same strange sarcasm as Akinli.

“Ben, are you seriously telling me you’re scared of a girl in a prom dress who can barely walk and can’t speak. Ohhhh, she’s sooo dangerous.” Yes, they were definitely related. I smiled to myself. I was dangerous, but I was glad Akinli didn’t see me that way. He paused for a moment. “Besides, I carried

her here, and she was trembling. She's scared. I think something bad happened to her, and I don't think she should be put in a jail cell after whatever she went through."

Had I really trembled? I didn't know I could do that.

"I don't think I feel comfortable with a stranger in the house," Julie mumbled. She clearly felt guilty for feeling that way.

"You just said that all that other stuff was a bad idea, too. Let her stay. She's perfectly harmless. She can stay in the guest room, and I'll sleep on the couch and keep an eye on her," Akinli said.

There was more silence.

"Come on. There's no telling what she's been through. She's all alone. I can't stand someone being put in jail for the simple crime of getting lost," he said.

More silence.

"Officer, is that okay?" Julie asked.

"If you want to take temporary guardianship of her, that's fine. Eventually, we'll have to do some legal work, but for tonight, at least, that's up to you," he replied.

There was more silence. And then Ben spoke up.

"If I get hacked to death in the night, I'm haunting your ass," he said, obviously to Akinli.

The officer laughed.

"It'll be fine," Akinli replied.

And with that, it was settled. I got a few more moments with this wonderful boy.

I figured out that Akinli, like me, must be a guest here. He wouldn't have to ask permission otherwise. And though Ben and Julie had allowed me to stay, they were nervous about it. After the circus of people left, I didn't see Ben or Julie again. I think they locked themselves in their room.

I don't know how long I sat there in the living room, but after the house was quiet, Akinli walked down the stairs. He looked at me with a gentle smile. I remembered that smile.

"I don't know if anyone told you, but you're going to be staying here tonight. I hope that's okay with you."

I smiled and nodded. As if he had to ask my permission.

"Are you hungry at all?" he asked.

I shook my head no.

"Are you sure? It's been a long night. You're welcome to anything here."

I smiled and shook my head again.

"Okay. But you must be getting tired. I'll go get something... less..." he waved his hands around in circles looking for the word, "frilly for you to sleep in. You'll be staying in there," he said, pointing to a door behind me. He vanished upstairs again. I went to the door and took a peek.

As planned, I was going to be staying in a guest room just off the living room. By the floor boards and where it was placed, I could see this room had once been a porch. Now it was enclosed for some reason or another and a new porch had been built outside it. The room had a large bay window that faced the Ocean. The middle window was wide open. They must have a low crime rate in Port Clyde.

Her waves were quiet. I looked at Her and, like a child, stuck out my tongue. I guess I wasn't really breaking rules right now, but it was the closest I could get. And She wouldn't know about it, and it felt freeing. I don't know if I'd ever done anything for the sole purpose of being spiteful. But then again, I wasn't staying with Akinli for spite alone. He returned to find me in the guest room.

"This is the best I can do. Julie's already asleep, and I don't think much of what I have is going to fit you." He handed me a pair of boxer shorts that would no doubt need a safety pin to stay up and a green shirt that I guessed was too small for him.

Boys never throw away things they should. He closed the door behind him, and I changed into his clothes. I felt strange about that. It seemed inappropriate, but my other option was to wear the dress all night. I couldn't handle having Her on me right now, and I didn't want to hurt Akinli's feelings.

I emerged from the room to find him on the couch where I had been earlier. He was sitting in pajamas of his own and watching TV. Sweet, typical, American boy. I found the paper from earlier and asked for a safety pin, which took several minutes to find. Once I was sure my bottoms were going to stay up, I relaxed a little. I felt exposed like this.

"Do you want to hang out for a little while? Watch some TV?" he invited.

Not knowing when I'd have to leave him, I nodded my head, and we settled onto the couch together. I pulled into a ball to cover myself up; I felt so insecure. He mistook this posture for coldness, so he pulled a blanket off the back of the couch and messily spread it over me. The channel was showing a commercial, but even from that I could tell we would be returning to sports. I had never been athletic myself, so I didn't know much about any sport. I knew lots of guys liked football. Was this the season for football? When the show came back, it was full of giant men in tight clothes.

Akinli noticed my puzzled expression. He laughed.

"It's a strong man competition. These things crack me up."

We watched as men carried refrigerators, lifted huge smoothed boulders, and flipped massive tires in strange races. It was truly entertaining. And when the first man came up to pull an eighteen-wheeler into motion from a standstill, I pointed at the television and shook my fingers wildly. I couldn't believe any human was that strong! I was quite durable, but I was sure that even I couldn't do that.

"I know, I know!" he cried out. "It's crazy!"

I nodded my head with a giddy smile on my face. He looked over at me and laughed. This must be what normal felt

like. Jillian sometimes made me feel this way, like I was average.

Between the contests, he asked me questions, and I scribbled down the answers. They were easy enough.

“Favorite food?”

Cake. Any cake! Desserts in general.

“I can respect that. Cake is a good one, brownies, too. Mmmm.” I nodded in agreement. “I’m more of a pizza guy myself, though... Okay, favorite color?”

I like blues.

“Really? I was expecting pink. I thought all girls loved pink.” I rolled my eyes. He laughed. “Okay, I’m wrong. I got it. Well, I guess you were wearing blue when I found you. Did you pick out that dress?”

I didn’t know how to answer that one. “No” would have been the honest answer, but I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to remember that detail. Then I wondered if I should be able to remember that I liked cake. I would have looked lost in thought, which I suppose is how I should look. This was going to be complicated. I shrugged.

“Fair enough. I like blue, too. What else... oh, favorite season?”

Autumn.

“Why autumn?”

I guess, I had to think a moment, I like the change. That everything is supposed to be dying, but it looks so lovely. And it’s predictable. Winters can be too cold or springs too wet or summers too dry, but falls are always beautiful.

“Wow. I like the way you said that. I think I feel the same way, but I wouldn’t have known what words to use, you know?” He smiled at me. “If you like fall, you would love it here. It’s amazing! I hope you get to see it.”

I felt strange at that. Was he planning to keep me around that long? He looked like he was almost blushing.

“Umm... what else? Do you like music?”

We passed the time so easily, I didn't notice how late it had gotten. I didn't need sleep, but I knew he must. So I pointed to the clock, to myself, and then to my room, letting him off the hook.

“Yeah, you're probably right. It's about that time.” He seemed as hesitant to leave as I felt.

“Are you scared at all? Will you sleep okay? I could stay up while you slept if you want.” He misread the shock on my face. “I mean, sorry, I'm not trying to be creepy. I just figured you had a really bad day, and it might be hard to sleep alone.”

I didn't know how to look helpless on purpose, so I looked hopeful and used my hands to express that he could come along.

I knew I was in trouble. I was already attached to him. Everything about him made me comfortable, and it couldn't last. I knew that. I still had nineteen years to go. In nineteen years he would have a wife... maybe a family. Should that knowledge hurt me so much so soon? This would be short-lived. But I had no guarantee I would ever get to feel this again, no matter how long I lived after this life. So I took every second I could.

He pulled a cushy chair up near my bed. I crawled under the covers and faced him. His mouth pulled into his signature smile. I reached my hand out for his, and he took it. I squeezed it tight and looked at him with a gratitude that I hoped he would see.

Either he could see it or was a mind reader. He said “anytime.” He had no idea that I wasn't thanking him for temporary quarters. What I was thanking him for was a chance to feel something I had been waiting for a hundred years. Even if it only lasted a night, even if I was the only one who felt it, I was grateful.

I feigned sleep, and after a while I heard him move. He was standing close to me, I could tell that. I could hear him breathing. What was he doing? And then I felt his warm hand touch my forehead. And then my cheek. I held my act steady though his touch made me feel more than awake.

“Where in the world did you come from, you beautiful, silent girl?” he whispered. I felt him linger over me. It probably should have bothered me, but instead I tried to mentally will him closer. After a moment, I heard him slowly creep out of the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

I waited a few minutes. I heard the springs on the couch protest his squirming, but after a few moments he settled, and the whole house was quiet. I waited. His light snores carried into the guest room. I tiptoed across the floor and opened the door. I sat in the doorframe and watched him sleep. The steady movement of his chest was comforting. I must have stayed there for hours. I couldn't pull my eyes away. It was like staring at a piece of art or the stars in the sky. I just had to watch him. What if he changed in the night and I missed it? I was perfectly comfortable propped up against the doorframe, spending a night silently close to Akinli.

It was around four when I heard the Ocean through the window asking where I was, if I was okay. I thought She'd give me more time. I didn't want to go to Her, and technically this wouldn't break the rules. She wasn't giving me an order; this was a friendly inquiry. But I had no desire to be friendly towards Her. I wondered if She would leave me alone if I didn't answer. Then I wondered if She would look for me in the rain or the fog. I'd have to give Her some kind of reply before She discovered what I was actually doing.

I could move quietly, that wasn't a problem. It was the house that made me nervous. I decided to crawl out the already open window. I crept across the porch and ran the short distance to the coast. The rocks were a little difficult to navigate, but I found their edge and sat perched for a moment. She was only inches away. Could She sense I was near? I

shielded my mind against Her, thinking only of the two words I needed to say. I shoved one foot deliberately into the water.

I'm fine.

I pulled my foot away and ran back to Akinli's house. She would know I was where She had left me, unharmed, and still obedient. Well, almost.

I managed to get back into the house without being missed. I wanted to go back to my spot by the door, but I didn't want to risk getting caught. Instead I curled up on the bed, full of thought. Sometimes I slept for the fun of it or to keep the habit because I would need it later. But tonight nothing could calm me. I stayed awake until the sun broke through the night in abundance.

I heard the three of them moving around, but I didn't want to intrude. They assumed I went through some ordeal, so maybe I should be really tired. I caught bits of their sentences, but I felt guilty about eavesdropping.

"I'll take Evan out, so it should be fine." That was Ben's voice.

"I can pick up a shift for him if he wants; tell him that." Akinli.

"I'm going out for the day; I'm running errands. Will you be okay with her?" Julie.

"Her name's Kahlen. And, gee, I don't know... she is smaller than me... and frightened and alone. Maybe I should call in reinforcements." Oh, Akinli...

"Shut up," Ben and Julie said in unison. How cute!

The noise settled, doors opened and closed, cars came and went. After a while, all I could hear was the one person left. Akinli was doing something.

Around eight he knocked on the door and poked his head in. I sat up on the bed, and he said, "Good morning, prom queen." An homage to my dress, I guessed. He came in with two plates of food and sat on the bed with me while we ate.

The food was completely average, which led me to believe he made it. I appreciated the effort.

He told me that Julie and Ben had gone out, but would be back in the afternoon, and maybe we could do something together. He had already called the station this morning; no one was searching for me, or at least, it hadn't been reported. He couldn't believe that no one was noticing my absence from wherever I belonged. And then he said something that made the first time we met, the meeting he didn't remember, make strange, sad sense.

"I hope your family isn't freaking out somewhere. My parents used to worry about me a ton. When I went off to college, my mom called me every day. She was one of those moms, you know? She took good care of me. I loved her like crazy. My dad, too. It was just the three of us, so we were really close."

I thought of my parents. They endlessly protected me, their oldest child, their only girl. They kept me out of danger as best they could. The biggest danger of my life had been my own doing. I lost them in the process. And two brothers—brothers I loved—all gone.

"My mom got sick during the fall of my junior year, so I went home. She had cancer, see. And once we were sure of how it was going to end, I had to go home. So I stayed with her and dad and just tried to be as good to her as she was to me."

Oh, no!

"Dad and I were making plans. He wanted me to go back to school, but I wanted to stay with him a while. I didn't think it'd be fair for me to just run off and leave my dad alone. Besides, I always liked being with my family..."

He got quiet for a moment.

"Then, Dad was taking Mom in for an appointment. I was supposed to go with them, but something came up. It was stupid. They got in an accident and... well."

Another pause. A long one. Steady breaths.

“At least I had been preparing to lose Mom, but her and Dad at once was hard.” His voice was strained. He wanted to cry, I could see it. But he wasn’t going to. Not in front of me.

“It’s been four months, and I think about them all the time.” He looked down.

I thought of that day on the beach. He was broken and thoughtful in his suit with no shoes. Four months ago. His eyes stayed focused on the bed or the plate or his foot, anything to keep him from meeting my eyes. He ached. And I understood all too well.

I took his arm and started writing letters on it with my finger. There was no way I was leaving him to go find paper. It took him a minute to understand what I was asking, but he started mouthing the letters and that helped.

“N-A-M-E-S... names? What? My parent’s names?” He finally looked into my eyes.

I nodded. He swallowed. And then smiled.

“Andrea. My mom was named Andrea. And my dad was Rick.”

Rick and Andrea. The people who had made this amazing person. The people he missed. The people he blamed himself for losing. He cleared his throat, and his eyes fell again.

“Anyway. If your parents or anybody is out there looking for you, we’ll help you find them, okay?”

Me? How could I be worried about me?! I was shocked. He hadn’t led his parents to their death— like I had— but he felt guilty for surviving. And in that moment, I saw what had been bothering me all this time. It wasn’t just that I had become a siren; it was that they died, and I lived.

Akinli and I both made it out of situations that should have left us dead, too. Instead, we just had to live without the people we loved.

And this wasn't his fault. It's not his fault he lived. And it wasn't my fault I lived either. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I had wanted to die, to finally end that battle in my head. I'd been selfish enough to believe I was the only person who had ever felt this pain. But I wasn't. Here, a normal boy with a real life could feel the exact same emotion. And then, in a completely different train of thought, I remembered Alex. He had survived our sinking ship with six other passengers. What must he have felt the rest of his life? He must have carried my death like a burden when he didn't have to... Oh, the things we weigh ourselves down with.

I touched Akinli's knee so he would look up at me. I touched my heart with my right hand and took the same hand and put it on his chest. I wanted him to know that I, all too recently, also knew what it meant to lose someone you loved, that I understood his pain. I wanted him to see that it wasn't his fault, that he would be okay. A million things I just wanted to say and couldn't.

While my hand was still on his chest, he brought his own hand up to hold it. It looked like the toughness that all men are supposed to hold on their faces was breaking a little. His eyes were wet, but he was still refusing to cry.

You don't have to be like that in front of me.

I didn't want a façade. I wanted *him*. But I couldn't explain that. He seemed to understand at the very least that I sympathized with him. And that was enough.

"Thanks, Kahlen," he whispered. I forgot what I was even thinking. I loved the way he said my name. We sat there on the bed, just watching each other. I don't know what my face looked like, but I saw the emotions walk across his. There was sadness, then calm, gratefulness, and then... wonder? It was a beautiful look on his face. I smiled, apparently a little too warmly. He leaned in a bit. I was unprepared, and my body flinched just a little. That small movement was enough to knock the plate, which had been balanced on my knee, onto

the floor. It didn't break, but the noise was enough to snap us both out of the moment.

CHAPTER 7

I didn't mind that we were stuck inside all day, but Akinli kept apologizing. I *liked* being alone with him, and I could guess that he felt some of my enthusiasm. I didn't know how to hide it. I kept telling myself to be careful, that these feelings were most likely one-sided. I knew I was incredibly naïve when it came to romance, but it had felt like he was going to kiss me earlier. If I was wrong, I didn't want to let myself hang onto that possibility. I repeated what I knew for sure: I was someone he felt obligated to take care of. I was someone he had to keep amused. Those were things that I knew were true.

Still, stupid as it was, I entertained the thought of kissing Akinli.

The reason we were indoors was completely practical. The only outfits I had were men's boxers or an evening gown. I doubted either would go over well in what I assumed was a small town. I had never heard of Port Clyde before, so it couldn't be that big. And the view gave me absolutely no clues as to my whereabouts. The road wound into a wooded stretch one way, and houses blocked the curving coast to the other. Across the street were houses similar to the one I was in, backed by thick woods that further impeded the view. An older woman lived in the house directly across from us. She came over with the ambulance last night in tears, worried for either Ben, Julie, or Akinli's welfare.

My limited vision was obnoxious. I was curious about where I was exactly. I couldn't see if the Ocean was my only way out. On the other hand, Akinli was right— this place would be beautiful in the fall.

I made all these observations while he was taking a shower upstairs. I wasn't going to go up there to see if the view showed anything more until I was invited into that part of the house. And also, he wasn't clothed up there.

Over the course of the morning, I had learned that Ben was Akinli's cousin. Ben and Julie had been living together for

years now, spanning the end of college and their jump into adulthood. They suited each other. She was sweet and cautious; he was spacey and comical. Akinli had only been living here a few months. I could guess why.

Akinli was here trapping lobster with Ben and two other strong, young men that made up their crew. I knew Maine had a reputation for good lobster, and these guys helped supply it. Knowing that he did such a labor-heavy job, I was a little surprised to find his name written into the margin of several books in the downstairs nook. It appeared he was studious, reading everything from fiction to history. There were even a few textbooks down there. But maybe those were Ben or Julie's.

The way he talked about Ben, you could tell he was like the brother Akinli never had. They had grown up together, and Akinli admitted that Ben had been his best friend since he was eight or so. The thought of the two of them small and causing trouble was incredibly amusing to me.

I could hear in his voice that he had a certain reverence for Julie. I sensed he thought it was a miracle that any woman could tolerate Ben. Akinli loved him, undoubtedly, but he was still surprised that Ben could hold onto someone as put-together as Julie. I don't know. Ben seemed like a nice enough guy to me.

The home was marked with signs of family. There were knickknacks on the shelves; someone in the house had a fondness for moose. One spot on the couch seemed particularly worn, and I guessed that was someone's favorite spot. A collection of pictures sat in frames and hung on the walls. Ben and Akinli held lobsters in both of their hands, sticking their tongues out in one. Julie sat on a bench surrounded by people I assumed were her parents and siblings in another. Ben and Julie sat together in a photograph obviously taken by a professional. Faces of people I had yet to meet were dotted around the house. This place was entirely theirs.

I heard a door open.

“The shower’s all yours,” Akinli called from upstairs. Another door closed. I didn’t really need or want a shower, but I had to pretend to be something close to normal. A normal girl would want a shower. I grabbed my dress, since it was all I had, and climbed the stairs to the one shower in the house. There was a half bath under the staircase, but no tub. I took in the upstairs quickly. I could hear Akinli moving in his room. The door to Ben and Julie’s bedroom was open. It was predominantly feminine but a little messy, which I liked. And then there was what looked like an office space in another small room. The office window was open— nothing but trees.

I took a fast shower. The warm water felt good but also unwanted in a way. I knew She wouldn’t feel me here, but the way the liquid ran across my skin was entirely too familiar. The dress was an issue, too. After the discomfort of the shower, I didn’t want to be in something that was Hers right now. It was my vanity that won out. I was comfortable wearing Akinli’s clothes at this point, but I looked better in the dress. I ran my fingers through my hair so it would pull apart and curl, and away I went.

I galloped down the stairs and found Akinli in the kitchen getting more food. We’d just eaten! Maybe I used to eat that much too and just couldn’t remember. He was barefoot in plain old jeans and a black cotton shirt. I knew he was strong; he had carried me here. But it was different to see his muscles pulling at his clothes. I fought back a blush. This whole situation was going to get a lot worse if I couldn’t keep some sort of hold on my thoughts. He looked up from whatever he was snacking on and saw me in my dress. He sighed and then smiled.

“Hold on. Wait right there,” he said, dashing past me up the stairs. I heard drawers opening and closing. A moment later he ran back down wearing a red silk tie and a silver cummerbund over the same t-shirt and jeans.

“There,” he said, straightening his tie. “Now you won’t feel overdressed.”

I breathed a laugh. It was tricky to keep the sound out, but the action could not be helped. He was just funny.

With pen and paper in hand he took me into the living room where we spent most of the morning. We were going through channels when I noticed that the house had a small collection of movies.

Which one is your favorite? I wrote.

He pulled out a box with a cover I hadn’t seen before— obviously a comedy.

“Have you seen this?”

I shook my head no.

“You. Couch. Now!” he commanded.

I smiled and bounced onto the couch. I rustled a little as I settled. Akinli put the movie on and sat close. But not too close.

The movie was ridiculous. Funny, for sure, but even gross in some places. I had to guard myself so I didn’t laugh out loud, and that was really, really difficult. Not because of the movie itself, but because of Akinli!

Before the first scene even happened, he was giggling. I was completely enthralled. I tried to watch the movie, but most of the time my eyes were on him. His eyes crinkled into slits when he laughed. He was just so beautiful. I couldn’t keep myself from studying him.

After lunch— which I was forced to eat and Akinli was eager to help himself to— we stayed at the kitchen table and found ourselves playing cards. I knew how to play poker because of my recent years around teenage boys. Jillian and I learned to play because it was something Micah liked to do. She wanted an excuse to be around him, so we started up weekly poker games. Jillian wasn’t quite comfortable doing this on her own, so I learned to play and went with her. We

learned the rules and what hand beat what all by ourselves. We could actually hold our own in the games with the boys. Our little gang wagered M&M's since gambling wasn't exactly permitted on school grounds. No one was ever brave enough to actually eat the M&M's after all our hands had been on them. Before the games started, Jillian would always set aside a handful of blue ones... her favorite.

I wasn't aware of the tears that memory brought on until they were spilling down my cheeks. They didn't escape Akinli's notice.

“Hey... hey, Kahlen? It's okay.”

He started rubbing my arm. Being consoled had the same effect as Miaka and Elizabeth's warm words—the tears came faster. The ache for Jillian made me want to wail. Silence was torture. I stayed quiet, but the tears ran anyway. Suddenly, Akinli was beside me with one arm around my waist. I felt bad for him. I was sitting there with two pair and a jack high—I was going to squash him—and then, for no apparent reason, I was sobbing. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable; he had already done so much for me.

“Do you want to talk about... well... do you want to write about it?” he asked encouragingly. The way he phrased things made me smile.

I figured if I set the precedent, he wouldn't feel like he had to be so guarded around me. But pretending not to remember things left me unsure of how to honestly explain myself without making things more complicated. He took my pause as a “maybe” and went to get my paper. I tried to collect my thoughts. He returned and pulled his chair close to mine, setting the pen and paper in front of me. What was I supposed to say? I paused with the pen in hand.

I think I had a friend who liked poker.

“Oh! Do you remember anything about him?”

Her.

“Sorry. Her, then?”

What was I supposed to say? The truth I guess...

Just that I loved her.

“Was she with you? When you got lost, I mean?”

No. She’s gone.

“Oh... *oh.*”

We were quiet for a minute.

“Well, you know I understand that, Kahlen. I’m sorry that something so sad is the first thing you remember.”

We looked at each other. His eyes were full of compassion. I liked that he gave me the room to be sad. Finally, someone who would let me be.

I felt awkward at being gloomy around him, but if that was what I needed, he wouldn’t try to make me feel any way I didn’t. It was almost comforting to not have to pretend.

“But, on the plus side, you remembered something. Yeah? That’s good. Do you remember her name at all?”

I didn’t want to write Jillian’s name on the paper. It felt criminal. Mercifully, Julie walked through the front door—that strange door that landed in the kitchen—and saved me.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. I saw her eyes go over our closeness and my tears. She had bags in her hands.

“Yeah. Kahlen here remembered something. Nothing to do with her getting lost. Just something... well, something sad,” Akinli spoke for me.

“Oh.” Her face fell a little as she looked at me.

It hurt to have people feel sorry for me. Maybe I deserved pity, but I didn’t want it. I gently pushed my chair back and went to walk out of the kitchen.

“Kahlen?” Ankinli’s voice was soft, wondering if I still needed company.

I shook my head no and put up a gentle hand to stop him. I needed a moment alone.

I walked into the guest room and shut the door. I wasn't sure what I'd see if I closed my eyes, but I slept anyway.

I woke to the sound of the TV going. It sounded like a crowd cheering. And then someone in the room yelled "Yes!" followed by another voice shushing the exclamation. It was dusk outside. I'd slept through the rest of the afternoon.

I didn't know which was ruder: to stay in the room and ignore the people who were opening their home to me, or to go out into the living room and make them remember I was still here while they were obviously enjoying some time together.

I decided to do the latter, but only because I wanted to see Akinli again. I was going to have to find a way to say goodbye. Soon. This afternoon had readjusted my perspective. My proximity to Jillian had hurt her. Yes, she would have died even if she hadn't known me, but those last few moments of her life would have been different. At least, along with the fear, she wouldn't have felt betrayal. I didn't want to have an opportunity to hurt Akinli.

Though it had been a little more emotional than I'd expected—with me sobbing and him near tears at one point—all in all, I had a good day with Akinli. I knew his voice now. I knew his laugh. I knew how his hair looked wet. I knew his face, either pale or tan. I knew how he absentmindedly popped his fingers. I knew that when he sat on the couch with any sort of intensity, he set his elbows on his knees leaning into whatever had his attention. I knew that when he was relaxed, he stretched out his legs and balanced his feet on his heels. I knew he scratched his head when he was bluffing at a good hand. I had a bundle of material. If those moments on the beach had helped me through a handful of months, this last day could surely occupy my mind for nineteen more years. I would have the best of him. In my mind, he would never age, just like me. He would always be perfect and happy in my head. Until... until a day came when I'd forget him. Forgetting Akinli... the thought was painful.

I shook it off. I straightened my hair and my dress, took a few steadying breaths and opened the door.

Not what I expected.

Julie, Ben, and Akinli were there, but so were two other guys and a girl I didn't know. Our expressions as we took one another in must have been something. Ben laughed as I quickly shook my head. But Akinli was quick to make me calm.

"Hey there, Prom Queen! Glad you woke up. Come meet some of our friends."

I walked out timidly. Julie and the new girl were huddled together around a magazine on the loveseat. The girl was watching me walk out with her jaw open. Ben and new guy number one were on the couch. Ben was an average-sized person, but his friend was pretty large. They took up the three-body space easily. New guy number two was in the lone chair. Akinli was sitting on the floor with his back against the sofa, so that's where I went. I sat close enough to him that he put his hand on mine. I guess he felt my nerves. He would have thought it was because of the strangers, and he was partly right. I was trying to get out of here and soon. It was bad enough Akinli, his only family, and the little old lady across the street knew about me. Here were three more witnesses.

"Okay, up there by Julie is Kristen." Kristen smiled and waved. Her eyes wandered my body with envy. She seemed a little more interested in my dress than me. I couldn't blame her.

"This is Kristen's boyfriend, John." The guy on the couch mumbled a "whatup," all one word. Why was that popular? I'd heard it before.

"And then, that guy is Evan." The guy in the chair merely lifted his chin. Evan was big, too. He was as big as John but firmer. He had a beer in his hand. That made me look around. John, Ben, and Kristen all had beers, too.

Quietly, so no one else would know, Akinli whispered, “Are you doing okay?”

I smiled and nodded. I wanted his last thoughts of me to be warm ones. I was all too good at putting on my brave face.

“So you’re tha girl that’s taking ma room?” Evan asked, his speech slurred a bit. I just shrugged in response.

“These are the guys that work on the boat with us. On Fridays we hang out, watch a game, and drink a few beers. Evan likes to stay here so he doesn’t have to drive home. He lives just outside of town.” Akinli explained quietly. His face was close enough to mine that I could smell the alcohol on his breath. But he didn’t have a drink in his hand. I learned two things in that quick second: Akinli was at least twenty-one, and he knew when to cut himself off.

“You don’t talk?” Evan asked.

I shrugged again.

“Wha the hell does tha mean?” he asked, popping open another beer.

I didn’t like Evan. That’s all it took. I got up and went to the kitchen. On the countertop were my ravaged sheets of paper, covered in halves of questions and scratched out lines. I took it and my pen with me back to the living room. I wrote a note and passed it to Akinli who laughed.

“She says, ‘If I thought you were sober enough to read, I’d try to explain. As it is, I’ll just be pleased if you manage not to puke on me.’”

Everyone snorted or giggled. Except for Evan. He glared at me. I had meant it as a little bit darker than a joke, but I honestly didn’t know if he’d be able to understand it. Count on a drunk to miss everything you say save your insults. I’d obviously offended him in front of his friends, and now he disliked me as much as I disliked him. Except for Aisling, I don’t think I’d ever made an enemy that fast. But that was good. When I left, he’d be the one saying it was better I was gone. I could count on him for that.

A few minutes later, all the attention went back to the TV. Within an hour, Evan was passed out on the chair. I tugged on Akinli's sleeve to get his attention. I motioned towards the kitchen. When I stood, he followed. He really was easy to communicate with, all things considered. In the kitchen, I sat at the table and started writing. Before I could finish, he spoke.

“Are you hungry?”

I shook my head no and then thought better of it. I probably should be hungry. I just didn't feel like bothering with eating. I passed him my note.

I think I should go. Like with the police. I'm interfering here, and I don't want that. You can't babysit me all day while you wait for someone to show up looking for me. I'm sure the officers would be fine with coming to take me. And I really don't mind.

I had thought this was the best idea. This way, he would think I was being looked after and feel absolutely no guilt at my disappearance. I didn't think I had it in me to vanish on his watch. He looked a little bothered by my note.

“So you heard that was an option, huh?”

Oops. Forgot I shouldn't have heard that. I nodded my head ruefully and pulled the paper back.

I really appreciate everything you've done for me. You've all been so kind. But I can't just stay here. I should probably go where I can be at the source if anyone comes for me.

He didn't speak for a minute. He kept running his hand through his hair, thinking of what to say. The motion was hypnotizing. It took me a moment to remember what we were talking about.

“Kahlen, I'm not your warden. I can't stop you if that's what you really want to do. But... well, I'd like it better if you stayed. At least for one more day. How about that? If we don't have any answers by tomorrow, then you can go, and I won't get in your way.” He looked uneasy. “Sorry if I sound overprotective or something. I just... I don't like the thought

of you in a jail cell remembering something like you did today and then being all alone trying to deal with it. I know I don't really know you, but I like having you around. You're already a friend to me. And when you go, I'll worry."

I didn't want to hear that. Akinli wanting me to stay only made it harder to leave. And here he was asking for something perfectly reasonable: one more day. That couldn't be so bad, could it?

I thought through my options. I could do what *he* wanted: stay one more day and then leave. I could do what *I* wanted: go ahead and call the cops to take me away. Or I could do what *She* would want: wait for everyone to sleep and disappear in the night, the sooner the better.

I wasn't really concerned with what the Ocean wanted right now. She could suffer and wonder for ages longer as far as I was concerned. I didn't think my idea of leaving now would be so bad; Evan would have his bed back. It suddenly disgusted me that I slept where he did. But Akinli's eyes were pleading. He wouldn't force it on me, but he'd try to will it into being. How was I supposed to refuse him? I picked up the pen.

One more day.

He smiled.

The night passed on and John and Kristen said their goodnights. Evan was still passed out, so the guys hoisted him onto the couch. It was a squeeze with how long he was, but they managed to place him on his side with a glass of water and a garbage can nearby, just in case. Ben had made his way upstairs, but Akinli and Julie lingered for a minute.

"I hope you can sleep a little after your long nap there," Julie said with a shy smile.

I smiled back. She was trying to be warm to me. I couldn't imagine how uneasy my presence in her home made her, but she was attempting to be kind all the same. I appreciated it so much. She gave a timid wave and disappeared up the stairs.

Akinli and I were alone. Well, almost alone. Evan snored through his unconsciousness. It was a little loud. Akinli laughed.

“Good luck trying to sleep through that. You probably aren’t tired at all, huh? I can stay up with you for a while if you want.”

Of course that’s what I wanted. More time. Any time. But it would just make it worse. And he had skipped work on the boat today to be with me already. The guys had a rotation which my arrival had thrown off. He had to work tomorrow, and I couldn’t make him stay up with me. I gave a little shooing motion, telling him to get upstairs. He smiled, but waited.

“Okay, okay. Well, I think Julie’s going to stay here in the morning, but I’ll be home a little after noon. We’ll hang out then,” he promised.

I nodded.

We both stood there a little awkwardly. What was the right way to say goodnight? If Elizabeth had been in my place she would have kissed him, but I wasn’t quite that brazen. A hug felt right, but I couldn’t bear to initiate it. So what I got was a pat on the arm and a “Goodnight there, Sparkles.” I wondered if he’d run out of references to this dress. I hoped he’d keep trying until he did; I was so amused. That boy wore his tie all day. He grabbed it just then and mock pulled himself up the stairs by it, turning off the lights as he went.

I didn’t bother trying to sleep. I put on the shirt and boxers Akinli gave me yesterday, but only for the sake of the show. After being around him all day, I noticed Akinli had a smell. There was a little of it on his clothes, and it was strangely comforting.

I sat for hours staring out at the Ocean. *One more day*, I thought to myself. I couldn’t drag this out any longer. It had been an exciting little field trip, but after whatever we did tomorrow— and once no one showed up looking for me again

— I'd calmly go with the police. From there I'd make my getaway.

As I was debating my options, I heard muffled movements. Something fell with a thud. There was some more shuffling and a loud crack. I heard Evan cussing under his breath. He must have run into the coffee table in his quest for the bathroom.

I was only slightly off.

I was taken back a bit when Evan opened the door. A surprise registered on his face, too.

“Oh yeah, I forgot *you* were here.” He was glaring at me, standing on slightly unsteady feet. The only light was the moon coming through the bay window. It was full and bright enough to light us both. Evan's clothes were disheveled, and he held the glass of water in his hand. He gave me a once over, and I thought that would be the end of it, but he kept coming toward me. “You know, it's a good thing you can't talk, because you'd get yourself in a lot of trouble around here.”

He said all this slowly, threateningly. He'd crossed the floor with the same measured pace of his speech. Suddenly, he reached across the bed and squeezed my face in his free, massive hand.

“You mess with me again, I'll break your little fingers, too. Got it?”

The look on my face must not have seemed contrite enough, because he released my cheeks, pulled that hand back, and slapped me across the face. It didn't hurt me, but the action resulted in two quick events.

First, I realized that after all these years, I had come to think of myself not just as something deadly, but something special. You didn't hit a siren. We were something to be respected. Who did this guy think he was daring to put his hands on me? And, for that matter, siren or not, he didn't have the right to do that to *anyone*. I thought I had been angry at the Ocean when She took my parents; I thought I had been angry with Her

when She took Jillian. This guy thought he was going to take *me*? I'd happily die trying to take him out.

The second reaction tied into the first, because I couldn't help the tiny yelp that escaped when he hit me. It just happened. In the next second, he had poured his glass of water on his face, trying to breathe it in. The sound was short and the water was limited, so it only resulted in a few choking coughs before his head cleared. He was embarrassed by the unexplainable event and looked prepared to take it out on me. But my revelation had made me prepared to fight.

Evan threw the glass on the floor where it exploded into tiny shards. He went to pin me on the bed, straddling me. I was just about to scream— yell words he deserved to hear— and watch contentedly as this pathetic excuse for a man would shatter the window and run into the Ocean to his death. Good riddance. But I started to doubt that plan.

What if Akinli heard? Or Julie? Or Ben? Or even the sweet old lady across the street? I had never tried to use my voice to defend myself. Was a light whisper all I needed? If it failed, he would certainly try to keep me quiet after that. And if he was still alive after I tried to fight him off without being able to use my voice, would he tell Akinli I had been lying to him all this time? That I could speak all along? In the moments I was trying to figure out what was best, he had painlessly slapped me again, and now had me lifted off the bed by my shirt. The look in his face shifted. It looked evil enough when he came in the room, but now I saw a different monster coming to the surface.

“Well,” he thought aloud, “if you're not going to scream...” He ripped my shirt, Akinli's shirt, open. If he thought he was getting any farther than that he was wrong.

Dead wrong.

I inhaled to speak, sing, scream if I had to. Evan wasn't going to hurt me. I would have to kill him. God forgive me, it was all I could do. My lips trembled as I prepared to speak.

Arms flew over Evan's back pulling him to the floor. He released my torn shirt to fight back, and I moved quickly to cover myself. The room was still dark, and I was a little too shocked to be sure of what was happening. I sat up and saw we were no longer alone. I didn't need lights to make out Akinli's features. He had Evan straddled on the ground, punching him repeatedly in the face. There were muffled groans and cuss words as Evan fought back. A few punches later, the light flipped on.

Ben and Julie were standing in the doorway. Now that there was light, I could see blood. Blood on Akinli's hands, blood under Evan's nails. The glass was cutting them both up as they struggled against one another. I covered my mouth so I wouldn't scream. Akinli pulled his fist back and connected with Evan's cheek, sending the monster's head back. Evan was still a little too out of it to really move, but his arms gripped around Akinli, ripping at his clothes in an effort to get him off his chest. Evan let go with one hand, searching for a weapon. His hand found a hard-backed book, and he swung it into the side of Akinli's head.

What was I supposed to do?

I couldn't speak. I wanted desperately to help, but I didn't really know how to fight. All of this happened in a few quick seconds. Then, responding in a way I didn't know how to, Ben jumped in the middle of it.

"Kahlen, get out of here. Come here!" Julie yelled at me. I obeyed, taking a roundabout way to leave the room.

"Akinli, ease up!" Ben yelled.

Julie took me upstairs quickly, and the sound of the fighting died in my ears.

CHAPTER 8

“Did he hurt you?” Julie had me on her bed, touching my face gingerly. I shook my head. A normal girl would have been bruised probably, but this temporary body was strong, unbreakable. Nothing could cripple me. I was angry, enraged even, but not in any physical pain. My worried expression was for Akinli. I didn’t see how he looked. I didn’t know if Evan had managed to land another swing on him.

I knew it was all over now. I heard Evan protesting as they threw him out the door, Ben yelling he didn’t care how he got home. I had just finished wiggling into a new shirt that Julie had provided. This one fit me. I looked over at the clock on Julie’s nightstand. It was nearly five in the morning. She wasn’t convinced.

“Are you sure? Does it hurt anywhere? Do you need ice or anything?” she persisted.

I shook my head again, this time looking at her face. She looked terrified and sympathetic. That expression meant the world to me. I had forgotten how comforting it was to be a younger sister.

“Thank God you’re okay. Evan has a temper sometimes, but I’ve never seen him act like that towards a girl. I’m so sorry. It makes me sick thinking that it could have been worse.”

She had no idea. I’ll admit being cornered by someone bigger and stronger was pretty awful, but I was about to kill that man. I was unbelievably close. One more second was all it would have taken. Akinli saved me twofold. He saved me from someone who would have hurt me— or at least tried to— and he saved me from truly turning into the monster I always feared I was. I’d never be able to thank him enough for that.

“Kahlen?” It was Akinli’s voice, but it was low and gruff, labored with worry, fear, and fatigue. I looked up to see him in the doorway. His shirt was torn on the sleeve, and his skin was splotchy. It looked like his lip was bleeding or had been a

moment ago, and there was a cut on his left temple where the book had crashed into his head. A collection of band aids on his arm covered a multitude of scratches. The blood had been washed from his hands, but traces of it remained on his shirt. Otherwise, he was safe, whole, unbroken.

My relief overpowered any sense of modesty. I flew at him, wrapping my arms him, burrowing my face into his chest. It didn't seem like he was tensed when I had taken in his injuries, but he must have been. With an indescribable pleasure, I felt his whole body relax in my embrace, and he held me back.

"She's just fine," Julie said. "She doesn't have any bruises or cuts. She's shaken up, which can't be good for her on top of whatever happened the other day, but she's fine." I felt the weight of Akinli's hand holding my head, his fingers getting a little tangled in my hair. He spoke over my head to Julie.

"Ben's fine. Not a scratch. He's just making some coffee. He's pissed. Fired Evan, and now he's trying to figure some things out, ya' know?"

"Yeah. Right thing to do though. I guess it's close enough to start the day. I'll be downstairs. You want some coffee?"

"That'd be great." I stayed nestled in his arms. I listened to all his words vibrate in his chest. It was the most reassuring sound in the world.

I didn't see her, but Julie's hand rested on my shoulder as she exited the room. Akinli took a few stabling breaths and then pulled me back to look at me.

"Did he hurt you?"

I shook my head.

"Are you sure? Because if he did, we really should do something about it."

I put my hand over my heart as if I were taking an oath. I shook my head again slowly, looking into his eyes the entire time. I had to convey that I was safe, that he'd saved me.

“I’m so sorry.”

I shook my head again. Evan’s behavior wasn’t his fault. I reached up and brushed his hair out of his eyes. I moved my hand too slowly down his cheek, enjoying the feeling of his skin and stubble as my fingers passed. I hoped he didn’t notice. I was just so glad that he wasn’t hurt.

He pulled me close and held me for a long time. I felt tiny. His arms wrapped around me easily, with room for two of me to hide there. His hands— those strong hands that were strapping enough to hurt me much more than Evan could have — rubbed my back and my hair, incredibly gentle with my indestructible body. His lips and nose rested on my forehead. His breath was hot on my naturally cool skin, and it felt electrifying.

It ached. Because I knew with a certainty no doubt or fear could cloud that here, in Akinli’s arms, was exactly where I was meant to be. And with a certainty that I wanted to doubt and absolutely feared, I knew I would never be allowed to stay here.

The morning was a little tense, but everyone was in good spirits when I walked out of the guest room in Akinli’s overalls. They were huge, of course, but Julie didn’t really own anything appropriate for going out on the boat. I left the boxers on for extra coverage, folded up the hems of the legs until I found my feet, and wandered into the living room. Ben laughed out loud, Julie giggled, but Akinli looked pleased. This was me trying to make amends.

Over breakfast they had discussed the plans for the day. Turns out they usually started working around six in the morning, so this wasn’t an unusual time to discuss their schedules. John was leaving town today to visit Kristen’s family. Again. Ben grumbled. Yesterday the family car had made some funny noises, and Ben had to take it into the shop — which wasn’t even in town— first thing in the morning if they had a prayer of getting it back in a day. I didn’t know much about cars, so I didn’t follow that branch of the

conversation well. Evan had taken Ben's shift today, but now Evan was gone. Akinli said it was no problem; he could take care of the traps alone. It would be harder and take longer, but it wasn't an issue. He said he'd gladly take the trade, looking at me pointedly. I felt so bad, I took up my paper.

Can I help?

Ben laughed, but Akinli was for it.

"You need some new memories. This should be fun," he said. And with that, it was settled. After breakfast, he went upstairs to find me clothes.

"Your Miss America gown doesn't look exactly sea-faring," he claimed. If only he knew. But I couldn't effectively argue, so giant overalls it was. I pulled my hair back with a rubber band, and Julie lent me a pair of shoes. They were almost exactly my size, but they had the strange indentations of another person's footprint. I felt bulky and silly, but I was happy. I was finally going to be of service to my caregivers, and I was going to see exactly where I was.

The town was so small, we walked to work. In the front yard, I noted the mailbox. With iridescent stickers, the word "Schaefer" was printed on the side. I stopped, and Akinli turned. I pointed to the word.

"What? You expecting mail here? Gosh, Kahlen, you're here for a day and you're already having all your bills forwarded here? I'm not paying 'em! I'm serious. And if I find you having wild parties while we're gone all day, you'll be sleeping on the porch."

I had rolled my eyes twice during that little speech, but he kept on. When he finished, I shook my head and underlined the name with my fingers.

"What? Schaefer? Ben and I are Schaefer men. Proud of it, too. And," he got close so that only I would hear the whisper, "you didn't hear this from me, but I'm thinking Julie might be a Schaefer woman someday soon." He winked.

My mouth opened with shock and joy. I liked Julie. I hoped she'd be happy.

“Now don't go blabbing that all over town, you chatterbox. Gosh, Kahlen, it's like I can't get a word in edgewise with you.” Akinli tugged on my overalls, and we continued into town.

Port Clyde was beautiful and tiny. We walked down a maze of streets, passing other people who were already awake and starting their day. Akinli waved to them all, introducing me as his “friend Kahlen.” We turned down a road and the whole scene finally unfolded.

There were several small docks in the distance leading to the Ocean. Boats were everywhere with men already starting on their day's work. Buoys of every color littered the water like confetti. There were buildings that looked like houses but were almost assuredly businesses. A row of cars lined a concrete barrier that was next to a tiny beach that was made up of more of the same large, dark rocks behind Akinli's house, except here there was a small stretch of sand that dipped slowly into the Sea. It was quaint. I liked the colors. It painted a picture of a place that was somehow innocent.

Now that I noticed, even the Ocean behaved different here. I thought of the beaches in the south where people were there almost exclusively for pleasure. Down there, She was louder, boisterous, almost playful. Here She was all business. Her waves were quiet and slow, realizing people depended on Her here. Even upset with Her, I could appreciate that.

Ben and Akinli's boat was named “Maria.” It was moored out in deeper waters; we actually took a smaller motor boat to get to it. Then we traded off and were out to catch some lobster. Akinli didn't let me do much in the way of work. I should have known it would be that way.

Since I couldn't die of starvation, I almost exclusively ate cake. I knew it was only a matter of time until I had to go back to the other food groups, the hideous, non-cake food groups. My plan was to enjoy it as often as I could while I couldn't

gain a pound from it. I was always nervous that I would pay for this indulgence later. My cake-loving led me to an embarrassing place when Akinli asked if I liked lobster.

I just shrugged. It was more difficult than usual because he had insisted upon strapping me into a life jacket.

“You can’t exactly call for help if you fall overboard. I’ll never be able to forgive myself if you drown on my watch,” he had said. His concern was cute.

My shrug shocked him.

“Tell me you’ve had lobster before,” he declared. “Seriously, you haven’t lived until you’ve tried it. Stop looking down! Look at my face and tell me: Have you had lobster?”

I slowly looked up at him with a blush on my cheeks and shook my head no.

“Oh my gosh! How have you gone through life without lobster?! Okay, that’s it! Tonight, we’re going out for a lobster dinner. If you get out of this town without tasting it, I’ll be almost as ashamed as I would be if you drowned.”

I smiled. He didn’t do much talking on the boat; he was pretty focused on his work. And I was pretty focused on him. As the sun climbed higher, the day got hotter, and he took off his shirt. It’s not like I hadn’t seen plenty of guys without their shirts on before, but there’s something different about it being someone you really like. And he was doing a lot of lifting and pulling. When he pulled the traps out of the Ocean, water would splash around, dripping down his chest. I honestly tried not to stare, but I couldn’t help it. He looked gorgeous.

When I wasn’t ogling Akinli, I soaked up the moment, not worrying about its eventual end. I enjoyed the sun here in Akinli’s boat, in Akinli’s clothes, in Akinli’s presence. And, while he didn’t say it in so many words, I was fully looking forward to my first date. I knew I should be more guarded, but I couldn’t keep up the show anymore. I wanted Akinli. So,

when he took my hand on the walk home that afternoon, I didn't bother putting up any kind of fight.

Ben was still gone when we came home for our very late lunch. Julie had already called the police that morning. No leads. Big surprise! When Akinli mentioned he was taking me out for dinner that night, Julie nearly exploded with excitement. She asked if she could dress me up. There was no way to say no to that kind of enthusiasm.

That afternoon, she took me under her wing. I showered and washed my hair at her command. I felt bad though; all the soap in the world wouldn't wash the saltiness out of my skin. She proceeded to do my hair and makeup.

"You really don't need any of this; you're a natural beauty. And the lone restaurant in town doesn't have a dress code, but let me play anyway, okay? I live with two boys," she said.

I nodded. I was pleased to have her speak to me at all. She had disappeared after I arrived and was gone most of the day before. Her kindness to me this morning had been so unexpected. Julie's thoughts were in the same place.

"I'm sorry if I seemed rude when you got here. I was sort of worried about having a stranger in the house, and I got scared a little. But I've been thinking of how you must be feeling. You can't speak, you don't remember anything, you don't really know where you are, and you're depending on complete strangers right now. And, if that isn't enough, you get assaulted in our house." She sighed at the memory. "You've had a lot to deal with, and I'm sorry I didn't get that."

I smiled up at her in the mirror. We were in her bedroom—the boys had been banished. Ben showed up a short while ago, only to have Akinli steal the freshly repaired car and bolt from the house. If he took the car, I had to assume he left the town as well. I couldn't imagine that there wasn't anyone or anything here that wasn't in walking distance.

Julie was intent on turning me into a beauty queen, and it was just the two of us now. I thought that maybe Julie and I

could have been friends. If I was some average girl moving into town, she would be someone I wanted to know. I was glad that she was taking to me so warmly, even with my oddities. Almost as warmly as Akinli. I still wasn't sure where Ben stood. I had worried that my inability to speak would make them all uncomfortable around me. But it was starting to have the opposite effect. Seen as the outcome of a horrific experience, they were endeared to me by my silence. And since most people are never actually listened to enough, my condition turned me into a set of waiting ears, a friend.

"I've gotta' tell you, I haven't seen Akinli so upbeat in ages. I don't know how much he's told you, but he's had a rough couple of months."

I nodded my head.

"So he told you? Well, that seems about right, he's pretty open. When his parents died, he took it really hard. He was just so low, and that's not in his nature. He gets that from his parents— they were some of the nicest people I've ever known. Ben and I used to go down to see them all the time. That house was just the warmest place to be. The three of them were so close; they didn't really argue the way some families do... I really wish you had met them."

So did I.

"Sometimes when his mom was really bad, he'd come up here and spend the night. He hated being away from her, but he just couldn't cry in front of her. Knew it would break her heart, and he didn't want her feeling guilty. Ben's the closest thing Akinli has to a brother. And I guess he would consider me a sister now. I hope so."

I was glad the fondness Akinli had for Julie was reciprocated.

"He had been bracing himself for a long time. She managed to hold on longer than any of the doctors imagined, but she was still getting worse. And then the accident happened. He was a wreck. Blamed himself, said he should have been there.

You can see how he is— always thinking of others. He just started sinking. So we told him he could stay with us if he wanted. We had the room. We didn't really need much help with the boat, but I'm glad he came. And it works out now. Honestly, I'm glad Evan is gone. I hate that he did that to you, but I'm *so* glad he's out. I've been worried about his temper for years, but he and Ben had known each other for so long. I just never wanted to say anything..."

I thanked my lucky stars that when Evan did finally go after a girl he ran into my unshakable body instead of Julie's.

"Don't tell Ben I said that, okay?"

I smiled and gave her a pointed look.

"Oh yeah... who are you going to tell anything to?" She smiled.

"Well, like I was saying, he decided to move up here with us, which was good. I think Akinli likes being with family. I'm pretty sure he wants to have a big one himself one day. And now that he's here, I just couldn't imagine life without him. But, ohhhh, his girlfriend..."

My eyes widened. Girlfriend?

"She threw a hissy fit. She didn't want him to move, and she gave him hell about it. Went on and on about the distance, but, for goodness sake, they still live in the same state! It's only a couple of hours, but she made it sound like he was moving across the country. And I couldn't believe she'd be so hard on him after everything.

"They'd been together forever. She stuck with him when he had to drop out of school— told him he could always go back. And then when his mom started getting really weak, she brought food and would visit on the weekends. You know, I think that did his mom a world of good, to see that he had someone who was serious about him. They were really good together. Or so we thought." Julie sighed.

"She made it through the funeral and even played hostess so Akinli didn't have to lift a finger. Two weeks later, when he

decided he was going to come up here to live with us and work on the boat, she lost it. Said she'd done all this work for him and he was abandoning her. The poor boy just needed to get out of there. Personally, I think she thought he'd go right back to school. Akinli is really smart. He reads all the time, and when the guys decide to have a *discussion*, he's always the one who shuts things up because he's the only one who knows what he's talking about. I don't think she wanted to settle for a fisher. Well, she told him to go ahead and go, and that was it," she concluded.

I guess Julie assumed Akinli would have already mentioned all this. I wondered if there was an opportunity for it somewhere, and I had made it pass somehow. In truth, when it was just the two of us, that was all I thought about: him and me.

I couldn't bother to be jealous of this girl. I was too shocked. I wouldn't care if Akinli picked up trash with his bare hands for a living. Or dug ditches. Scrubbed floors on his knees. He was the best and kindest of men. And what kind of person holds your grief against you? All of that work and time, just for her to drop him in the end. I hated this girl. I felt a little guilty because I was glad she was gone. And I knew her absence hurt him.

"He's been working really hard. Sometimes I think he's just going through the motions. Every once in a while he comes out of it and acts like himself. Most days he's just quiet. But he's been much more like himself since you came. I think a night out will do him good." She smiled at me.

"You're gonna' look so gorgeous!" Julie squealed. I couldn't help but smile.

Julie and I were about the same size, so while she let me try on all of her clothes, I put her in my sea foam dress. I wrote down that I thought I had messed it up and that it was bound to fall apart now, but that she should keep it until it did. I secretly hoped a formal occasion would present itself in the next few weeks. She really looked lovely in it.

We made a mess of her room, but it was so much fun. We finally decided on a red dress that reminded me of the cherry dress I had in the 50s. It was the same shape— sleeveless and fitted through the waist where it fluffed out and fell just below my knees. And this girl was prepared; I had red heels to match. I loved the look of it; the red really looked good with my brown hair and eyes. I wore those sea foam dresses all the time, but I wasn't sure I'd ever felt sexier than I did right now.

I didn't have much experience with makeup, but Julie was a master. She managed to make my eyes look deeper, my lashes look longer, and my lips look fuller. My hair she had curled and pinned up in places so a few tendrils fell around my face in a way that looked accidental, but was completely choreographed. I felt like I belonged in a photograph.

Finally, when she was done dolling me up, she opened the door to hand me over. Julie kept making tiny, happy sounds and grinned from ear to ear. I peeked into Akinli's room across the hall. I hadn't looked in there yet. His room was tidy except for a bunch of shirts that had been haphazardly piled at the foot of his bed— the rejects from whatever he decided to wear tonight. His bed was made. Baseball hats hung on the wall. There were a few pictures, but it was too dark to make out the faces. He wasn't there.

I walked downstairs with Julie trailing at a distance and found him pacing in the kitchen. I could see him as he crossed in front of the doorway twice with his head down. On his third pass, he looked up and saw me with a double take. I could tell he was pleased with what he saw, but I was too busy taking him in to blush. He wore loose khaki pants with his white button up shirt tucked in. He had his sleeves rolled up, and I noticed a leather bracelet on his left wrist. He looked clean and tough at the same time. I was starting to sense that was his style.

“Hey there, Kahlen,” Ben called from the couch. Then he did a wolf whistle, and I rolled my eyes.

Akinli shot him a look that silenced him. I was still on the bottom step of the stairs when he reached out, taking both of my hands in his. I felt warmth flood my body. “Let’s get outta’ here.”

“Have a great time,” Julie called. I didn’t look back, but I felt the smile in her voice. I couldn’t feel the floor.

On the driveway, Akinli turned and stopped me. He still had my hand in his. He looked like he changed his mind as he was standing there. Whatever he was going to say flew out of his head, and he just stared at me for a minute.

“You look absolutely beautiful,” he said.

I ducked my head. He cleared his throat.

“Okay. Well, the restaurant’s only about five blocks away. You’ve seen it’s a small town. So I thought I would let you pick the mode of transportation. Option A is Ben’s smelly car.” He motioned to a blue Honda shinning dully in the moonlight. “Option B is my sweet Moped.” He pointed to a little silver bike by the side of the house. “And Option C is our feet.” He pointed to his legs.

Cars were old news to me. Nothing was going to top joyriding with my sisters. And walking was fine, but I didn’t usually wear heels. What if I stumbled while we walked? *Hmm*, I thought, *maybe he’d carry you again*. That’d be fine with me. *Or*, I managed, *he could think you look like a klutz*.

I picked the bike. When I pointed, he bounced on his heels a little.

“I was hoping you’d pick Bessie.”

Bessie? He saw the amused look on my face.

“Every good ride has a name. Ships do, cars do. And Bessie here has been good to me. Haven’t you girl?” He petted the seat lovingly. I smiled. “Do you want to meet her?”

I nodded. He started petting her handlebars, and I did the same. He laughed.

“You’re the most laid back girl I’ve ever met.”

Me? Laid back? I lived in an unknown world of stress. He was the laid back one; his personality just rubbed off on me. He took my hand and helped me get on. I was instantly pleased with my choice. The seat was long enough for two, but just barely. We had to get close, and it was a good excuse to hold onto him. The car wouldn’t let me do that. I pressed my chest into his back, feeling our legs fit into place very close together. I wrapped my arms around his chest and could just barely feel his heartbeat under my palm. He turned old Bessie on. She made a pathetic noise.

“Listen to that kitten purr!” he yelled.

I just shook my head. As we drove away, I looked over and saw Ben and Julie’s faces looking out the window. I was suddenly nervous about all four of our expectations for the evening. How similar or different could they be?

CHAPTER 9

After years of jettisoning through the Sea, I figured I had a fair chance of understanding the joy fish and sharks and dolphins feel as they swim in open water. But here, going possibly less than thirty-five miles per hour on Akinli's bike, I thought I understood what it meant to fly, too. The wind picked up my hair, and it whipped behind me happily. Julie's red dress was fluttering in the small breeze. I pulled close to Akinli, as bold as anything, feeling the joy of true freedom.

Swimming was an action; flying was a feeling.

In this small moment, I was where I wanted to be and doing what I wanted to do with the one person I wanted to be with. Had I ever been able to make such a decision on my own? Had there ever been a time when either my family or the Ocean hadn't given me some sort of limitation?

I wanted to tell Akinli I was happy. I was sad I couldn't say it, but I refused to let anything ruin my very first date. I didn't know how to date. I hadn't gotten that far when I was human, and I certainly never allowed myself to be this close to a man as a siren. I had seen enough movies to have a rough idea of how to behave. I hoped he'd blame any missteps on my part on my fuzzy memory and not me.

The ride was too short. I was looking forward to going wherever we were going, but I liked having an excuse to be so close to him. Akinli parked Bessie on the edge of the row of cars by the concrete barrier. He stood and held out stable hands for me as I rose, trying to be ladylike with my dress. Once I fluffed any wrinkles out of my borrowed ensemble, Akinli hooked my arm around his and led the way.

When he walked me towards the restaurant, I thought he was taking me out to the boat again. Surely there was nothing else here. We walked through cars, behind a building, and stopped in front of a screen door. He held it open for me, and I skeptically walked inside.

This restaurant was so small! If he hadn't shown it to me, I don't think I would have ever noticed its presence. It looked like it was a storage shed and had to be about the size of Akinli's living room. Down the middle ran a bar with the kitchen behind it, open for everyone to see. The other half was filled with tables and chairs and benches, and they were packed with happy, chattering customers. We were definitely overdressed. A couple of heads looked up at our entrance and lingered on me. I was used to that type of reaction from men, but I was here with someone. Didn't they see that? I ignored them and looked at the decorations instead. It looked nautical, of course, like the rest of the town. Some of the same buoys that were in the water were tacked to the walls with nets draped everywhere. It was peculiar, but pleasant.

A waitress walked up to us.

"Hey there, Akinli," she greeted. "Looking sharp."

"Hey, Megan. Megan, this is Kahlen. She's being introduced to the wonderful world of lobster tonight. How long for a table for two?"

"In here? A while. Still the busy season, you know that. You should have made reservations earlier today."

"I see then. Well, if you could set up a few crates for us by the sink back there. Is that non-smoking? That'll be fine."

She laughed. "Hold on a second." As Megan walked away, I noticed she had an engagement ring on her finger. Thank goodness. Didn't Akinli realize how charming he could be? She poked her head out of a screen door opposite to the one we entered and looked around. She looked back at us and smiled and motioned for us to follow her.

Outside, the pier was covered in picnic tables. The restaurant was microscopic, but surely I would have noticed all these tables? I guess I was a little distracted this morning. As we walked, I noticed a bathtub full of lobster. How funny! Dinner swimming right there on the dock. Most of the picnic tables were full, but some smaller tables were open. Megan led

us to one of those tiny, round tables just big enough for two. We were right against the railing of the dock, and I could see the outlines of all the islands in the distance.

“I hope you like your lobster,” Megan said, leaving us with our menus.

Akinli went to work immediately. I was already seated, but he took his chair and brought it around the table so he was close to me. He piled the menus, apparently intending for us to share. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a pen and a small blue notebook with a flower in the corner. It was new.

“The lobster is a must, okay? But if you see something else you want to try, just point to it, and I’ll order for both of us.”

It struck me then that he had thought this entire thing out. He knew I wouldn’t be able to order on my own, so he wanted to sit close by. Taking bunches of paper would have been obnoxious, so he bought me a notebook. And even that detail had traces of serious thought to it. It was blue, my favorite color, and feminine with its delicate little flower. Somewhere between him actually asking me to dinner and Ben coming home, he had figured it all out. If we were going on a date, this was how to make it work.

I hoped he didn’t have too many more surprises like this. My heart was skipping beats already. I was in way too deep. I didn’t exactly stop myself from falling, but he did a whole lot of pulling, whether he knew it or not.

He described a few items on the menu for me, but in the end I could only settle on the lobster and even that seemed strange. I felt the creatures in the Ocean and I were linked somehow, and it seemed wrong to be eating them. But the guilt was the least of my worries.

I made a huge mess trying to eat my dinner. It required two different kinds of forks and a cracking tool I wouldn’t have known how to use on my own. Akinli was patient with me. He helped me open the shell and pull out the meat. It was good. It was sweet and savory and the texture caught me by surprise.

It's difficult to describe. Thinner than chicken and chewy, but not in a tough way.

Akinli told me the tail was the best part, and when I couldn't figure out how to break it, he ripped it open with his bare hands. I don't know why, but that made me hungry in a very different way. All in all, I was glad I'd tried lobster, but I was grateful that my responses to things were pretty much limited to nods. I got the feeling that this food was a luxury, but mostly because of the way he talked about it. I probably wouldn't seek it out again on my own.

When we were done and I was sure I'd wiped all the butter off of my hands, I went to grab my notebook.

Thank you so much for dinner. It was yummy.

"Anytime."

Is this where you went this afternoon? To get this notebook?

"Yeah." He smiled. "I had a few errands to run."

I thought about our afternoon apart from each other. I wanted to ask about old what's-her-name, but I didn't know how to. And we'd had such a nice evening, I didn't know if it would make him sad to talk about her. I went a different route, still eager to learn all I could.

Julie told me that you read a lot?

"Yes. I was studying English in college. I'm hoping to go back soon. Not this fall, obviously, but maybe in the spring. I think I'd like to teach one day."

I think you'd be a great teacher! Just look at how patient you are with me!

"Ha! You don't require any patience, Kahlen. You're very easy to be around."

How old are you?

"Just turned twenty-three. How old are you?"

I didn't know if nineteen sounded too young. It was only four years, but maybe that gap between teen and twenty-something would discount me for some reason. Well, that, and I was temporarily immortal and contained a voice that might break him.

That's a very good question.

I smiled, giving off a show of complete calm at my forgetfulness. He laughed.

"Doesn't matter much, I suppose. I'd hang out with you even if you were twelve." He paused. "But please tell me you're not twelve."

I rolled my eyes. He chuckled.

A waitress came and cleared our plates. I noticed her bend and whisper something in Akinli's ear. For goodness sake, did every girl in this town flirt with him? He whispered back "Kahlen." Oh! I wondered what she asked. I hoped it was something along the lines of "Who's your girlfriend?"

We continued with our half-written conversation for a few more minutes. There weren't very many people left outside anymore. The Ocean was still, and the seagulls that had chirped away all morning had silenced themselves for the night. I knew a lot about living without sound. Sometimes that life seemed like too much quiet to bear, but something about this silence didn't bother me so much. I had to assume it was good company. I found myself smiling at Akinli for no particular reason as he scribbled in the margin of my book. He caught me staring and smiled back. His eyes were soft, reflecting the outdoor lights.

I lost every thought in my head.

A group of the wait staff came out of the tiny restaurant with a cake in their hands, aglow with candles. I wouldn't have noticed except for a few gasps from other diners. How sweet! It was someone's birthday. I searched around the pier for someone's face to light up, realizing their cake was coming. But the only face with such an expression was

Akinli's. Was it his birthday? No. Ben and Julie would have said something. My expression must have shown my confusion. He leaned into my ear and whispered, practically breathing his explanation.

"I'm sorry. I had to lie. I told them today was your birthday. It was the only way they would let me bring you cake. And I know how you love cake. Go along with me, okay?"

I didn't know how to respond, but my body responded of its own accord. My eyes welled up, but I couldn't actually cry because I was smiling, too. I didn't remember my last birthday party. I didn't even know when my birthday was anymore. Maybe I wasn't growing up, but I'd seen so much time in my life it seemed obvious now that I should have celebrated the passing of it. I missed this ritual more than I thought I had. I wrote quickly— blinking back happy tears— as the staff continued to walk towards us.

But maybe you're telling the truth. I have no way of knowing.

He laughed. "Good point."

They sang as they approached, and the few remaining patrons applauded.

"How about this? If you never remember you're real birth date, we'll make it today, alright?" he whispered again. I loved the feeling of his words falling on my skin.

I nodded, tears still in my eyes. I was ridiculously happy.

"How old are you, dear?" a waitress asked.

"Kahlen's twenty today," Akinli answered, winking at me. Not a bad guess. Twenty sounded better than nineteen to me. And, if this was my next birthday, I would be twenty. I beamed.

"Make a wish," he lovingly instructed.

I smiled brightly, looking into Akinli's eyes. I knew what I wanted more than anything was to stay with him. I could wish for that on every candle, star, clover, and eyelash in the world

and never ever get it. I had to accept that wasn't something worth wishing for. If I couldn't have that, what was number two on the list of things I wanted most in the world? I closed my eyes and focused on something that I knew could truly happen.

I wish that Akinli would be happy.

I blew out the candles with an easy breath to the applause of all the bystanders. What kind people to clap for a stranger. There was plenty of cake to go around, so I shared with these people and had my fill as well. There wasn't a single bite left over to take to Ben and Julie. Oh well.

The restaurant actually closed before we finished talking. I scribbled my notes, trying to keep up with our conversation, but usually our thoughts rambled over one another's, never actually finishing a complete exchange. And it was fine with me. I was content here, even with the Ocean just under foot.

Finally, once the lights were all shut down and we couldn't see what I was writing anymore, we stood to leave. Akinli took my hand without a second thought. I was happy, imagining the closeness of the brief ride home. But when we got to Bessie, he turned back to me.

“Do you feel like going home yet?”

I shook my head.

“Me either.” He smiled devilishly. “Come on.”

Akinli pressed a button and the seat on Bessie popped up. Underneath was a storage area with a blanket inside. I wondered if that was always there or if he'd only just put it in there today. We ran down to the concrete barrier that separated the cars from the coast. He hurdled over it and then reached for me. Akinli took me by my waist and helped me over; the heels didn't set well on the rocks. He started taking his shoes off.

“Just leave them here; no one's going to take them.”

I was hesitant because they weren't my shoes, but I couldn't argue that it made things easier. He held my hand and helped me down the spiky coast. I pretended to need more help than I actually did. There was a small stretch of sand just past the rocks. Houses lined the coast. It was getting late, but several of them still had lights on.

At one house, I saw the light of a screened-in porch. I couldn't make out their faces, but I could see two girls around a CD player. They were giggling and handing CDs back and forth. Their songs drifted on the wind, much like the call of the Ocean, and wrapped around us on the beach. The current song was upbeat. I liked it.

Akinli put the blanket down at the edge of the rocks, smoothing out the corners into a wide rectangle. I hopped directly from rock to blanket. I wasn't sure if the moisture that saturated the sand would give me away. I sat down, wrapping my legs around to one side and smoothing out my dress, trying to look ladylike. Akinli pulled in right behind me, propping himself up on his hands. I fit just between his legs, and I let myself lay back on his chest. There was a comfort in the simple motion of his breathing. We were quiet for a long time. The girls went through several songs in the background.

“Kahlen, can I ask you a question?”

I nodded. I didn't know how I would answer; there was no way he could read anything in the dark here.

“Do you believe in things like God or fate?” Wow. That was an interesting question. And he asked about two different things. At least, they were different in my mind.

I made a motion with my hands that I'd used before to say “so so” or something similar— that was the only way to express my feelings.

“So, sort of? Wait do you mean that for God or fate? Sorry, that was confusingly worded.”

I put up the number two with my hand.

“So you don’t believe in fate? Or you sort of believe in fate?”

I gave a shaky nod. I didn’t know how to express this one without words.

“What about God? Do you believe in God?”

I nodded enthusiastically. I had believed in God before I was a siren, and I had even more of a reason to now.

“Well, if you believe in God, do you think that He could ordain something to just *be*?”

I nodded.

“Is that different than fate to you?”

I had thought so... I shrugged.

“Do you think that something could just be meant to be?”

His thought process was perplexing. Where was he going with this? I couldn’t understand. I turned to look him in the face, with an expression to convey my confusion.

“Sorry. I mean, I know that all sounds weird. But a lot has happened to me in the last year or so. And it’s been hard. But then, I don’t know, to have it all lead to a place where I find myself... happy. Do you think that God could have meant all that bad for good?”

I reached up and brushed his face. Was he talking about me? I didn’t know. I just wanted him to be happy. I’d spent my first birthday wish in eighty years asking for just that. If he was there now, I couldn’t be more pleased. Even if his happiness completely excluded me, I could be alright with that.

I thought of my own struggle. I had lost my family, my life, my dearest friend. And that twisted path— a road that made no sense to me— led me to this moment. And where was I in this moment? On a blanket, sitting with the most wonderful person in the world. Resting against the chest of the kindest, gentlest man, talking about life or cake or whatever we felt like.

Wasn't I happy in this moment? Could God have brought me through all of that, knowing it would take me this long to find the one person on the planet who was right for me?

I couldn't say. Would God let me come here to meet Akinli only to have me lose him again?

I looked into Akinli's handsome eyes. I know I had to seem sad.

"You know what? I do believe it. I think that everything happens for a reason. Even the bad stuff can bring us to someplace good." He touched my cheek as he said those last words. If he did mean me...

You think that now because you don't know I have to leave you.

He chuckled.

"Alright. I think you're onto something. Next time I ask about faith, we'll use paper, okay? I shouldn't spring that on you without you being able to explain."

I gave him a serious nod. It was unfair to leave me stranded without a way to explain myself.

I sighed. The evening was passing on. My time was running out, but thinking about that would only ruin it. So I smiled as Akinli started to move.

He stood quickly and pulled me up along with him. "Do you want to get your feet wet?" he said enthusiastically, trying to change the mood.

He succeeded.

Without meaning to, I took several steps backwards. I couldn't be in *Her*. That was the greatest danger I could think of. I found myself trying to pull my hand out of his grip.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Are you okay?"

I nodded my head, but I don't think I pulled my face together well enough.

“Kahlen, honey, are you afraid of the water?” he asked. I was thinking of too many things to properly answer. I was engulfed in worry at being in the Ocean, nervous about how to respond, and warmed because Akinli just called me “honey.”

“I noticed it on the boat today, too. When you got in, you looked at the gap between the dock and the boat like it was the scariest thing in the world.”

I stared. I didn’t know I had done that.

“Kahlen, do you think maybe you *did* fall off of a boat? I thought that at first, remember? Because you smelled like the ocean. Do you think that might have been what happened?”

I shrugged. I knew I looked worried, and I was trying to unwrinkle my forehead. I didn’t want him to worry about me. He took my face gently in his hands, and I looked into his eyes. I could feel the tension in my body fading at his touch.

“I’m sorry. I’m asking too many questions. I know you can’t remember any of that, and I shouldn’t push you. I’m sorry if I upset you.” His hands were gentle but supported my head in such a way that I couldn’t feel its weight at all. Honestly, as he looked into my eyes, I couldn’t feel the weight of anything. “Don’t you worry about it anymore. We don’t have to get anywhere near the water. And I won’t make you go on the boat again if it makes you nervous. Never again.”

He pulled me in like he did this morning, as if he felt a sudden urge to protect me. I must not have been as good an actress as I thought if he could read my nerves so easily. His arms wrapped around me like a shield, and my worries faded into black along with the night. I couldn’t make out their shape or color anymore. All I could see was Akinli.

The song switched in the distance. The tempo was steady but slow. One of the girls sighed.

I thought about how I was supposed to have left tonight. That was the plan. There were no new answers, and there never would be. I had given Akinli his day, but now it was just assumed I’d stay. He had just promised to never make me go

on the boat again. He must believe there was a reason to make such a promise. And he was figuring out every little thing that would make me comfortable, so I'd never need to be anywhere else. I didn't want to go somewhere else, that was certain, but there are some things that just can't be helped. What was I going to do?

"Hmm," he said. His head was turned towards the song in the distance. "Do you want to dance?"

The song was good for a slow dance. I thought I could do that. No one could see us here if I managed to be less graceful than I hoped to be. I nodded my head and smiled, pushing the inevitable out of my mind again. I was already in his arms, so he simply dropped his right hand to my waist and lifted the other to hold my hand up. My one hand rested in his, the other set itself upon his chest. We swayed to the sounds in the distance. Every once in a while he would switch directions, and I followed in matched time, our feet pushing the blanket in strange ways on the sand.

"You follow really well. Most girls try to lead. I've never had such an easy time dancing," he whispered in my ear. He got quiet.

His breath kept falling into the hair beside my neck. Every once in a while he seemed to take a deeper breath, like he was trying to smell me without me noticing. It was probably a big disappointment; he could smell the Ocean anytime he wanted. His rough hand held mine tenderly. I felt so small by him. He moved his head up; his nose rested to the side of my forehead.

"Earlier tonight, when we you were telling me that story with your hands..."

I grinned, and my cheek spread into his chin. Using the paper was easy enough and got us through most of the evening. But at one point he had insisted I try to tell him something using only hand gestures to see if he could keep up. I told him about discovering Miaka without him having any clue what the big motions of my hands meant. Every once in a while he would interject with a silly comment like "I love

jelly, too.” I finished with a flourish, to which he said “jazz hands.” I didn’t know what it meant, but it made me smile all the same.

“I just want you to know, that’s the best conversation I’ve ever had,” he whispered. “You probably feel like you don’t communicate much, but I think you say a lot. Your eyes, your posture. There’s a world of words around you, Kahlen. And you may not be able to express it all as easily as you’d like, but I can tell that you understand things. And not just the surface of things... if that makes sense.”

I pulled back to look at his face. He looked like he really meant what he was saying. The wind picked up a piece of my hair and blew it across my cheek. He took his hand off my waist and used his fingers to brush it back into place. Instead of dropping his hand, it disappeared into my hair. He looked into my eyes, and it seemed like several thoughts were running behind his. He stared. His breathing picked up.

But everything else seemed to slow down. I could make out the sounds of lapping waters hitting the sand and rocks. I saw how the moon was slightly smaller than last night, but still full enough to light our faces now that our eyes had adjusted to the dark. I could smell Akinli’s detergent mixed with the smell of the Sea and something sweet being baked in one of the houses nearby. I could taste the thickness of the air around me, full of the heat of summer. I felt Akinli’s hand massaging the back of my neck, my hair moving with his fingers.

My body felt strange, new. Similar to the moment I became a siren, when I knew I should be feeling pain but was completely numb. That lack of sensation had now settled into normalcy for me; it was comfortable. But this was different, better than comfort. This was more than being happy or good. It was stronger. This was conflict and peace. I felt completely satisfied, but burned with a mysterious need. It was almost painful and impossible to name. The unknown urge burned slowly across my skin. My eyes became heavy. My lips parted.

Akinli's face changed, too. Almost like yesterday, but deeper, hungrier. He must know what I was feeling. I ached to know what this was. I was dying to ask him.

"Kahlen," he whispered, "I know you can't really say no to this. If you want to, you can slap me afterwards."

He bent in, slowly bridging the space between us, and kissed me. The burning wavered, but only slightly in the distraction of my worries. I prayed I could just be quiet. If I could just not make a sound, I'd be eternally grateful. My first kiss was finally happening, and I was too afraid to really enjoy it. I knew my body was tense, and I worried he was going to misread that as rejection. But I didn't want to reject him at all! I *liked* it. I wanted more of it. It helped that painful, joyful burn, and made it worse in one action.

His lips were warm and soft. He was so strong, but he handled me with care. It wasn't an intrusive kiss. It was slow, purposeful. After a moment, he pulled back, and looked into my face. His expression was wary, like he was wondering if he'd broken a law. The song changed again.

I had survived. I didn't make a sound. Akinli was safe, I had been kissed, and She had no idea. This knowledge filled me suddenly, and I felt my heart start to race. The fire raged on, not even remotely quenched. I bit my lip. My chest heaved. He saw my excitement and kissed me again.

Akinli's hand was already in my hair, and I reached up tangling both of my hands in his. His hair was soft in the back. I thought of the time I'd managed to get a wild rabbit close enough to let me pet it. I had to stretch up on tiptoe to reach his lips. Akinli put his arm around my waist to pull me into him. With my weight on his body it was easier, so we didn't break apart.

That kiss led into another. His lips, using the tiniest force to guide me, opened mine, and I could taste his breath inside me. He made the smallest moan. I felt a little earthquake travel up my body at the sound. Moved by that shiver, I pushed myself into him. The kisses got harder, deeper. His tongue found his

way into my mouth and mine into his. I couldn't summon the rationale to be a lady.

No, all I wanted was to be less and less ladylike. The desire made my knees buckle, and I slipped away from him for a second. But his arms were around me, and pulled me back to him. In the second we were apart, I was startled into opening my eyes. I looked into his and felt absolutely weak.

The momentary pause didn't slow him. He was kissing me again before I could catch my unnecessary breath. My legs refused to work. He let his bend, too, and we made our way down to the blanket. Akinli cradled me down, shifting so that he was mostly over me and kissed me on and on. His lips left mine and traveled up and down my throat. I heard myself breathing wildly but couldn't stop it. *No sound*, I willed, *no sound*. He moved his mouth gently along my jaw line, kissing me behind my ear. I felt my hands dig into his back. He seemed to like that. He moved, and his hand fell off the blanket into the wet sand. When his hand came back to me, I felt the grit on the dress. Sorry, Julie. He kept making those delicious sounds, and I wished I could, too. I hoped my silence wasn't hiding how much I absolutely *wanted* him.

For years, even just this morning, I had thought absolutely nothing could cripple this impenetrable body. Here it was.

A part of me was nervous that Akinli's hands would go somewhere that would make me uncomfortable, but they stayed either on my back or in my hair. I loved both. Yes, he was being much too forward, but he was a complete gentleman at the same time. I pulled him closer to me. My fingers made a mess of his hair and tugged at his shirt. I just wanted more. I had no idea that this was in me all along.

I thought of the decades when I dreamed of being kissed. All of my faceless daydreams were little more than filling time. Simply being kissed would not have satisfied me. Only this man— this man that I adored with all that I was— would ever do. I didn't ever want to be kissed by another person. I wanted, needed only Akinli.

If the song changed again, I missed it. My leg— without me meaning to do it— hooked itself around him, locking him to me. Akinli responded by somehow managing to hold me even tighter. He ground his body against mine one slow time. Another earthquake. He smelled like water and grass and air. He smelled like living. He tasted unimaginably delicious. Better than cake. And I drank it all in there, with the Ocean within yards of us and completely unaware. I would probably have to pay for this later. If She didn't punish me, I would. I'd be haunted by the longing. I couldn't possibly keep him.

But... maybe. Maybe I could.

I laid there— half beneath Akinli— and thought, *I've done so much in this life. Surely there's a way to make this work.*

His lips moved again from my mouth to my jaw line and crept up to my ear, kissing my excited skin the whole way.

“Kahlen? Stay with me? Don't leave. If someone comes for you, then fine. I'll deal with that if I have to. But otherwise, I want you to stay here. Would you stay? ”

I pulled back to look at his face. He looked worried. Maybe afraid he'd said too much.

I want to stay with you forever, I thought. I love you. I love no one like I love you. I'd give you anything you wanted.

It passed through my head, and I knew it was true. Just like that, all of my armor was gone. Every defense I'd ever had fell to pieces. I was Akinli's, and I couldn't do anything to fight it. I thought about the people who had left him— his parents and that girl. I couldn't do that to him. I wouldn't. Whatever he wanted from me, he was going to have.

I nodded my head.

His mouth was on mine again, moving slower now. And I kissed him back. I kissed him until it ached.

CHAPTER 10

I was surprised to find Akinli was right— no one took our shoes. We walked back to them in silence, the girls playing music giving up long before we did. He kissed me once more before starting the engine of his beloved Bessie. I gripped him tight as we rode back to the house. I felt alive in the small breeze his bike kicked up and tried to commit all of these feelings to memory.

Bliss settled in as we traveled. I didn't have any sort of plan that would make it possible for me to stay yet, but I felt a new determination. I had never wanted anything like I wanted this, and I'd overcome the distance between humanity and myself in some aspect already. This could be done.

When we pulled up to the house, most of the lights were off. I was glad I didn't have to face Julie like this— I could feel my hair sticking out at strange angles. And I could feel sandy wet splotches on her dress. I hoped I hadn't ruined it. We crept in silently, Akinli holding my hand as he walked me to the guest room.

The door to the room was open, and I saw that Julie had left some girly pajamas for me. How sweet of her. Akinli lingered.

"I feel funny. Like I should say something, but..."

I covered his mouth with my fingers and slowly shook my head. He stared at me and nodded. What exactly were we saying just then? Did it matter so long as both of us understood? He took my wrist in his hand and pulled it away from his mouth. He bent down and gave me another excruciatingly wonderful kiss.

"Sleep," he commanded me. "I'll see you in the morning."

I smiled and watched him unwillingly back out of the room, looking at me until the closing door finally obstructed his view. My head swam. I put on Julie's pajamas in a trance. I settled on the bed, watching the moon outside the window. I don't know why, but my thoughts went to time.

It didn't make sense. Decades dragged on with nothing worth noting, and then days were so full of goodness I could barely hold onto it all. It took me years to bond with some of my sisters, but I was knit into Akinli within the first seconds I saw him. I had years of being unbreakably nineteen stretched out in front of me— women would kill for that luxury— but those years of being frozen while Akinli aged were my adversary. I felt certain that if I looked back, I could add up the time of significant moments of my life into less than a week's worth of hours. And I was sure that if I had a guaranteed hundred more years, it wouldn't be enough for me to have my fill of Akinli.

Time is a healer. Time is an antidote.

Time was my enemy.

I sat awake in bed, adding and subtracting hours. Value and waste, importance and irrelevance all weighed in new ways in my brain. I couldn't rest, and I couldn't calm down. I was anxious without a plan. I wanted to see Akinli again; he calmed me. I was already breaking rules, so what was one more? I climbed the stairs to Akinli's room.

The stairs barely made noise when I moved. I was lighter than the boys. I heard Ben snoring on the one side of the hall where he and Julie shared a room. Across from it, I saw that Akinli's door was slightly cracked. I peeked in and found him just as awake as I was, looking out the window.

"You too, huh?" he said with a smile. He lifted his blanket and whispered, "Come get in here."

I left the door cracked and crawled into his bed. I settled in, curling up into a ball, my shins resting against his bent legs, arms crossed in front of my chest. He slid one arm under my neck, and the other wrapped around the middle of my back. We fit together like puzzle pieces. He rubbed my back in silence for a long time. All the confusion from earlier melted. I was in my place. Everything else could move, break— I wouldn't notice or care.

For years I dreamed about falling in love. I had no idea it would feel like this. My own will, my own wants all vanished, and I didn't miss them. I'd stay right here to make him happy. That was all I wanted. The desire was disconcertingly powerful.

His rough fingers traced my spine. It was so late, but he seemed alert. He watched me with anxious eyes, but he didn't try to kiss me again. I wanted to try myself, but I just wasn't brave enough to initiate it.

"Kahlen... I want to say something," he finally said. He looked nervous, like he was struggling to find the right words. "I know I probably acted a little out of line tonight. I just... I don't know. I liked you from the moment I saw you, and I got caught up there. I shouldn't do things like that. I should have asked you first. I'm sorry about that."

Sorry? Sorry for the best thing I've experienced? Ever? Don't be sorry for that!

"I care about you. I really do. I just... I've had a rough year, and I should be more careful. Maybe you don't feel about me the way I feel about you. We really don't know each other. And I sort of had you cornered there. It's not like you had anywhere to go if you didn't want me to kiss you. And you probably feel a little obligated because, you know, I found you and all. I just want to say... just because we kissed... a lot... well, you're not bound to me or anything. I mean, maybe you have a boyfriend already who you just can't remember right now."

He looked sad saying that out loud.

"But, if you want to stay, if you give me some time, I'd like to try. To be with you. To be together." He looked scared. How could he think I didn't like him? Didn't he know how wonderful he was? I had no option besides silence, so the pause between us grew. He started to fidget.

"Could you... I don't know, do something? Like, if you're just not interested in me or think you're already taken, could

you tap your nose or something?” I smiled and kept my hands firmly tucked in between our chests. I felt him relax a little.

“Hmm. Okay... if you think you would like to stay and try to be together... uh... I don't know... slap me in the face,” he said. I smiled wider. I tried not to think of whether or not I could, because he only asked if I would *like* to stay. And I did want to stay. So much. All I needed was a way to make it work. I was convinced there was an answer out there somewhere. I wasn't about to slap him though, so I just rested my palm on his cheek.

“Not quite the sign I was looking for, but I'll take it,” he said. He kissed my forehead. He stayed awake looking at me. I should have probably felt self-conscious, but I was completely at peace with him. As the minutes wore on in silence, his eyelids started to fall, and then he drew in a deep yawn. I could see the clock from where I was; he'd been awake nearly twenty-four hours.

“Will you stay up here? Be here when I wake up?”

I nodded. He finally slept.

I stayed awake most of the night thinking. It was easier to do with Akinli holding me. I watched his beautiful face, just happy to hear him breathe.

This was the end of it. I'd put up a decent fight, but I wasn't going to win. This was love. I knew, just knew, that once I was back to my aging, breakable self, there was no way I was going to forget him. How could I? In the same way that I longed for love in this life, I would long for him in the next. There was no way around it anymore.

What would I give? What could I possibly bargain to stay with him? I had no leverage. I owned nothing that the Ocean wanted or needed, except my body. She might take that one day. She could have it, eventually, if it meant I could stay with him.

I had stayed with the schools for years at a time. Would I be able to do the same with someone who would be watching me

infinitely closer? The students didn't need me to talk. How would Akinli feel if my voice never returned? At the schools, I could ask for time off when the Ocean needed me. Could I ask time off from a friend? Or was he my boyfriend? What was I to Akinli? Surely I meant *something* to him— not just a person to fill his time or bed. I sensed he didn't have the ability to treat anyone with such disregard. I wished he would do the honorable thing and just say it out loud!

But I didn't care. If he felt a fraction of what I felt for him, it was enough. I imagined scenarios for over an hour and thought I might have something worth trying. And then, unable to pass up the experience, I fell asleep in Akinli's arms.

Somewhere in the night we shifted, and in the morning I found myself resting with my back against his chest, his arms wrapped around me like he was protecting something fragile. I knew it was morning, but I didn't want to open my eyes. I delayed us separating as long as I could.

"Oh my gosh!" I heard a whisper. "Ben! Ben, come here." Julie had seen us through the open door. I heard Ben's less cautious steps approach. I stayed still, imagining the awkward one-sided conversation that would follow if they knew I was up.

"Wow. I didn't think she'd be that kind of girl," Ben said.

"Don't be stupid!" Julie breathed at him. "They're both fully clothed, sleeping with the door open. It's sweet. Besides, you know how Akinli is."

"How he is doesn't matter. A hot chick in your bed is always good."

I heard Julie slap him somewhere, and they both went downstairs. I suddenly remembered I'd have to explain Julie's dress to her. A few minutes passed, and I felt Akinli start to stir. I rolled over so that he would see I was where I promised I would be. When he opened his eyes, I was there.

We endured Ben's suggestive comments through breakfast, Akinli insisting the whole time nothing happened while I

nodded in silence. I wrote a note apologizing to Julie for all the sand on her dress, but she just looked like it was the best thing that had ever happened to an article of her clothing and told me not to worry.

There was work to be done, and Akinli and I had made for a late start. I wanted to stay with Akinli, to not miss any time with him, but he said that I should stay since he had a lot to do and wanted to catch up with Ben. I assumed catching up meant “tell him about kissing you and why you were in my bed.” I really didn’t want to be there for that anyway.

“Besides,” he said, “I’ll be back in a few hours. It’s not that much today. It’ll give you a chance to miss me. And we’ll go out this afternoon; I think you should get to know your way around since you’re staying and all.” He grinned excitedly at the thought.

We were in the guest room as he was telling me this. I was still in my pajamas. The window was open, and the salty air blew in. The Ocean was still being quiet, which was good. I’d need to find a way to get back in Her good graces. My plans wouldn’t work without Her help. It was a long shot, but still.

Akinli pulled me in for a hug and held me for a minute. I was surprised by how natural this all felt. It was like I had always hugged him good-bye in the mornings, like this was our routine. I didn’t want to let him go, and as he pulled away he must have seen some of that on my face.

“Hey... are you okay? Do I need to stay?” he asked, touching my cheeks and forehead like he was checking to see if I had a temperature.

I grabbed for my notebook.

I’m just fine. Of course, you should go. Do everything you need to, hang out with Ben, take your time. I’ll see if Julie needs help here— she’s been so nice.

“Yeah, she’d probably love to have you around. I think she gets sick of us boys. But are you sure?”

I nodded enthusiastically. I just hated to lose the time, that was all. But it was ridiculous to think he'd spend every waking moment with me. Besides, I could spare him for a few hours. If I managed to break away from Julie, I could go talk to the Ocean. Maybe She'd feel like She owed me one at this point. I could play that up.

“Alright, you just have to promise you'll miss me, okay?”

I put my hand up like I was taking an oath and smiled. He looked at me wickedly.

“Nope. Not convinced.”

With that he stole my notebook out of my hands, pulled me in, and kissed me. It wasn't as driven as the night before. He was sincere, confident. Last night he was trying to evoke an emotion in me. Today he was sure it was already there— I could feel it in him, too. I was beginning to discover that there were many kinds of kisses that said a world of things. Maybe if I could just keep kissing him, I would never need my voice anyway.

When we broke apart, his breathing was a little unsteady.

“Alright. You'd better think of me all day now.”

I sighed at him, pulled back my notebook and scribbled quickly.

Silly boy.

Julie was truly grateful to have the help cleaning up. It was the least I could do for sheltering, feeding, and clothing me. Besides, I was used to spending most of my time with girls. Akinli had left my tiny notebook with me, which was better than having to hunt down paper when I had to ask a question. At first there wasn't much to say, mostly asking where sponges were. But after a while, Julie started talking like she had the night before.

“So Akinli said you might stay with us a while. That true?”

Did he not ask you first? If that's not okay with you, I understand.

“No, No! I really like you Kahlen. You’re sweet as can be. You kind of fit in here. I was just wondering if this was his idea or yours. If it’s what *you* wanted...”

I nodded.

“Are you sure? I mean someone out there might be looking for you,” she said.

Honestly, I really don’t think so. I could be wrong, but I think I’m alone.

She shook her head as she spoke. “I don’t think so. You’re perfectly healthy— it’s not like you’ve been living on the streets. And he didn’t exactly find you in rags. You were in a really expensive dress. Don’t you remember how you got it? I mean, either you’re something like a debutant or you stole it.” She immediately cringed for letting those words out. “Sorry.”

I don’t know where it came from. I don’t even want the stupid thing. If you’re worried about me stealing from you, I can’t say I’d blame you. If a stranger was in my house, I’d worry, too.

“Oh! No, Kahlen, no. This is coming out wrong. What I mean is that I don’t want you to miss out on whatever life you had. It was obviously something special, and you must have been special, too. I think Akinli is great, don’t get me wrong. I love him like a brother. But to decide so quickly that you’d rather not bother with trying, and just stay here in a tiny room and date a fisher... it just seems hasty. And just because no one has shown up *yet* doesn’t mean they won’t. We might not be able to keep you here anyway,” she explained.

This sounded genuine. She wasn’t afraid I’d rob her blind. She thought I would eventually leave, either by choice or force, to go to wherever I had been. She was right... partly anyway. In the hours while Akinli was still asleep I had made my plan. If I could convince him I was at least eighteen, which I was, we could legally be together— date, get married, whatever he wanted. I could stay with him maybe four years, five if I was lucky. And then, I would “die.” The easiest way

would be to fake my own drowning. We were right by the water, and we would be out on his boat a lot. One day, after I had tied up any loose ends with him, I could slip into the water while his back was turned and swim out of his sight or reach.

It would be hard, but the kindest option was death. I couldn't let him think that I would ever leave him upon my own free will. He would have to know that the only thing that could ever separate me from him was death. And, unless the Ocean could guarantee I wouldn't have his face in my mind when I left this life, I *would* ask Her to die once I disappeared. The thought of living with the wanting, not knowing who he actually was or how to get to him seemed like torture. I'd had enough of time tormenting me. It would be merciful for the both of us, all things considered.

Of course, he wouldn't see it that way. To him, it would be the saddest ending. But I thought about my family and Jillian. I thought about the lives they led and how special they were. Isn't it the last chapter of a book that really makes it worth reading? Every story has to end. And everyone thinks death is a sad way to end a story. But that's just not true. If it is, we are all just walking tragedies. I flipped to a fresh page to answer Julie.

Maybe one day another life might catch up with me. Or there could be no other life at all. I guess I couldn't say for sure. Either way, I choose Akinli. There are some things you just know. And I know I want Akinli. I hope that will always be a good enough answer: that he's what I would take over anything else.

It wasn't a long speech, but it filled the tiny page. Julie smiled at it. For her at least, it was a good enough answer. She passed my notebook back to me and cleared her throat.

"So... what happened exactly that got my dress all covered in sand?" she asked peeking over at me.

I didn't raise my eyes from the section of sink I was cleaning, but I felt my lips curl against my will into a smile and the heat of a blush cover my face.

“Okay! I’m going to get bigger sheets of paper. I need details!”

When Ben and Akinli came back, Julie and I rushed to crumple up all the papers I had filled with paragraphs about Akinli and get them into the trash. I had gone on and on about how strong he was and how I thought he smelled and gave her details that I really didn’t mean to. But reliving them on paper made the moments even clearer for me. As I thought through it all again, I just adored him more and more. I think my attention to all things Akinli made Julie sure about what I had written earlier—he was what I chose. We barely got the last of the pages shoved into our pockets when Ben came through the kitchen door.

“Hey babe,” he said to Julie.

“Hi!” she replied breathlessly.

“What’s going on in here?” Ben’s eyes darted back and forth between us, trying to unravel our secret. As if he and Akinli hadn’t been talking about the exact same thing for at least part of the morning. I’m sure it was absolutely plain to him that we were gossiping.

“Just work, you know. Hard work,” she said, smiling at me. Our smiles grew bigger and hers finally broke into wild laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Akinli asked walking through the door.

“Our girls are being super girly,” Ben said.

Our girls. I liked the way that sounded. Akinli walked across to me with a smile, kissed my forehead, and said he’d be back downstairs once he washed up. He had been gone for hours, but the thirty minutes it took him to clean himself dragged on and on. Julie lent me nicer clothes than the ones I had been wearing to clean. I suspected she hoped they would have similar adventures as her dress. So did I.

Akinli looked so good when he came down that I didn’t mind the wait anymore. This time, because we were going

farther, we took the car. It did smell a little like fish, but that wasn't something I minded.

We drove past the tiny collection of houses and businesses and churches to leave Port Clyde. The road we were on stretched out forever. I guessed that this might be the only way in and out of town.

“Any of this look familiar?” Akinli asked, apparently noting my curiosity. It was strange. There were metal sculptures in people's lawns at random. Boats were stuck in sandbars just waiting for high tide to come and rescue them. I kept seeing signs for lobster, as if we didn't already know how easy it was to get to. And the road just kept going.

I shook my head. It was the truth. I hadn't seen a bit of this in my life.

“Kahlen, I'm starting to think you had to have washed up on shore somehow. You'd have to have seen some of this if you drove in. I wonder if we'll ever figure out what you've been through. I'll bet it's one hell of a story.”

When we finally got to the end of the road, you had to turn left or right. Akinli took a right, and it looked for a moment like we were going to be on another one of these rural roads. But slowly signs of popular civilization started passing by: a fast food chain, a home improvement store, a gas station with more than one pump. We drove on and on, until he hooked around, and I saw the Ocean and yet another harbor. We parked along the street. I turned to look at him, and he answered the question in my eyes.

“Rockland.”

The shops in Rockland were full of afternoon business. This place was obviously a bit touristier than Port Clyde, not that they didn't have their share of visitors. We looked in a couple of shops before we sat down to a late lunch. Calzones, yum! I was starting to get uncomfortable with him paying for everything. If I was going to stick around, I'd need a job. If I was going to fake a death in a few years anyway, it didn't

matter if I got legal documents. Maybe I could give them to Elizabeth once I didn't need them— we looked similar. He drew me back from these thoughts by apologizing about the venue he chose not having cake. They did have ice cream though, and locally made. That would do.

When we finished our lunch, Akinli got up to get us some of this local ice cream. It took a while since the building was now packed with an afternoon rush. There wasn't a single open table anymore. Akinli came back with a giant waffle cone full of ice cream. I had decided on two flavors I'd never tried: eagle tracks and caramel almond. Interesting combination.

“Is it good?” Akinli was messily making his way through a pile of ice cream even bigger than my own.

I nodded fervently. We'd have to come back here. There was a tiny ice cream shop in Port Clyde that had local ice cream, too. I would have to try every flavor at both places now. It was so well-made.

The door opened, ringing a bell, and an elderly couple walked in. I felt a gust of summer air interrupt the air conditioning around me. They looked around, searching for seats, but there were none to be found. The lady looked disappointed. They were both sweating and obviously tired. It was a bit on the hot side— I could tell because Akinli had beads of sweat on his forehead— but it was nothing I couldn't take. An older body, however, like the bodies of this couple, might have been seriously bothered by it all. It looked like they were about to turn and leave when I heard my favorite voice speak up.

“Here you go, ma'am.” Akinli stood. “We're all done.”

I followed him immediately, proud to be with a man who knew how to treat a lady. Not just me, but any lady.

“Oh, bless your heart, dear. Are you sure?” the lady asked.

“Yes, ma'am. We were just about to get out into some of that sunshine,” Akinli said, making it seem divine that

someone would come along and help us go faster.

“Too warm for me,” the gentleman commented, winking at me. I smiled back. What a cute couple.

“Well, then, you two enjoy some ice cream. That’ll help,” Akinli suggested as he ushered me towards the door. “Have a nice day.”

The old woman snagged my arm just before I exited. “He’s a keeper,” she whispered in my ear. I smiled as brightly as I could and nodded in agreement, stepping out into the sunlight.

“What was that about?” Akinli asked before taking another bite of his cone.

I just shrugged innocently.

“You keeping secrets from me?”

I took a bite of ice cream, being coy. It was fun to flirt with him knowing I didn’t have to worry about whether or not he actually liked me.

“You can try all you like, but I’ll get to the bottom of everything, Little Miss Kahlen. Remember that!” He used his free arm to pull me close and kiss my forehead. It was a cold, sticky kiss.

I wondered if he *would* get to the bottom of everything. I’d need to talk to the Ocean and soon. If She could keep Her secret for who knows how many years from the entirety of humanity, surely She would know how to help me keep it from three people. I worried that Her wisdom might include me leaving Akinli. I couldn’t do that. Not anytime soon.

And though Akinli was a bright boy, he wasn’t the kind to believe in the nonsensical. I wouldn’t speak, and I’d look the same as I do now for the duration of our life together. Maybe I’d have to find a way to explain my absences every year or so, but that would be the worst of it. None of that, in my head, pointed to the stuff of fables and legends. This was doable, no matter how much of a snoop he may be.

He had brought along my notebook, grabbing it from the kitchen as we left. We didn't use it too much. Our silences weren't uncomfortable. We were at home with one another, with or without words. He hadn't actually said it yet, but it felt like Akinli had told me he loved me several times. I didn't let those count though; I held out for the real thing.

We threw away the last of our napkins, and he looked me over.

"You are living a borrowed life," he said.

I felt my body contract. I'd been saying that same thing since the very beginning of my sentence.

"Look at you: borrowed food, borrowed bed, borrowed clothes. We need to get you something that's all yours." This was all too close to home, but he didn't see my terror, just my confusion. He scanned the shops. "Where to? I'm getting something for you to keep."

I shook my head, but he insisted. When Akinli made his mind up about something, he was all but impossible to dissuade. I looked up the line of shops in front of us. Toy store? No. Something there would be fun, but impractical. Clothing store? Maybe. Julie's stuff fit almost perfectly, so it'd be better to wait until I had my own money. Jewelry store? No. Too expensive, and I didn't know anything about jewelry. And then, a store that said "Coffee and Books." Yes! I pointed to the shop, and Akinli looked pleased.

"Great choice," he said.

We walked in the store, and I was sure I'd made a good pick. The front half of the building contained a collection of tables for people to sit and drink and read. In the back, there was a maze of used books. The shelves wound around and were full of other bargain hunters. I searched for the children's section. Not only were these books generally less expensive, but most of the time, the words that adults need to hear the most are hidden in children's books. The beauty of that is that

most children need to have the words read to them. It works out for everyone.

It took me a long time to settle on something. I wanted to get Akinli's opinion, but he'd vanished. I guessed he went to find a more manly section to browse. I went through book after book. If I was only going to get one, it'd need to be a good one. I decided to ask him for *The Giving Tree*. Maybe he would read it to me later if I asked. It took me at least twenty or thirty minutes to decide. I had a really hard time focusing around books. Just as I made my selection, Akinli came around the corner.

"Did you pick one?" he asked, looking very excited.

I handed him the book. He looked it over, pleased with my choice.

"Nice."

He bought me my book, and on the ride home, I kept taking it out of the bag and hugging it. He was delighted to see me enjoy it so much. I really hadn't thought about what it meant that I didn't own anything anymore. For decades I hadn't had to go without anything I needed or most of the things I wanted, but I felt a pulse of satisfaction at knowing one little thing on this whole planet was truly mine. I thought of my cherry dress, the one that I destroyed in the Ocean. I had forgotten that She'd gotten me that, or at least made it so I was able to. I wondered if She was feeling guilty or worried now. As we drove, I started working out the conversation I'd have to have with Her soon.

It was easy to find our way back home. I could have done it on my own: drive until the big T in the road, turn left. I looked at the long road again, and this time I felt a part of me lift when I saw the sign that said "Welcome to the Village of Port Clyde."

I showed off my book to Ben and Julie when I got home; I genuinely couldn't contain myself. Julie patted my hair and

winked at me when the boys weren't looking. Another sisterhood in the making.

Ben made a variety of things on the grill for dinner. I had chicken. I loved the smell of grilled food. Sitting around the table, everyone bantered back and forth. If I managed to write down a comment fast enough, Akinli would read it aloud. There were laughter and jokes, comments on family members, and things on the news. They didn't just fill up silence, they communicated. There were even a few moments that made me uncomfortable because Ben would say something that Akinli disagreed with, and they would heatedly debate it until Julie asked them to stop. But when it was over, no one was mad. It was completely okay to disagree here.

We settled in the living room after dinner to watch sports. I didn't have a clue what was going on, so I kept thumbing through my book, reading its short pages over and over. If I was going to stay here, maybe Julie and I could fight for some more feminine programming every once in a while. Poor girl got run over here all by herself. Every once in a while when I looked up to see something on the TV, I found Akinli looking over at me, just quietly smiling.

The evening passed quickly, like all my time with Akinli did. Julie gave me a hug before she went up to bed with Ben. Akinli did end up reading my book out loud to me on the couch. He hadn't heard it before. He loved it.

"Have you ever been friends with a tree?" he asked me jokingly.

I shook my head. No, not with a *tree*.

When it was time for bed, he walked me to the door of the guest room— my room— and put one hand up on the wall.

"Listen. This is going to sound weird at first, but I want you to hear me out. I just... I want you to stay down here tonight. And I'm going to stay upstairs. I really want to do things right with you. It's not easy to behave when you're right there in my bed. And I care about you too much do something stupid and

mess this up. Does that make sense?” He looked worried and kind of embarrassed.

I wanted to be with him more than I could say, but the thought about the way things might progress scared me. Though some of my thoughts and feelings changed with the eras, I was enough of my original self to want to wait for this. It was a struggle though. What was it girls said nowadays? Oh yeah. Akinli was hot.

I put my hand to his face, brushing a piece of his long hair out of his eyes. I nodded with a meaningful look on my face. I hoped he would understand just how much I agreed.

“I should have known you’d be great about this. You’re too good for me, Kahlen.” He looked at me with love in his eyes, and I wished he would just say it.

Please! I willed. Tell me you love me!

No such luck.

“Give me a kiss goodnight,” he said.

I went up on tiptoe to reach his lips and kiss him. He kissed me back, putting one hand high on my waist. The kiss connected to another.

And another.

Heat. Earthquakes. Dizziness.

The space between our bodies disappeared. I toppled backwards into the doorframe, feeling the weight of his body against me. His arms and chest were so muscular. It wasn’t for show like it was with some men; Akinli had earned this body. This somehow made it even sexier to me.

As always, he was warm. I could feel his temperature where my bare arms touched his skin and on my hands that were tangled into intricate knots in his hair. His hands that had been high on my waist slid down and were now resting high on the backs of my thighs. Tomorrow that thought would make me embarrassed. Right now, it only made me want him more.

Like last night, one of my legs hooked around him unintentionally, and he willingly took that invitation to come even closer in. I felt lightheaded. That unexplainable weakness rose in me again. I felt like I might pass out. I wondered if I was capable of that. I was lost in my wanting him when I suddenly felt his hands turn into fists.

Akinli stumbled away from me, and that took some effort with my leg still in place. I looked at him with guilt in my eyes, like a child caught doing something they were specifically told not to.

“See?... I’m not...” He sighed. “Okay. Sorry, Kahlen. I’ll see you in the morning.” He gave me a peck on the cheek and dashed up the stairs, running his hands through his hair.

Why did he have to be such a good kisser? It was all his fault. Stupid fisherman. Stupid, sexy fisherman. Stupid, sexy, wonderful fisherman. Who was I kidding? Who do you blame when there is no sin?

Wait... Was I a good kisser, too? I mean, he seemed just as drawn in as I was. Maybe I was! Imagine that.

I wanted to apologize for not being more guarded, but I had just told him I’d stay downstairs, and I didn’t want to disobey. My apology would wait for the morning. I walked in the door of my room and put on the pajamas I had left folded on the chair. Then I turned and saw something resting on my pillow: a small box and a note. I caught my name written on the top of the page.

Kahlen-

I thought you might get upset if I did too much. But you’re special to me, so you should have something special from me. I hope it’s a good representation of something I know you like and the change I’ve felt since you came. I’m so happy you’re staying.

Yours, Akinli

I knew he had disappeared for too long today, I knew it! When did he manage to sneak this in here? I opened the box, and on the cottony fluff at the bottom was a thin necklace with a tiny charm: a glittering, silver leaf.

Perfect! Just perfect! If I had gone myself, I don't think I could have chosen anything better. I raced to the mirror and tried it on. It was so small and delicate. It wasn't obnoxious—the way some girls' jewelry was—and only the two of us would understand it. I hated that he spent who knows how much on this, but I really did love it.

I quietly went out into the kitchen and rummaged through the junk drawer I discovered while cleaning this morning. There it was—a thick marker. I found paper and wrote as large of letters as would fit on the page. I hoped it would be big enough. I went back into my room and crawled out the window onto the porch. From there, I walked down the steps to the open space that was their back yard.

The light was already off in his room, but I'd bet all kinds of money I didn't have that he was laying there awake. I picked up a rock and threw it gently at his window. It hit. I saw a shadow move. I threw another rock. He saw where the sound came from this time and went over to the window. He pulled it open and stuck his smiling face out into the night. I held up my sign.

THANK YOU

I saw his eyes catch the glittering at my neck. His face was glowing.

CHAPTER 11

I was at home here now. I knew it because the next few days passed with me as a part of the regular motions. One morning, after Akinli came into my room to kiss me good-bye I found myself alone in the house. They trusted me here alone. I wasn't sad to be by myself. Looking around, I felt the presence of my adopted family in every room. Julie's knitting bag was full to the brim with yarn in one corner. Ben had left his half-full glass of milk on the coffee table. The book Akinli had been reading the night before was left open and face down on the arm of a chair, not bothering with a bookmark. They were with me as I sat in the silent house.

Because no one was here to hear it, and because I ached to say it out loud so badly, I spoke.

"I love you all so much," I said into the air.

I wanted them to continue to trust me, so I tried to be useful while they were gone. I cleaned up the kitchen, which was something that needed to be done more than once in a day. Ben and Akinli were like tornadoes around food. I did some of Akinli's laundry; I knew where his dirty clothes were and Julie had shown me how to work the washer that day we stayed home alone. I tried to tidy the house, but it didn't all go smoothly. Ben and Akinli came home to find me battling with the vacuum cleaner. Akinli just smiled.

Julie took bunches of her clothes and put them in the dresser in my room. She even went out and bought personal things I hadn't thought about needing— like a real toothbrush. We went out for a walk, the whole family, and Ben draped an arm around my shoulder. I knew that was as much of a welcome from him as his manliness would permit, and it meant the world to me. We went to visit the lighthouse. I climbed over the rocks with Akinli, watching the sky change colors at sunset. Some families sat at picnic tables in the area. I liked it here.

I was surprised when we left to see a memorial to the fishermen lost in the harbors of St. George. I thought this place was so small that the number would have to be practically insignificant. But I was just getting used to the town; maybe I was wrong.

One afternoon, while Akinli and I were watching yet another one of his ridiculous movies, we laid down on the couch. I found myself wedged between him and the back pillows with an arm and a leg draped across him. I don't remember falling asleep; I certainly didn't make the decision to. I woke up and the movie was over. The TV was going, and Ben and Julie were sitting in the room, too. Ben was in the chair, eyes locked on the TV. Julie was curled up with her knitting. She stretched and rubbed her stomach and went back to her work. I looked up at Akinli's face, and he seemed completely alert.

"Hey there, gorgeous," he whispered. His hand was tracing slow lines down my arm.

I must have looked confused.

"I just couldn't wake you up. You look so beautiful when you sleep."

I smiled.

He must love me. I felt radiant.

When Thursday came, I celebrated a tiny anniversary internally. A week ago tonight, Akinli had found me. No one was looking for me, which had them all surprised. Akinli was more and more certain each day that I was staying for good. I could do this. It wasn't so bad to have to be quiet. And I was careful.

I still hadn't gone to the Ocean yet. I was afraid of Her reaction. It was sort of like talking myself into speaking to Her that first time all over again. I kept telling myself She would be kind, but after how everything happened with Jillian, I didn't know if I could trust that to be true. I had to build up a little more courage.

Friday was a lazy day. Akinli and I crawled out of his window and sat on the roof of the porch. We laid out blankets, he pulled a radio out on the window sill, and we read books to pass the hours. Julie had tried to get me into a two-piece bathing suit, but I just couldn't do it. Streaking in the dark was one thing, but being half-naked in front of Akinli was another. I settled for a tank top and shorts, and he eyed me enough as it was in those.

It was pleasant outside. We didn't speak too much, but he did give me a nervous look at one point in the day and asked, "Do you really like it?"

He was looking at my necklace. Again. I didn't bother with a nod. I kissed him. I was tired of letting him pick when we kissed. He didn't seem to mind. We sank back into silence for a while. A question had been brewing in me since he'd spoken the words, and I wasn't sure if it was either appropriate or important to ask. But there on the roof, my curiosity won out.

You said the other day you wanted to do things right with me... does that mean you've done it wrong before?

I was going to have to rewrite that; it sounded too vague. But he understood. I knew because he looked ashamed.

"I don't suppose you would even remember if you've had boyfriends or not, or, if you had, what you've done. But I want you to know even if you weren't exactly innocent, I wouldn't be bothered by it. I'd be lying if I said I didn't like that you seem to be though. I really like that about you. You're sweet and modest. It's refreshing.

"But, yeah, I've got a bit of a history there. I've slept with three girls. The first two were in high school, back when it was just something you did. Sex didn't really mean much to me at the time. I mean, it was fun, but it wasn't special. I don't know if that makes sense."

He looked at me, and I nodded. I thought I understood what he meant.

“Ok. Umm, so the third girl was my only serious girlfriend. We dated for two years in college, right up until my parents died. I don’t know if I told you about her, but yeah, we were really involved. I thought she was the one, you know? So we thought we’d be together forever. But I think that sleeping with her made the end worse. I was older, so it was important. Everything was so personal, so I thought I’d see if she was unhappy with me; I thought we were so connected.

“I’m telling you, she dumped me out of nowhere.

“That was months ago. I wasn’t really looking for anyone after that. Finding you was a surprise.” He smiled at me, forgetting what he was saying for a moment.

“Anyway, I didn’t feel anything with the girls I didn’t care about, and I felt awful later with the girl I cared about most. I made the decision to wait now, not knowing who would come along or when. And I know it’s soon to say it, but I really like you.”

His face was sincere. He hadn’t said love yet, but maybe that was something he was saving up, too. Just because he didn’t say it doesn’t mean he didn’t feel it. We were guarding our bodies, and it seemed pretty obvious how we both felt about that. But I couldn’t know for sure.

“And, if you and I don’t work out, I don’t want there to be any regret. If some guy shows up tomorrow claiming he’s your fiancé or whatever, we could still be friends.” I eyed him skeptically.

“Well, mostly friends.” He leaned in and kissed my neck. Shivers.

“Anyway, that’s what I mean. I just don’t want you to regret anything, and I don’t want to be that close to you if someone comes to take you back to wherever you came from. I’d be sad enough as it is. That’d just make it worse.”

It was hard to hear about him doing things with others that he wouldn’t do with me.

Yet. I kept telling myself that “yet” would come. I couldn’t sit here and compare myself to these faceless strangers. They weren’t here anymore. I was. Besides, his reasoning was for my protection as much as it was for his. I appreciated the care he took with me.

Thank you for being honest. I really just wanted to understand.

“Thanks for being so cool about it. Don’t hold any of that against me, do you?”

No, of course not! Not anymore than you would hold my past against me.

I knew that was the right comparison. I could tell in his face that I could burn the house down, and he’d just get out marshmallows and thank me for the lovely flame. I’m not sure I could make a mistake big enough for him not to forgive.

I think your decision is very wise. I’m sorry you had to get hurt to make it though.

“Thank you. Well, umm, like you said, it totally wouldn’t matter, but do you know if you’ve ever...”

Ha! Based on how nervous I get when you touch me, I’d say no.

He chuckled. “Yeah, you do sort of flip out. It’s kind of cute.”

I couldn’t hide the blush. Inexperience made me feel as pure as the snow one second and as dumb as a post the next. Oh well. I wished I could laugh about it like he was. I suppose it was kind of funny. I wish I could make any comment on the subject. If we could talk about this, we could talk about anything. Well, almost anything. And not *talk* so much as scribble.

Does it bother you that I can’t speak? That I may never speak?

He pondered that one for a long while. He ran his hand through his hair and down his chin. It must have bothered him

then. I didn't need for him to say anything now. But after a moment, he did.

"Kahlen, I don't mind communicating with you on paper. And, I was thinking, since it looks like you'll be staying, I'm going to learn sign language. It seems like you already know it, so I'd just have to figure out what all those moves mean, and that'll make things even easier. I don't care how we communicate, I'm just happy that we do. And, I know you might not believe this, but you say things all the time. I can see it. Right now, you're upset. Because you think I'm upset. Because you think I'm disappointed."

Yes, that's exactly how I felt.

"And maybe I am a little disappointed, but not because I think it's harder this way or even weird. It's for totally selfish and kind of embarrassing reasons, honestly."

My attention piqued, and he could tell.

"You're gonna' make me explain that, aren't you?"

I nodded. He sighed.

"It's just... ugh, this is so embarrassing. I... I just want to *hear* you. I get your expressions and your body language; I think I understand you pretty well. But, well, I want to know what your laugh sounds like. Not this breathy one, which I honestly love, but the one you had before now. And this is totally egotistical, and I get that, but I want to hear you say my name. I want to know what it sounds like when you say it."

He was looking down, playing with a piece of the blanket. I wished I could offer some sort of consolation, but all I had were hands full of silence.

"Do I *want* all that? Yeah. Do I *need* all that? No. I like you just how you are." He gave me a serious stare. "No-talking, half-named, washed-up-by-the-surf Kahlen. This girl here. That's who I know, and that's who I care about. I don't need anything else."

Good-bye, decorum! I lunged at him.

After spending hours hidden together in the sun, we fled inside to the comfort of the house. Ben and Julie were talking about the evening. After last week's episode, Evan wasn't invited over for their usual Friday night get-together. Ben was surprised he hadn't heard from Evan; he wasn't expecting an apology, but a rant seemed in order. Kristen had called earlier in the day to say that she and John had plans. So it looked like it was going to be just the four of us. And I couldn't be more pleased; I liked it being just us.

"I've got to get some groceries though. I want to make lasagna. I figured we could have a nice big dinner together," Julie said, scribbling down her list.

"We'll do it," Akinli offered, looking in my direction for approval. He had it. "It's good for Kahlen to get to know the village."

"Actually, I think we're going to need more than you can get at the general store."

"That's fine. We'll still go." He looked to ask me again.

Yes, I'll go, goofball.

I knew the drive out of town. Akinli turned up the radio and sang along to the music. As someone who sings for a living, sometimes it's easy to forget that music makes most people happy, that it was meant to express more than impending doom. Akinli didn't have a perfect voice, but it was a happy one. It was just one more thing on the list of reasons I adored him.

I was trying to start a list of reasons I didn't adore him, too. It was short. He burped too often, and that bothered me. Also, I questioned his taste in movies. I liked that he had some sort of imperfections in my eyes. He wasn't some prince in a book. He was an average guy with an average job who I loved in an above average way. It reminded me he was real.

We made it to the larger supermarket outside of town, and Akinli held my hand across the parking lot. It wasn't too full. He grabbed a shopping cart as we entered the automatic doors.

“Would you like a ride, my lady?” He gestured that I should get into the cart. Why the heck not? He lifted me into the cart and pushed me along the edge of the store to the front corner.

“Before we do any serious shopping, ladies and gentlemen, I think we’re going to need a time trial for our vehicle today.” He made the sound of a revving engine.

I put up my hands to protest. He paused. Then, like I remembered Elizabeth doing, I pulled down my imaginary sun visor, checked my hair, flipped it back up, and grabbed my invisible steering wheel. He laughed outright at that. He revved again. And then, in a flash, he took off.

My hands fell from the fake steering wheel to grab the front of the cart. He turned down the maze of fruits and vegetables, making a figure eight. He then twisted down one aisle and up the next taking us back to the front of the store. He went along the side again, taking a sharp turn at the back of the store. And there, in the middle of that harmless and ridiculous moment, everything shifted.

I laughed.

I don’t know what would have happened if we had been somewhere else in the store, but as fortune would have it, we were by the meats and seafood. Akinli unconsciously swerved and crashed into a tank full of lobster, breaking the glass. The cart tipped, and we both fell to the floor, covering ourselves in water.

Oh, God, what have I done?

“Kahlen?”

Don’t cry out loud! Don’t cry out loud!

“Kahlen, are you okay?”

What was I thinking? That I could do this for years? I can barely make it a week.

“Kahlen, please, are you alright?” Akinli was getting a little hysterical.

“What is going on over here?” A grumpy voice was getting closer.

“Kahlen?”

“Who’s responsible for this?”

I can’t stay. I’ll kill him one day. I won’t mean to, but I will. So stupid!

“Kahlen, please?”

“Sir, did you do this?” the manager asked.

“SHUT UP!”

Akinli yelled so loud the angry manager and all the people mumbling around us silenced themselves.

“Kahlen, can you hear me? Are you hurt?”

No, I wasn’t physically hurt. So I shook my head.

It took quite some time to talk things through with the manager. Akinli had no idea why he’d swerved. I guess he hadn’t heard my laugh, or rather, *known* he heard my laugh. We hung our heads as the manager scolded us in front of the other customers. We both had to sign wavers clearing the store of any injuries, though we were both fine. The staff was angry that I could only sign my first name. They let us do our shopping, but only with a clerk walking with us. I felt Akinli look down at me again and again, but I was too upset to look back at him.

We were still wet as we drove home. Akinli didn’t turn the radio on this time. We were halfway home before he spoke to me.

“Hey, I’m sorry I hurt you. Sorry I embarrassed you.”

That finally broke through. I knew I’d been in my own world since I tumbled to the ground in the store. I was rethinking my once-perfect plan. It took me out of his presence, at least mentally, for a while. I didn’t realize he’d see any of this as something that was his fault. I should have known he would take this all on himself.

We didn't bring the notebook. I needed words right now. I needed to tell him he didn't do anything wrong. He usually read me so well, how could he be so wrong now? This one really mattered. All I could do was shake my head longingly, hoping my expression would be enough. It wasn't.

"No, I know I was acting stupid. I don't know what happened... at all. But I'm sorry I did something dumb that obviously upset you."

I shook my head more fervently now. He had to know I wasn't mad. The look on his face showed he didn't believe me. But once we were home, I'd have paper, and then I could explain...

Explain what? How was I supposed to tell him it was my fault? How was I supposed to explain that I was worried about him? He'd never understand it. I was running out of options. Could I have really been upset with the Ocean over Her rules? Now I knew better.

Akinli and I made our way home without another hint of communication.

We pulled around the corner on the way back to the house and saw another car in the driveway. The moment it was in view, I felt Akinli's posture change. His back that had been slumped in shame seemed to stiffen up. I heard him mutter "Casey." I didn't know who Casey was or what he had done, but apparently Akinli wasn't excited to see him. My only guess was that Casey was another Evan-type, and that had me a little on edge, too. We pulled up the driveway and came to a stop. He looked embarrassed.

We walked inside slowly. I left a gap between us because he seemed so tense. Once we rounded the corner into the living room, I figured it out.

"Akinli!" she squealed.

Casey wasn't a he. Casey was a she. A beautiful she. Her long blonde hair draped down her back and reminded me for a moment of how Aisling's hair always bounced. She had

sparkly blue eyes, was slender, and smiled from ear to ear at the sight of Akinli. Without missing a beat, she ran up to him and kissed him on the mouth.

It took an incredible effort not to speak, not to cry. I felt my lips tremble, but I had this act down. A soft smile pushed its way through, composure coming into place like sliding on a familiar coat. I expected him to push her off, but he didn't. When she pulled away, he looked pained, confused.

“Hey, Casey. What... what are you doing here?” he asked.

“Well, what kind of welcome is that?” she said, her voice mockingly upset. “I needed to talk to you, so I came up for the weekend. Ben and Julie said I could stay.”

He looked over at them. Ben looked amused. Julie looked apologetic. I tried to hide any shock I felt when she turned her eyes on me. I saw her eyes look me over, sizing me up. I was humiliated by the way I must look next to her. My hair was a mess and my clothes were still soaked through. I was dirty from being on the floor and there were strange stains that I guessed came from the lobsters. I saw the confusion in Julie's face at my appearance, but I didn't have time to worry about it.

“You must be the girl Akinli found in the woods. You don't speak, right? Are you deaf?”

“She's not deaf,” Akinli said with an edge. “She's in shock or something. And her name is Kahlen.”

“Oh,” was all Casey said.

Akinli turned to me. “Kahlen, this is Casey.”

“His girlfriend. Well, sort of,” she added.

He said nothing to correct this. Akinli was unreadable. Was he upset at me? Or her? I couldn't tell who the wall was directed at, but he had all but shut down. Whatever was happening, I wouldn't add to his pain. Akinli already thought he'd hurt me once today. I smiled as warmly as I could and embraced my enemy for the sake of my friend. Casey let out a little “oh” at that, but didn't reject the hug.

So this was the girl who supported him for years only to leave over something as silly as his job. This would have been who had his shoes the day I first saw him on the beach. This was the last girl he touched.

As each of these thoughts passed through my head, my heart broke. No one could deserve him, and she would never love him like I did, but she was right for him in a way that I wasn't.

Julie said she was going to get started on dinner. I motioned that I would help and went to her as soon as I'd changed clothes. I saw that Casey was sitting next to Akinli on the couch, but that's all I let myself absorb.

I was glad we were working from scratch because it meant there was more to do. I went to start chopping some tomatoes, but Julie stole them and handed me an onion instead. She knew what she was doing, and I gratefully shed a few tears without judgment. Julie looked tense. I felt bad for her. I took my time doing every task she gave me— anything to avoid going into the living room and actually see them interacting. When there was nothing left to do, Julie cornered me near the oven.

“Are you alright, sweetie?” she whispered.

It was a lie, but I nodded.

“Do you want a hug?”

My lips pulled down, preparing for sobs that I wouldn't allow to come. She drew me in, and petted my hair.

“It'll be okay. He didn't look happy to see her. They'll talk some things out, and she'll leave. I don't think she's going to be able to do anything to change his mind.”

I tried to look like I believed her, but in truth, I was weighing it all in my head. While I wanted him more than anything, I knew I couldn't stay. If he would take her back, she would be better for him than I would. She could speak to him, grow old with him. He would only ever grow old *around* me. I wouldn't mind that so much, but I couldn't explain that to him.

And he would only ever manage to grow old around me if I didn't accidentally kill him. I had been lucky. Twice since I'd come here a sound had escaped: the yelp because of Evan and the laugh for Akinli. Twice in one week. So that meant this family would be in danger from me roughly a hundred times a year if I stayed.

From the second he took my hand in the woods, I feared the moment I would have to leave Akinli. I thought it would be years from now, but that just wasn't an option. This would be easier, quicker, safer. Casey had provided a timely exit. Now I just had to pray things worked out for them and wait for the right moment.

At dinner, Casey operated quickly so that I ended up sitting far away from Akinli while she positioned herself beside him. She dominated the conversation by talking about school, her plans, and people that she and Akinli both knew. He paid attention when she mentioned his friends, but that was about it. I tried not to look at him. Julie tried to be a gracious hostess and asked Casey questions since I couldn't, Akinli wouldn't, and Ben just smirked at the whole situation. When Casey was done speaking, she turned on me.

"You didn't eat much, Katie, are you on a diet?"

"Kahlen," Julie and Akinli said in unison.

"Oops," was her reply.

Akinli went to the counter for my notebook, guessing that I would want to defend myself. I turned to a blank page suddenly realizing that we'd nearly filled the book in the few days we had it.

I'm just not very hungry. Thanks for your concern.

I let her read that and then wrote something for Julie.

What I did have was excellent, thank you.

"Anytime." She smiled.

"So you can't speak and you don't know who you are or where you're from or anything?" Casey asked.

I shook my head.

“How did that happen? What’s the last thing you remember?” she posed.

At this the whole table looked up. No one had thought to ask me this, at least not so directly anyway. I’d found that telling the truth is the easiest way to remember your story, so I gave them the most honest answer I could.

I can’t even begin to know what it was, but something made me upset. I was scared and sad and angry. So I ran away. I ran and ran and ended up in the woods. Then I heard Akinli. I was worried because it was a man’s voice, but then he looked kind. And here I am.

Julie read this to the room, and Akinli looked touched.

“Am I really the first thing you remember?” he asked timidly.

I nodded. He almost smiled.

“That makes me nervous,” Julie said. “It sounds like someone tried to attack you.”

“Good thing we have these two strong men around,” Casey said, her voice full of implications.

Ben suggested playing a board game after dinner while yet another baseball game he wanted to watch was on. It was all a waste. The only two people really involved were Casey and me, trying desperately to beat the other. It’s probably for the best that Julie won without even trying.

When it was a little after nine, I felt it was late enough to excuse myself. I waved goodnight to the room. I’m not sure if the longing in Akinli’s face was imagined or not. It would be easier to think it wasn’t real. But I gazed at him a few seconds longer than I should have, memorizing his beautiful face, in case it was the last time I saw it. I changed into my pajamas and crawled into bed. I looked out the window at the Ocean. Once I was sure everyone was asleep, I’d go back to Her.

When I heard everyone move upstairs, I threw a little hissy fit under the cover of their footfalls. I was so upset.

I could tell Casey was shallow, no match for his character at all. But Akinli had feelings for her; he would have asked her to leave right away if there wasn't anything there. Akinli hadn't made me any promises. I wished I had just one so I could stake my claim, but in the end, it was better this way.

With the footsteps drowning it out, I threw my clothes around and ripped my blanket off the bed. If I could have screamed, I would.

Love is completely irrational.

As the minutes passed, I grew anxious to get to the Ocean. I would have to confess everything, but I wasn't afraid of Her reaction anymore. Anything She had for me couldn't be worse than what I was feeling.

I crept out onto the porch. I kept telling myself it would be better this way. It would've had to hurt so much worse if I had stayed for months or years. All of those memories to live with. The night was deep now. No one would see or hear.

Akinli must have left his window open because I heard their voices enter his room. I froze.

"What made you come?" he asked.

"I miss you. I'm willing to admit I made a mistake. I never should have let you go," Casey replied.

"*Let me go?*" he said incredulously. I guessed that was a poor description of their last moments together. "Casey, my parents had just died." His voice broke. "I was just trying to keep my life together, keep my head above water. I just couldn't stay there anymore. Didn't you get that? It wasn't about you."

My eyes welled up. I wished I could go hold him. He went on.

"I needed to take care of myself. I was alone. I had Ben and Julie, and I thought I had you. But the minute things didn't

turn out the way you wanted, you gave up on me.”

“I know, I know. I was way out of line. I didn’t really want to let you go, I just lost my temper,” she said. It seemed to me she should have sounded more repentant than she did.

He was silent. I could hear his footsteps covering the small space in his room.

“Akinli, I came to tell you I made a mistake. You said when you left if I changed my mind I should tell you.” Ah, an open door he didn’t close. He would have done that. He was too kind for her. “Well, I did. We have a long history, and it was wrong of me to throw it all away. Besides, we both know your parents thought we were going to get married and...”

“Don’t,” he cut her off. “Don’t.”

She waited. After a long pause she spoke again.

“Does this have anything to do with *that girl*?” she spat.

“Kahlen,” he corrected her. “No. Even if she wasn’t here, I’m not sure I’d want to be with you.”

“Ah ha! But she is here, so it makes a difference, right?” she guessed.

“We’ve gotten very close since she came here. I invited her to stay with us. She said yes, and Ben and Julie are all for it,” he told her.

“You’ve gotta’ be kidding me!” she said loudly. Ben and Julie were no doubt hearing all of this as well. “She’s been here, what, a few days? How do you manage to get close to someone who can’t even talk?” she asked, unconvinced.

“You’d be surprised. She communicates a lot. She’s not a complicated person, and if you had paid attention tonight, she was saying lots of things,” he said.

“Like what?” she asked, still doubtful.

“Like she’s leaving this all up to me. She likes me, but she’s not bothered that you came. She wants me to do whatever would make me happiest; if she could say it out loud, she

would. I can count on her. She's steady. If someone came for her and took her away, I'd be her friend. If you ended up in my life, she'd be mine. I can't say I'd get that from you."

Wow. He saw right through me. Sometimes, he had me so right. Whatever he wanted, I was prepared to give. Girlfriend, lover, friend, acquaintance... however he wanted me, I'd be that for him.

"Well, if she doesn't care, and I really do, then you *should* be with me."

He snorted.

"I can't believe this!" Casey squealed. "Are you seriously telling me you've got some sort of crush on her? I mean, I know you like to be Mr. Protector and Provider, but think about it. She's completely mute, and she has absolutely nothing. Well, she has a name. Not even that— half of one. She's a nobody."

Akinli didn't respond. Maybe he had an argument, maybe he didn't. Either way, it was silent.

She softened her tone. "Look, Akinli, I didn't come up here to argue with you. I wanted to tell you I was sorry and that I still love you. I know I caught you off guard today, but let's just sleep on it. We can talk it over in the morning. I really want to be in your life, Akinli."

I heard him sigh. "In the morning," he agreed.

"Thank you," she said. "Now, why don't you come to bed?" I heard her pat the mattress.

"Wait, we're *not* sleeping in the same bed."

"Actually, I was thinking we could worry about sleep a little later," she breathed, her words dripping with seduction.

"No. I'm sorry, I can't do that." I heard him start to scramble around his room. "You can sleep in here. I'll take the couch."

“I don’t think so. She’s right there,” Casey stated, anger rising in her voice.

“I don’t know what you’re imagining I’ll do, but if you don’t trust me, maybe you should leave.” There was no threat to Akinli’s words. He was completely calm. I was proud of him. It was firm enough for her to know he meant it, but gentle enough that she would stay. I heard his door open.

“Akinli?” she called quietly.

“Yes?”

“Do you miss it at all? Do you want things to go back to how they used to be?” she asked, sounding sweet for the first time.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I do miss my life feeling... normal. I miss that a lot.” He paused a moment. “Goodnight, Casey.”

I heard the door close. Casey moved around and then muttered aloud, “Ugh! Even his pillow smells like the fish. This place is a dump.”

I wanted to smack the words out of her mouth.

A few seconds passed, and through the window I heard the door to the guest room open.

“Kahlen?” Akinli whispered. I quickly moved to the end of the porch and jumped off, hiding behind the corner of the house. I heard his hands come to rest on the open window sill.

“Kahlen?” he called louder. All was quiet. “Oh, no,” he said going back inside.

I ran to hide behind the closest house. Looking back, I saw the lights come on in every room, downstairs and up. A moment later it was Julie’s voice on the porch calling my name. She went back inside, looking nervous. With the night to hide me, I turned and ran full out to the open Sea.

CHAPTER 12

Hitting the water was a terrifying relief. I felt the sobs come right away, but She was too happy that I came back to notice. For a few seconds the Ocean showered me with that happiness and begged me for forgiveness. She really did feel terrible about me losing Jillian. If I had asked Her for anything with Akinli, I'll bet She would have caved. It would have taken a lot of persuasion, but I would have had Her help.

Maybe. What the hell did I know anymore? Every thought that entered my head was wrong and backwards. My stupidity only added to my sadness, and I cried even more fiercely.

The Ocean fell into silence as She felt the enormity of my conflict and sorrow. The sobs grew into wails as I could finally, fully unleash my voice. The noise seemed completely indecent. Even I shied away from the sound.

She begged me to explain, but my words were lost. I couldn't think. All I could do was cry. Knowing that leaving was best didn't make it any easier to do. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I could just go back. Crawl in the open window that led to *my* room in *my* home.

Except She had a firm hold on my body, and I knew I couldn't win. Besides, this was for the best. I loved Akinli, and now I had lost him forever. But, really, was this anything new? When the enormity of it had passed, when I settled into the normalcy of losing someone else I loved, I calmed and spoke.

Do You remember the boy a few months ago? The handsome one throwing stones on the beach?

She did.

He found me. I ran into the woods to be alone after I left You. I wasn't sure where I was going or what I was doing. I was thinking of going to Jillian's funeral, but it just seemed wrong. So I just sat there. And then he just appeared. He found me crying and thought I was lost. He took me home; he

introduced me to his family. I spent time with him.... I fell in love.

Did anyone figure out that I was different? Of all things that happened, this would be Her main concern.

No, no. None of them suspected a thing. They thought my silence was a reaction to some sort of trauma that I pretended I couldn't remember.

Was I sure?

Positive. There was nothing about my actions that could have been read as something extraordinary. I slept and ate; I remembered to breathe. The only thing was the dress. It got left behind, but I told them I had abused it so much it was bound to crumble. We're all safe, I promise.

She apologized for interrupting me. She told me to take my time, to let it out, to tell Her everything.

So I did. I told Her about being found and how sweet Akinli was to me. I told Her about his parents dying, and how the first time I saw him must have been the day of their funeral. I told Her how Ben and Julie were so welcoming, first taking him in, and then me. I explained how Akinli defended me in the middle of the night, saving me from this terrible person, not to mention myself. I told Her about how he kissed me— how absolutely perfect my first kiss was, how I loved it. I shared with Her about my book and my necklace, and how much it meant to me to have something that was truly my own. I told Her that I felt like I was a part of a family. It was a whole new kind of love. I was happy.

Then I explained how he pushed me around in a shopping cart for fun, and how my one peal of laughter brought my situation back to me. I explained about Casey coming back. How he seemed a little unsure, but that she was obviously the better option. I was sure he'd give her a real chance if I left. So I did.

I was going to stay. I had a plan. I thought maybe I could stay with him a few years and then fake my own death. I

thought that since You and I talk so often, I'd be able to plan how to leave to sing without him noticing. I was doing so well at staying quiet, and we communicated so easily. But that one laugh... I just... I knew I couldn't stay.

She was pleased I came to this decision on my own because She would have had to deny me. And She would have been sad to have to hurt me again. But there was no way around it — a situation like that would eventually go too far. I was lucky it was only a laugh because it could have been so much worse.

Something in that sounded off.

Has anyone ever let that happen? Let it get too bad?

Yes, someone had.

I know there are some things You prefer not to tell me, but I think this is a story I need to hear.

She was reluctant to admit it, but I did need the warning. Her name was Amelia, and she had been a siren hundreds of years ago. She fell in love with a sailor and had made a plan similar to mine. He wasn't going to be able to stay with her very long, but, like me, she thought anything was better than nothing. The sailor merely thought Amelia was deaf. Typically, this would have been seen as a flaw, considering the era, but she was so beautiful that it was easily overlooked.

My long lost sister had been desperately happy. The Ocean remembered the strength of Amelia's feelings; it was very near mine.

Amelia was in the middle of this stretch of time— only a few months in her case— when she accidentally let her hand rest in an open flame. Her beau noticed this. He saw that she didn't burn or feel the pain of it. Amelia noticed her gaffe too late. He started watching her more closely. And this was a time when humans were much more afraid of the abnormal— vampires and witches were a reality to them. They assumed she was a witch. They hunted her.

Oh my goodness! What happened?

The Ocean happened. In situations where the rules were breached there were usually only three options. If it was something small, more time would be added. The number of years depended on the degree of the infraction. That rarely happened because breaking the rules wasn't usually something small. In all Her years the Ocean had never ended up in a situation where more time fixed the problem. This case, like the others, went to the other two options: Either Amelia or the man would have to be destroyed. He had told a few people about Amelia's oddities, and she, distracted by her feelings, was much less guarded with herself.

Which did You choose?

She took the man and his mob. They chased Amelia out into the open water, and for the safety of Her daughter and Her own great secret, the Ocean dragged them down. She was satisfied with that, but Amelia was not. Her heart was broken, and she didn't want to live. She asked to die, and the Ocean consented.

You killed her?!

Amelia's life was one that was already meant to have been lost in Her waters. If someone didn't want to live, like Ifama, She had no scruples about taking what She felt was already Hers. It was hard to do, and She didn't like it; it hurt more than taking the random lives that passed through Her. She knew Amelia and cared for her. It's like losing a child when one of us leaves, which is why She tries to be careful when choosing, why there are so few. To take a life like that as opposed to simply letting her go... it genuinely pained Her. But it was what Amelia wanted, and it broke no rule, so She allowed it. The Ocean was relieved that I had gotten out before my situation reached such a level.

I thought about Amelia, my unknown sister, and her decision. She chose death when the person she loved most died. I thought about this new feeling I had. Possessive, unyielding, compelling. I had debated asking for death if I would have to live my next life remembering him, to ask for

that mercy instead of more pain. But this was a new scenario entirely. If it had come down to the same point— if Akinli somehow feared me, and that fear cost him his life— I would make the same choice Amelia made. I wouldn't hesitate. Existing somewhere away from him was hard enough, but living in a world where he didn't exist at all... I wouldn't live in that world. The Ocean saw that in my thoughts, and pleaded with me not to think that.

I'm sorry. I'm a bit surprised myself. I didn't know how much I loved him. But I guess it should be obvious— I love him enough to leave him.

She was freshly grateful for my choice.

I'm sure it won't be too hard for him. I know he cared about me, but I don't know how deep his feelings went. He yielded to Casey easily enough. I'm sure he'll forget all about me. After all, it was only a few days.

I paused. I was choked up for a moment.

I'll remember him though. I'll keep my little necklace and think about the best of him. But that's all.

Remembering was fine. She had no problem with that.

I needed to switch gears.

Can You take me to Miaka and Elizabeth?

She could, but I might not want to go. They were in London.

Oh... where's Aisling?

Same place she always is, but she would make me feel worse. No doubt.

Yes, You're probably right... Take me to London. I don't know what I've been waiting for. I'm not holding out on this one anymore.

Before She took me away, She wanted me to know that She truly regretted how things ended with Jillian, that I didn't get

more time. And She was sorry that that incident only led me to further sadness with Akinli.

I think about Jillian, and it does make me sad. She just had such a bright future. Nothing could hold her back. I admired her so much. But here, if You want to make amends with me, I'd like to start a scholarship at the school. That would make me happy— that someone who would have had a hard time attending could go there otherwise. That would mean a lot to me since there's no way for me to properly say good-bye. Instead, I'll let others know her.

She said I was full of good ideas today. An anonymous donation in Jillian's memory to the school shouldn't be a problem. She started pushing me forward, and the last bits of Julie's pajamas fell away. It stung. I still had my necklace, but taking off those clothes was like shedding the skin of the girl I had been for a week. I liked that girl. I envied her life. I mourned as miles of water separated her and me.

And then I remembered— she doesn't exist.

As far as Akinli is concerned... that's my fault, not Yours. I could have run away, but I didn't. If I had guarded myself like You told me to, I wouldn't be going through this at all. It's agonizing, I can't hide that, but then, there's something else to it, too. I've lived a hundred years, and those few days were the most wonderful and most painful of the thousands I've seen. But I'll only remember them for nineteen more years. Then they'll disappear with all the horrified faces and terrible screams of all the people I've wronged. I only have to know about him for a little while longer, right?

Yes, it should all go. The less I thought about it, the easier it would fade.

That's good to know. Thank You.

She seemed pained by that speech. She asked, since so much of what pained me was tied to Her, if I'd be glad to forget Her, too. She seemed sad.

Honestly? No. Yes, because of what I do for You I've seen some awful things. But think of everything I've done. Without You there would have been no Italian sunsets or walks in the rainforests. None of the sisters or the kids from the deaf schools. Even losing Akinli... at least I got to know someone like him exists. I've lived through a hundred adventures that I couldn't have been brave enough or physically able to do without You. I'm grateful for that. Marilyn always said the things we got to achieve were like a second gift, an addition to getting to live. She was right.

And I'm grateful for You. Just You. You have been like a mother to me. You've guided me through genuine confusion and sadness. You encouraged me to try things, to pursue. Even now, You've had plenty of cause to be upset with me because of my actions... but You comfort me instead.

I hope when I leave I somehow keep a part of You and me. Yes, You've hurt me. I'd be lying if I said otherwise. But I can't waste time being mad at You. I really do love you. I know I never said it, but I thought You knew. I've loved You for a long time— since Pawleys Island. I should have said it before, but I'm only just learning how important it is to say what you mean when you know you should.

She was delighted. She loved me, too. More than any of the others out of all Her sad history, I had been the most comfort, and I would be the one She would miss the most. She wanted me to know that.

I cried again. It wasn't the same as before, but it somehow all melted together. The last few days had held too many emotions for me. It took me a long time to calm down. But once I did, I made myself stay there. I knew I had to be braver now. I had to go be with my sisters.

It's okay for me to keep my necklace, right? Marilyn kept her engagement ring...

Yes, the necklace was no trouble. But I should refrain from mentioning its ties to Akinli. In fact, I shouldn't mention him at all. Miaka and Elizabeth caused enough mischief of their

own. They didn't need to know that I had faced a relationship and made it out unscathed; it might actually encourage them to try. That was too true. So I promised to never say his name to anyone but Her. I hoped that I'd never even think his name again, but that was too much to ask.

She gave Miaka and Elizabeth notice I was coming, and they met me in the wee hours of the London night. To not stick out in my lavish dress next to their very current clothing, we escaped the streets quickly to the flat that they were currently borrowing.

A borrowed life...

Tomorrow I would investigate this city the way it was meant to be seen. I tried not to look around too much as we headed inside. It wasn't hard to ignore.

"We're so glad you came back to us," Miaka told me. She wasn't tall enough to reach my shoulders, so her arms wrapped around my waist.

"We were worried about you. I mean, we could barely bring ourselves to party in your absence." Always count on Elizabeth for a joke.

"We did do some sightseeing," Miaka confessed sheepishly. "I wasn't sure how long you'd be gone. I thought it would be months, maybe even years." I felt so bad for hurting them. I needed them now more than ever. I needed to know I wasn't alone.

"I'm so sorry. To both of you. I should have been more open about my past, and I shouldn't have yelled at you when I left. Good-byes... well... they break my heart." My voice broke on the last word, and the tears came again. "I'm sorry. I need to rest a little."

My sisters attributed my grief to the loss of Jillian. I felt a little ashamed because the emotion I felt for her had been pushed to the background—almost entirely out of my heart—by the amount of space Akinli required there. But I knew I had a plan to keep her memory alive, and that comforted me.

Miaka, however, did notice my necklace when I finally got out of bed after resting, not sleeping.

“That’s very pretty. Where did you get it?” she asked the next morning.

“I found it. I really love autumn, and since it was so small the Ocean said I could just keep it.”

This little bit of silver tied me to a person a long ways away. I thought about him all that morning. What time was it in Port Clyde? What was he doing now? Had Casey stayed? Was Julie mad at me? Did he miss me?

These first few hours of my permanent separation from the person who would be the love of my life— no matter how many lives I had— were painful in the acute. I felt a sense of isolation and hopelessness that I could only trace back to the feeling of being alone in the Sumatran forest. That was a time I’ve refused to think about because I sank into the worst of myself there. I was terrified, alone, broken.

But that was nothing. Those two weeks in Sumatra were afternoon walks on a summer day. It was a warm bath or a welcoming bed. Those two weeks I would have taken again and again with joy if it meant that I could trade them for what I felt now.

This was night, pitch black and empty. There was nothing here to see or feel, no kind sun coming to end it. There was no soft place to rest my head, no partner there to keep the dark at bay. I was alone.

And I couldn’t even deal with that feeling because I had to put on my brave face for my sisters. What had I said it was like? Pulling on a familiar coat? Well, set the coat on fire and fill the pockets with lead. That was what I wore in the face of my sisters.

Miaka and Elizabeth showed me all the sights they had taken in over the last week. I saw it all, too: Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, the famous London Bridge. It was all

beautiful, but I could not focus on it. After all this time, it was just another place I'd seen.

After all this time...

I used to spend my time only noticing years. How many years had it been since I became a siren? How many years to go before I was free? But everything was different now. I felt hours and minutes. They ticked past with excruciating slowness. I didn't know that time could feel like this. It bothered me. It made me feel isolated.

Miaka and Elizabeth were not surprised that I didn't seem as taken in by the city as they were. Again, the loss of Jillian was my excuse. I tried to keep it together for them. If we were going to spend nearly two more decades together, I needed to be a better companion. I didn't think I'd want to do it all alone, like Aisling did. But maybe she had something right.

Aisling didn't let herself get attached to anyone. I'd bet this whole life hurt a lot less for her because she made herself a rock. No one could touch her, no one could break her. If I could work up the nerve next time we were together, I would ask her how she managed this. She was almost done with this life. Surely she wouldn't begrudge passing the secret of her survival on to me.

And even though I could talk to the Ocean, She couldn't stand my misery. When I came to Her crying, She could barely hold in Her own sorrow. She had to manage a whole planet, and here I was with my long lost love issues. I would have born it alone if I could have managed a way.

While my sisters weren't bothered by my mellow attitude, they were surprised that I took up sleeping regularly. They would be dressed up, ready to go to some party they managed to discover, but I would be pulling off my clothes to get under the covers. It was as unnecessary as ever, but it held the secret advantage of dreaming. I didn't see him every time I slept, but most times.

Sometimes I saw things I had already seen. Like that night on the beach, us still on the blanket. The music sounded so real—the melodies lingered in my memory, and I could even remember bits of the lyrics. The textures were as fresh as ever: Julie’s soft dress, the grainy sand, Akinli’s belt buckle pressed into my hip. His smell never faded; I would know it if I was blindfolded and placed in a room with a hundred men. And his beautiful face came to me with perfect clarity. Akinli had just pulled back from me, and the look on his face... he looked like he truly couldn’t believe how lucky he was; that it was beyond all reason that he should get to kiss me. Hadn’t he known it was the other way around?

Sometimes my dreams took me to those forbidden places we weren’t supposed to explore. Not yet. My mind invented visions of Akinli so tempting it threatened to make my heart burst. While his body in these dreams was what drew me in—with his defined arms and back and stomach, hands that gripped me tightly to him, breath unsteadily pushing into my hair—what always made me feel weak was the look in his eyes. Hungry, aggressive, focused. In my head, he wanted me more than any woman has ever been desired in history. I’d wake up warm and panting for air, though my breathing was fine.

Sometimes I saw things that I only wished I could. Wedding after wedding after wedding. They were always the same, but totally different. Most of them were in high-ceilinged churches. I didn’t know what it looked like in the churches in Port Clyde, but that’s usually where we were. That was our home. The guest lists in those ones were huge, with people standing in the aisles just to have a peek at us making our vows. Once, we got married standing in the middle of the Ocean with Ben and Julie and the rest of the sisters there to see. That thought, the most impossible one—that something like that could happen with everyone’s approval—made me the happiest. We were always blissful, and I could always say “I love you” out loud.

It was always a disappointment to wake up without seeing his face, but the days when I did left me lighter. I missed him so much, I actually ached. It was another one of those surprising things that truly, physically crippled this perfect body. But I was happy that I at least had that handful of days with him. I smiled at them. I'd mindlessly float through memories, lost for hours. Sometimes Miaka would catch my face while I was in the middle of one of my better memories and say, "There you are!" as if I had still been gone all this time. I was glad when I could be myself around them. The truth was I rarely felt like myself. Not with Akinli missing.

Most of the time, I fared pretty well. When I was absolutely miserable from the ache, I went to the Ocean. I'd hold out as long as I possibly could, and then I'd go to Her. I hated that She had to see this, but it was the only place I was safe to cry aloud. Sometimes you have to give the hurt a noise and let it out. If you don't, it fills you up with its emptiness.

I would cry and cry, adding to Her size one drop at a time. And She would cradle me deeper and deeper. I'd go to places where there was no light, and I could feel like none of it existed. She held me until I was calm. After one of these episodes, I would always feel ridiculous, as if there had been no reason for it at all. But the next time the feelings came, they felt completely valid. I couldn't find my way out.

I repeated my mantra to myself: It's better this way. He's happier this way. He's safer this way. You're safer this way.

Happy. Safe. Happy. Safe.

So I gave it time.

CHAPTER 13

My outlook on life became more and more desolate.

I had to put on an act for humanity, playing my part of the average girl. I could never let anyone come as close to me as Akinli had been. At this point, even the deaf schools were out of the question because I'd always be thinking of where I'd rather be. They wouldn't get anything from me.

I had to play a part for my sisters. They would undoubtedly be less guarded with themselves if they thought they could bend the rules—the rules they already walked the edge of. And they wouldn't understand my sadness if it lasted much longer. To them, I had lost a friend, and that's all they knew. But I had lost the love of my life— this cursed life and then some— and they could never know.

I couldn't play a part to the Ocean. Well, I could if I learned to guard my mind well enough. Marilyn had shared this with me, that sometimes she hid things from the Sea. But I was used to Her knowing my every thought. Even before I wanted to really let Her in, She was there. I'd have to guard the hurt as best I could; She would want me to forget all about him. But how could eyes not notice the light? How could lungs not acknowledge the air? There are just some things you can't ignore.

The handful of beings I had cared for knew me to a certain point. Akinli had broken through almost every barrier; he didn't try to make me play down my sadness. He took me in even with all my flaws. But that was no longer an option, not even for those inside the secret.

If I had felt like an actress before, it was nothing. I fell down the rungs until I landed as a puppet, with the strings of my duties pulling me down more than holding me aloft.

I kept it inside. The only other option was death at the Ocean's hands, and I couldn't leave this world yet. I couldn't die without knowing Akinli was happy and safe forever. I'd have to check on him again eventually.

I could see it all stretching out in front of me— years and years of wasting away in sadness. Akinli growing older, marrying someone else, having a family. And me, nineteen and unbreakable, but completely destroyed by my loss of him.

It felt like such a waste. I'd survived so much to have my life thrown off completely by one week. Is this what love did? Ruin everything? Was this love at all? I had nothing else to compare it to. I'd never dream of testing it. There was only one for me. He was all I wanted. And now... now I'd just have to survive.

So I went with my sisters. And I tried.

August passed.

My imagination got the best of me. I was sure Akinli was back with Casey, and the idea brought me more sorrow than comfort. I thought of them together, making up after her long absence. I wondered exactly how many kisses that would mean for her.

I tried not to think about how good his kisses felt, how easy they were to get lost in. But in trying not to, I remembered all too clearly. In an instant the kisses I had been trying not to dwell on since I left felt fresh on my lips. His weight, his smell, his taste— they all drifted into me. Those kisses were forbidden to me. Those kisses were Casey's now. And she was a greedy person. She would be taking her share of them and then some.

Their mouths would come together, a strange mix considering the honey that came from his lips and the venom that came from hers. The hands that used to tangle in my mahogany hair would wind into her golden strands. And she would press herself on him, giving him invitations he'd accepted in the past. But what would he do now? He was back with this girl who everyone thought he would marry one day. Would he fall back into that pattern? She was his familiar past and his obvious future... of course he would. And it would be unfair for me to hold that against him. She was his, he was hers.

And even if he didn't with Casey— though he was bound to between her strong will and his giving nature— it would happen with someone. And, whoever she was, she wouldn't know how lucky she was to have him.

September passed.

Elizabeth and Miaka were still trying to comfort me. They hadn't quite given up on me yet, though I knew I wasn't nearly as pleasant to be around as I once was. I wanted to talk to them, to explain why I was acting this way, but it wasn't an option. Miaka brought me cakes and treats, and Elizabeth did funny dances through the flat. I smiled and laughed from time to time, but they were weak.

I twirled my leaf charm over and over in my hand. Akinli promised that fall in Port Clyde was something to be seen. It wouldn't be long now. I tried to imagine it, to envision the little house with a yard full of scattered leaves. The trees would be alive with fireworks of autumnal colors, half-naked branches standing unashamed, daring the wind to take away the rest of their flickering clothes.

In my head it was beautiful, but I knew the only thing that would make the picture complete would be Akinli's smiling face. It wasn't something I could dream up; it was something I had to see.

So I asked the Ocean if I could go see Akinli. Not talk to him, but watch from the rocks and see the leaves.

She didn't think that was a good idea.

But I wouldn't visit him or anything. I want him to move on. I just want to see is all. Please?

She stood firm.

October passed.

We stayed in London until the end of the month. The honeysuckle and cigarette smell of the summer faded and gave way to drearier weather. I wondered how I had held this place on such a pedestal. All things considered, it was a short visit.

We had extracted all the fun out of it by then, or so Elizabeth said. In actuality, I was tired of all the people and was glad to leave myself. I was ready to go somewhere a little less populated. I didn't know if I was fooling my sisters, but I tried to seem interested in the things they said.

I continued to sleep. My dreams steadily became nightmares of Akinli being pulled away from me. He was always sinking slowly into darkness, to a place I could not reach him. And that bothered me because I knew that there was no place on this earth that this body of mine could not reach.

I stopped sleeping altogether. Seeing his face fade away was no way to see it at all. I was afraid that image would be the one that was stuck in my head. I thought, daily, of the look on his face out the window on the night I got my necklace. I put that into the forefront of my mind. That's how I would think of him, that was how he was now. I convinced myself of it. He was happy. And so we moved on. Good-bye, London. Goal met, nothing missed.

November passed.

I longed to be someplace more hidden. It was too much work to keep up the façade anymore. Pretending to be an average person... it was too much labor for my body to handle. My whole being felt heavy, the act of a smile seeming as difficult as those strongmen lifting boulders above their heads.

And yet, I did it. We went from London to Paris. How many times had I seen Paris now? It seemed we passed through often enough.

I tried to be enthusiastic. Miaka loved the art in Paris. We went to shows and ate in cafes like we usually did. Only this time Elizabeth was there, which was a mercy in some ways—a third person made it easier for me to slip through the cracks. In other ways, it was a struggle.

Elizabeth's thirst for life was unquenchable. For her there was always something to see, something to do. She insisted that we taste everything, walk down every street. And, begrudgingly, I followed. We were out a lot, practically every moment. At least that spared me the work of trying to make conversation. I'd walk behind my sisters, pretending to admire the scenery. But what I was really doing all that time as I strode along, my fingers twirling my necklace around and around, was missing something and someone much simpler than this self-important city.

November meant that it was Thanksgiving time. I wondered if poor Julie had to make the dinner all on her own. Or maybe Ben did some of the work. Or maybe they went to eat with other family members. I thought of the nameless faces in the frames around the house, people I had actually thought I might meet. The longing bit at me.

I asked the Ocean if I could go see Akinli again.

I just want to see him. That's all.

She claimed I was in no condition, that I was still moping. She said a visit would only make me think of him more.

I would think of him anyway.

All the same, I could not go.

Please? I pleaded.

No.

I'm begging You! Five minutes, that's all. Five minutes.

No.

I didn't speak to Her for a while after that, I was so frustrated. I couldn't figure out a way around Her or I would have tried. Even though it would have meant breaking a direct command, I would have tried anything.

December passed.

We remained in Paris for the holidays. Miaka and I had enjoyed Christmas there in our early years together, and Miaka

had described it with the infallible language of an artist to the point that there was no way Elizabeth was leaving before New Years. Paris was always aglow, but at Christmas it seemed even brighter. Still, with all the lights, it felt dark inside my chest.

No matter how many Christmases you live through, each one holds a sort of magic. Like if you really want something bad enough, it will come to you. We had lived through so many years together with such child-like enthusiasm, the magic of the holidays made you believe that things could really change— be better, be different. As much as I wished that year, I would not be with Akinli in Port Clyde. There wasn't enough magic to fix me.

Miaka had not believed in Christianity in her previous life. She merely enjoyed the celebrations and all of the shopping that surrounded Christmas, and it was easy enough to get caught up in it all. Elizabeth told me that she definitely thought there was a higher being out there, but she wasn't sure about a God in the way the church talked about.

“There is a God,” I said absentmindedly as my sisters spoke of spirituality.

“Oh yeah?” Elizabeth snapped, not rudely, but in disbelief. “How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“Huh?” Miaka chimed in.

“The Ocean told me. He's there. He makes the waves and the storms, She just has to be strong enough to hold them. She wouldn't need us if She could bring the *storm* to the *ship*. She is the most powerful thing we know of, and yet, She has to yield. Trust me, there is a God.”

They stared at me for a while. Probably because that was the most I had said in weeks. Those words comforted me because I was tired of answering to Her, obeying Her, bending to Her. It gave me the deepest comfort I had felt in a while to

remember that there was Someone, Something out there who could squash Her.

Still, ever aware of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the whole month felt hollow. I couldn't bring my beliefs to affect my view of the festivities around me. I saw manger scenes; I saw Santa's ringing bells. It meant nothing. No hope. No goodwill. No peace. I hoped with all my heart that whatever Akinli was asking for this year, he got it.

January passed.

A new year, just like all the others. One more gone, eighteen to go. Only eighteen more years of missing his smile. Of wishing he would hold me. Of thinking about him growing old without me. Only eighteen.

We stayed in France. We drank wine for no damn reason. I noticed that Elizabeth and Miaka liked to play the part of drunken girls. They couldn't laugh out loud or sing obnoxious songs like the others did, but they would sloppily dance with one another and the occasional drunken party-goer. At the high fashion party we crashed on New Year's Eve, they kissed. They liked to shock people; that was their buzz. I expected about as much from Elizabeth— her whole being searched for a high— but I was surprised that she got that much out of Miaka. We all participated in streaking and had fun stealing that car, but Miaka was getting more and more brazen every year.

I remembered how small she was on the beach that first night. I remembered her hugging me and calling me her friend. I remembered us crying on and on after that ship was devoured and Marilyn left.

Miaka didn't cry much anymore. She was brave and exciting.

I wasn't sure how much this experience had helped me; I think it made Aisling worse, and nothing would ever change someone as unmovable as Elizabeth. But it looked like Miaka had gotten the best deal of us all. Her previous life oppressed

her. She was not going to have to be the girl of the life she was born into. I was happy that she was going to be a true success someday.

Miaka and Elizabeth were growing steadily less tolerant of my moodiness. I would enter the room and they would stop talking sometimes. I knew they had been tearing me apart in my absence, complaining to one another about how I was poor company or teasing me for not being as strong. I wasn't surprised or impressed. No one could tear me down like I could.

I asked to go see Akinli again. I was denied.

Please? I don't want to do anything bad. I just want to see how he's doing; I can't stand not knowing.

She said to be more patient. It was foolish of me to think that a few months would change the entire course of his life.

Why not? A few days changed the course of mine! I could list them if You'd like; You were there for quite a few. Some of the more dramatic ones at least.

She insisted that I was the dramatic one. I was to pull myself together. She couldn't take my moping around anymore. She missed who I had been. I used to be full of questions and life, and now I seemed empty.

I wouldn't be empty if I could just see him! That's all. For goodness sake, let me just poke my head out of the water and see his expression and then take me away. Ten seconds. Anything!

No. If I worked hard and got myself straight, She would happily let me visit in a few years.

A few years? Damn it!

February passed.

The girls hadn't had their fill of Paris yet, but I was ready to burst. The sights and sounds were overwhelming. I knew they were eyeing me all the time, worrying about my detached

behavior. It took all of my brain power to come up with the idea of us taking a Valentine's Day trip.

Love was on my mind, but if I had been anywhere close to candy hearts and roses, I would have exploded. I told the girls they were my Valentines and that we should get away together. They thought that was sweet. It was by far the friendliest thing I had said in a while.

We had been most everywhere, but I knew anything out of the ordinary would appeal to them; after so many years it gets difficult to create ways to distract yourself. So in an attempt to go to every continent, we decided to visit Antarctica. Though it was empty and barren, it was beautiful. I couldn't appreciate it fully, but it was distinct in its loveliness.

We didn't plan ahead. There was nowhere to steal or borrow clothes from here. We probably could have made some, but none of us wanted to hurt an animal to get it; we had to hurt enough living things as it was. Instead, when the weeks' worth of our dresses started gathering holes, we took a rushed swim around the continent, coming back to where we left fully clothed in a new gown. It was a luxury.

I wished someone could have taken a picture of Miaka with her dark hair and skin in her glorious blue dress against the backdrop of snow. It should have been hanging in a museum. She looked so fragile against the angry wind, it was almost distracting.

At first I admired her. Then I was bothered.

I wondered if it had been Miaka or Elizabeth or even Aisling who Akinli had found in the woods that night, would he have wanted to kiss them, too? They were all beautiful and just as mysterious to the average human being. I wondered if Akinli would have acted faster if it had been Aisling. She looked a lot like Casey. For absolutely no reason except for her blonde hair, I disliked Aisling even more. And then, remembering Miaka's gentle beauty, I disliked her. And then thinking of Elizabeth's fire, I disliked her.

I was jealous of my sisters. In my head they kissed Akinli, stayed with him, managed to make him confess his love for them. Through the course of my malicious daydreams, they'd all crawled into his bed, convincing him to not hold out—they were worth it. In my imagination, they all betrayed me. It took me weeks to get over this fictional pain.

They were confused by my sullen attitude. It was my idea to come here after all, right? When nothing, not the atmosphere or interesting animals or the way our glorious voices echoed in the void, could bring me around, we went back to Paris. They were tired of me. I could have disappeared in the snow, and no one would have noticed.

March passed.

Miaka and Elizabeth went out without me more and more. I didn't mind. When they were gone, I was free to think about my real family. Not the family that was stolen from me all those years ago, but the trio living across the Sea next to the lighthouse that still beckoned. I wondered about Julie and Ben. Akinli said that he suspected she would become a Schaefer soon. Were they engaged yet? Already married? Expecting a family?

I found myself stuffing pillows under my shirt and staring at my reflection in the mirror. I thought I'd be beautiful pregnant. Would I someday finally get to be a mother? Who would the father be? Akinli would be settled into his family by the time I started one. His beautiful features would blend with someone else's.

When that thought finally and truly sunk in, I barely breathed for the rest of the month. I don't know what happened in March.

April passed.

The world was greedy this year. We were called to serve again. I don't remember what ship it was. I don't remember where we were. Who the hell cared? The lives and the faces

didn't register to me. There was only one face, one life I cared about. And, try as I may, I couldn't see it.

Miaka and Elizabeth's frustration with me turned to concern. If I had needed to eat or sleep, I wouldn't have bothered. I started to really wish there was a way to die. I didn't know if I could take the ache much more. I could have gone and asked the Sea to take me, but I really thought She would tell me no. She refused to give me anything I genuinely wanted.

Miaka took up painting again. One day while she was creating a beautiful cityscape, she asked me to come and sit with her.

"I'm worried about you," she said.

"Why? I'm totally fine," I lied. I was so used to putting on the show that I was still trying— even now that I was aware that my sisters could see right through it.

"I don't think so. You aren't yourself. You used to laugh a lot more, and you wanted to do things. Now you hide away. It's like no matter where we are, you wish you were somewhere else."

Oh, Miaka, you have no idea.

"I'm sorry. I know I haven't been very interesting to be around. I've just been thinking about a lot of things the last few months," I told her. It was the most honest thing I could say.

"Kahlen, it's been nine months now. Maybe it's time you said good-bye. I know you don't really paint, but I think if you make Jillian something, it will help you feel better," she suggested. She misread my sorrow, but her intentions were so kind. After how horrible I had been to her, Miaka wanted to help me. How could I have been jealous of her?

"I'll try," I promised. I sat in front of the massive canvas, intimidated by it. At first, I did try to think of Jillian. But I wanted to make something honest. It always seemed like the best art was honest. So I thought of Akinli. All I managed to

paint were leaves. Falling leaves of all colors— some not even found in nature— covered the canvas. It took me an hour or two, because Miaka gave me such a large space. But when I was done, it looked like it said what I wanted it to.

Change. Death. Beauty. Secrecy. It was my mysterious story.

Miaka loved it. Making it had been such a relief that I made another. And another. I kept on, creating designs with my leaves. In one painting, I hid a pair of beautiful blue eyes. In another, I painted myself made entirely of leaves. In another, only part of a chubby leaf poked itself out of the side of the canvas— an homage to the baby belly I found myself aching for.

Of course they were nothing next to Miaka's caliber, but the creating process was satisfying none the less. It was the easiest I had felt in a long time. Maybe because I was finally saying something about the only topic I wanted to discuss.

Miaka had made a dozen or so paintings and asked if she could take mine along with hers to do a show at a gallery. I don't know how she managed to set up these things without talking. It's amazing what passion will drive us to try. I didn't need the paintings, and I certainly couldn't keep them, so I told her it was fine. She could do whatever she liked with them. So she did.

Every last one of them sold.

I didn't know that's what her show would accomplish, but they were all sold to uptight French artsy people. For the first time in all of my life, I had earned money. Tens of thousands. In cash. I held it all in my arms, and cradled it like a child. I was so proud that I finally had something to show for all the sadness I'd experienced. I thanked my muse— my handsome and far-off muse— for refusing to leave my heart.

How in the world could I use this money? I had to make it matter.

May passed.

I silently planned. Part of the planning involved me painting more to show Miaka I was trying to get over Jillian. I did paint things besides leaves, but they were much less fulfilling. I made seven and only two sold. When Elizabeth stumbled upon a night club we had never been to, I dressed up and danced on the smoky floor. When they suggested an idea, I'd second it. I became as agreeable as I had been before, if not more. I tried to come up with little adventures of my own. Nothing I ever dreamed up could top Elizabeth, but they were both pleased to see my effort. The effort was all it took.

I spoke to the Ocean without mentioning Akinli. I told her about my paintings and how people had enjoyed them at Miaka's art show. I didn't tell Her I had made money off of them. I also didn't mention they were all leaves. I guarded my mind pretty well. If I hadn't, She most definitely would have called me on it. I talked about the fun I was having with Miaka and Elizabeth, racing each other up the Eiffel Tower to see who was fastest. Surprisingly, it was Miaka. I sounded peaceful, polite. I gave the right amount and type of energy. I was obedient. Obedience was always the key.

She was pleased to see that I was making such an effort. I was returning to that girl She had found worth saving, and nothing was better in Her eyes. But She told me that it didn't mean She would take me to Akinli.

Don't worry. I wasn't going to ask.

June came.

CHAPTER 14

June brought with it a sense of hope. Usually, when June came, I felt strange and sad. I knew I had become a siren in June. I took my last trip in June. I lost my family in June.

After Marilyn left, I knew the month didn't matter so much, still I looked to June as a time of change, a way to mark the passing years. It was a month to remind myself of why I had agreed to this life in the first place. A time to think of the things I wanted. Now I only wanted one thing, and I was going to get him.

I had to do a lot of work to lead up to it. I had to play a part. I had resented all those years I had to act normal, but they made my time of preparation so much easier.

I smiled for my sisters. I did what I was told. When it was hard, I thought of what these actions were buying me. I had the structure of it drawn out in my head. I waited for an opportunity. All it would take was for Miaka or Elizabeth to get bored with Paris.

Boredom came mid-June.

I told them I had an idea. I wanted to spend my money since I couldn't save it for the future. I wanted to do something big with them. I wanted a lavish adventure. I wanted to do something that usually would have required the Ocean's help, but instead try to see if we could manage it without Her. This caught Elizabeth's interest right away.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked.

"A trip. A journey. But not just any trip. Something in style," I said, drawing out every word, trying to make it sound fabulous.

They both beamed.

"First, I think we should go from here to someplace else in the world, somewhere overseas. We'll need to get identities, passports. We could ask the Ocean for some, and that would

be easy. But could we do it on our own?" I let the idea hang for a moment. I saw my sisters catch on. "I think so. Elizabeth, I think we could safely leave that up to you."

"Excellent!" she exclaimed. I could already see the strategies forming in her head. I hoped they wouldn't take her interest from the trip itself.

"I think we should go on a cruise together. Usually, She would take us across the world, but I think we could do it by ourselves. I've got plenty of money for us to get posh suites on a transatlantic trip. We could lounge around, eat amazing food, dance at night, gamble, get massages—the whole shebang! Just live it up as if we were heiresses on a holiday," I said with what I hoped was a mix of casualness and excitement.

"Ohhhh! That sounds so fun. Couldn't you just see us in bikinis on a deck drinking frosty little things? Everyone would be so jealous of us!" Elizabeth was totally on board.

"Okay, okay, but we'll need to look the part. Miaka, I'm counting on your sense of style here. We're going to need three killer wardrobes," I pleaded, looking at her imploringly.

"Oh! Really, you want me to do it all?" She seemed honored.

"Of course!"

"You *do* have amazing taste, Miaka," Elizabeth chimed in.

"Okay, then! I'll do it." She was radiant with excitement.

"Wait. Hold on. Where are we going to go?" Elizabeth asked, finally touching on the one subject that I knew would make or break the plan. I had alternatives, but it meant much more work. I hoped this would be enough to amuse them.

"Well, I've been trying to figure that out. I hadn't settled on anything yet, but the best idea I could come up with was Florida. There are a ton of theme parks there, lots of places to play. I thought we could just go and be like kids— have fun."

They looked at each other.

“So what you’re suggesting is that we go out, steal identities, buy tons of clothes we don’t need, and go on a cruise to America. Then, once we get there, we drop the charade and run around like a bunch of crazy children in amusement parks?” Elizabeth asked, summing up the idea.

I had to pause. It sounded a little crazy, hearing it condensed like that.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” I replied.

“That,” Elizabeth said, keeping me in absolute suspense, “is the best idea you’ve had in a year.” Her face lit up with the prospects of the journey. I could see her reveling in all the little details of it now: trickery, seduction, playfulness. All I had to guarantee is a good time. And really, I wouldn’t have to do much— the ships and the parks would do that for me.

“Definitely,” Miaka agreed. “But what about the Ocean. Do we need to tell Her? Will She be mad if we just go somewhere?”

“That’s the thing. First of all, She just fed; She won’t need us for a while. And second, I bet we could do it without Her ever knowing. Think about it: If we stay out of the rain and the water, the Ocean won’t know if we’re here or anywhere else. I’ll bet we could do this whole thing in two weeks and come right back here without Her ever knowing the difference. Wouldn’t it be fun to try and see? Besides, I don’t think She’d get upset with us if She did catch us anyway; She might actually be impressed.” That last part was a lie, at least for me, but I said what I had to.

“I like it. I’ll bet we totally could.” The tiniest hint of danger, and Elizabeth was sold. With her all for it, Miaka followed suit, just as she always did. I had hoped that was how it would work: give Elizabeth something tempting, pray Miaka would join in, and then praise them for their extraordinary talents which would make the whole thing possible.

It was almost too easy.

We started making plans. I could have done this without them, but if they spoke to the Ocean, She would know where I had gone. She would have commanded me back, and I would have had to obey. Like this, it was just a silly adventure we were all in on together. No real danger, no real risk. Just something to see if we could do.

I made my plans. I borrowed a computer by sneaking in through an open window. I made reservations for us on a cruise ship leaving in four days. It took some effort to find ones that were one-way. I then booked an entirely different cruise for the way back home two weeks from the day of our arrival. That would give us time to do what we wanted, give me time to do what I needed. I wasn't sure if I'd make it on the ship back or not, but I planned for it anyway. I booked our room in Orlando, the capital of theme parks. I was going to treat my sisters in style; I had more money than I knew what to do with. I decided right then that if I could manage to do it without being seen, a very large envelope of money would make its way into that precious mailbox with the most beautiful surname in the world printed on the side.

With the reservations made, I set to making plans of my own. I looked up a few things, printed off maps. I also did a little bit of research. The last time we stole a car, the idiot left the keys inside. I couldn't count on that this time. Don't people realize how dangerous it is to inform others on how to steal or make bombs? In a matter of minutes, I knew how to hot wire a car.

I searched desperately for holes in my plan. I figured that the only two uncontrollable variables were Miaka and Elizabeth. After wracking my brain for hours, I settled into the truth that there was nothing I could do to restrain them. If one of them went to the Ocean, it was over. If one of them discovered I was lying, it was over. If one of them learned about Akinli, well, it was more than over if that happened. I had to have faith in their quietly defiant natures to keep to this ridiculous plan and not expose me.

I don't know how in the world she managed to do it. I was afraid to know what lengths she went to, but Elizabeth had acquired passports and identifications from girls who could have easily been our twins. I couldn't have imagined the Ocean producing better results. If Elizabeth could bear to be obedient in a true way, I had a sense that she would excel at a job that required espionage. She was fearless, cunning, and truly heartbreaking to gaze upon. There's no doubt in my mind that Elizabeth could bring down a country if she had the mind to do it.

I was to be a lovely girl named Tara. Miaka was Kiko. Elizabeth was Veronica. I got the feeling she went to extra means to get hers; Elizabeth would have wanted a sexy name. Veronica was perfect.

She did this in less than three days.

Miaka, wanting to contribute more than just her amazing taste in clothing, gave plenty of her own money to the wardrobe fund. In fact, I don't think a penny of mine went into our clothes. And they were absolutely perfect. She found tops that were simple but obviously high-quality and well-made. She bought designer jeans in every flattering cut. She found the most amazing bathing suits for us to soak up the sun in. Elizabeth particularly enjoyed those. The dresses Miaka found accented our individual beauties. One showed off Miaka's delicate back, another brought out my gentle curves, and yet another made Elizabeth's cleavage the envy of us both. Everything she managed to find was suited for each of us. I could not have done whatever Elizabeth had done to get our passports, and after seeing Miaka's wardrobe, I knew I would have done a sloppy job of making us look like millionaires. I was glad she took the job. Miaka really had a gift for noticing the details of life. I think that's why she excelled at art; she really saw things.

When all of this was said and done, I truly appreciated the sisters I had been away from for years and then had practically ignored the last few months. We all had the same confinements in this life, but they still managed to stand out at

things. They could see the world, truly. And they were beautiful and fun.

I felt a deep pang of jealousy and regret.

It was all almost over. Eighteen years was an instant and an eternity in my eyes. I had never achieved anything to the degree of Miaka or Elizabeth. I was an average siren... nothing special. And while I mourned being absolutely ordinary, I couldn't bring myself to mind it. My thoughts were on the other side of the globe, hopeful and expectant.

When the fourth day came, we were more than ready for our adventure. Miaka and Elizabeth were just excited to be trying something new. I was happy as well, but for a completely different reason. I was risking a lot, I knew that, but I was prepared for death at this point if I somehow slipped up.

I called this sentence a "half life" because I knew it didn't belong to me. For nearly a year now I'd been living less than half of that half. I had to do more than just survive. If She took me for doing this, I was at peace with it. My only hope was, if She did discover me, Akinli would be spared. And that my sisters, unaware of where I was truly going, would not be punished.

Getting on the ship caused a scene. We showed up to the port in a rented limo and stepped out of the car in our designer clothes carrying designer bags to a mass of awed faces. We had gone through some labor this morning to make sure we all looked captivating and with the general aura our arrival projected, the trip was starting out even better than I'd hoped. Some people even took our picture. Without even having to ask, someone took our luggage to the ship immediately. Not speaking wasn't a problem; when you're rich, people don't expect to deserve your words.

Eyes gazed and heads turned as we passed. Everyone wondered who we were. Rich, obviously. Maybe famous somehow. We couldn't be related, at least not to Miaka, but were we in some special group together? No one knew what to

make of us. It was this initial sighting that made us the toasts of the rest of the cruise. We were adored for nothing more than showing up and looking beautiful.

Our rooms were three large adjoining suites. It allowed us to have some privacy if we wanted it, but mostly we just left the doors open and ran in and out as we pleased. We jumped on the beds and ate delicious food for the sole purpose of enjoying the flavors.

We took to the pool on the most populated deck together. Miaka had chosen decidedly microscopic bathing suits. I remembered how I was afraid to show my body to Akinli. These men that gawked didn't matter. Their stares meant nothing to me. I was a woman who was out of their reach, and I barely registered their attention. Elizabeth, however, was enjoying having all the men, both single and attached, eyeing her up and down.

“Look at that one!” she signed to me on the deck.

“Not interested,” I signed back.

“Since we're breaking rules, do you think I could manage to get one alone?”

My insides froze. If it had been love and not lust, I would have understood. But I knew her better. And if she made a mistake, I'd be the one who paid for it. She might get punished, sure, but I would miss seeing Akinli. I'd hurt her myself before that happened.

“Let's not push our luck for now,” I replied.

She let out a long, breathy sigh.

Before we headed to dinner the first night, I told the girls that if we were ever offered lobster, we should take it. I felt like I must have been the only person in the world who hadn't had it when Akinli asked me on the boat that day, but it turns out Miaka and Elizabeth had also missed out. So when it was an option as an entree on the third night, we all ordered it. They loved it. It was still average in the food department as far as I was concerned, but the taste took me to another place.

Savoring the pieces of meat on my tongue, I remembered the smell of the port, my little blue notebook on the wooden table, the mischievous look on Akinli's face when they brought out my birthday cake. I couldn't help but smile. They would assume it was a reaction to the delicious meal. Later Miaka asked when I became such a big fan of lobster.

"Somewhere along the way," I said.

I wished I could tell Akinli I was spreading the news about his favorite food. I wondered idly all night where my dinner had come from, if there was a chance his hands had touched it.

With his presence slowly coming closer to me, I was more and more at ease. No one was going to stand in my way now. This security allowed me to pull my mind away from Akinli long enough to enjoy my sisters. I was aware that if I made a mistake, this might be my last time to truly talk to them.

The thought of losing them in the same abrupt way we lost Ifama shook my resolve. I wouldn't want for them to know or see if that's what it came to. I wondered if it could be helped. The Ocean never told me exactly how Amelia met her ends. It sounded like Amelia died in the chase somehow, alone. But what if that wasn't the case? What if the Ocean took Amelia back to the rest and killed her in front of her sisters, flexing Her power? What if She made me an example for the ever-wandering Elizabeth and Miaka?

Elizabeth, always the rebel, would probably only become violent at that. Miaka, who may be tougher than she used to be, would remember Ifama, and it would all but break her. Aisling would probably yawn.

I pulled away from those thoughts. If I let them linger too much, I might wimp out. And this was too important to be shaken. I calmed myself and reveled in my last promised days with my sisters.

"Elizabeth, do you remember when you flashed all those guys at that concert in Australia?" I asked her as we huddled in our room on the last night of the cruise.

“Oh my gosh, I thought we were going to get mobbed!” she exclaimed.

“You have a strange effect on men,” Miaka noted.

“I can’t help it if I’m beautiful. It’s so funny, I spent so much time trying to be better than the men around me. I had to be smarter and braver and stronger. I’m not saying that doesn’t matter to me now, but I’m surprised at how they crumble at the sight of breasts. It’s ridiculous. I had the best weapon ever in my arsenal all along!” she said.

I laughed out loud. Only Elizabeth! “What’s your favorite memory, Miaka?” I asked.

“What? From all this time?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh... I don’t know. There are so many. I liked seeing Antarctica; I’m glad we did that. But with *you*... probably those first few years together. When I got to tell you all about my culture and you told me all about yours. Remember when I made you sing me every Christmas carol you knew? I had no idea what they were! It was so fun. I knew that I was getting a peek at a whole new world, but having you made it personal. It made it special.

“With Elizabeth though... hmmm. Oh! I really like the time you let me paint you.”

“You painted a picture of Elizabeth?” I asked. I was surprised. She never offered to do one of me, and I thought I would have seen the one of Elizabeth.

“No, no. I didn’t paint a picture *of* her. I painted her. Like her body,” she explained.

“She painted flowers all over me. I wish I had a picture—it was so pretty. Some of Miaka’s finest work,” Elizabeth shared, grinning at our tiniest sister.

“I wish I had seen that. It sounds amazing!” I was suddenly aware I hadn’t only wasted my time by not excelling at

anything, I had also wasted my chance to be a good sister, to know them as well as I could have.

“Oh, Kahlen, remember that first time you went streaking on that beach in Brazil?” Elizabeth asked.

“I don’t know how you talked me into that!”

“Me either. It took you forever to make up your mind,” she complained.

“I can’t help it; I’m modest. It’s a product of my upbringing.” I sighed.

We went on and on like that for hours. We remembered our collected years of escapades. I felt bad for a moment that Aisling wasn’t in any of them. But then I reminded myself that her solitude was her choice. And, if what I was about to do hurt my sisters, it would be the choice I would wish I had made as well.

As the sun rose on the last day of our voyage, we could see the port come into view. We packed together. Some of the clothes were too bulky to try to repack, so we “forgot” them under blankets and behind chairs for the maids to find. We were faster than we meant to be, so we had some extra time. We decided to just rest on the bed and laid there simply holding hands. I worried that I would lose this. Akinli was absolutely worth it, but it was still sad.

“Miaka, Elizabeth... I want you to know how much I have loved being your sister. Both of you have made me a better person simply by existing. I should have told you that before. I know I haven’t done much to show it lately, but I really do appreciate you. I love you both. You’ve made this time of my life so amazing. It would have been unbearable without you.

“When the time comes that I can’t remember you, I want you to know that you have made all the time up until then valuable. That’s all,” I said to them. If I had to die, I wouldn’t get a real good-bye. This was the best I could do.

“That’s still years away,” Miaka murmured. “We have so many more adventures to have together.” Her face looked

concerned. I was being a little more sentimental than usual. I wondered if she caught onto more than I meant to share. I needed to draw back.

“That’s true. I just don’t know if I’d ever said that to you. I wanted you to know.”

“Don’t be silly. You love me, I love you. You love Miaka, she loves you. I love Miaka, she loves me. That’s just how it is. We knew,” Elizabeth summarized.

“Good,” I said. I smiled at her.

I decided to do the checking in at the hotel. Claiming to be recovering from a throat surgery, I wrote out my instructions to the attendant at the desk. Kindly, he phrased most of his questions into something easily answered with a nod or a shake of my head. Once I had our keys, I got my sisters from the far corner of the lobby and went upstairs. The room was one large suite with multiple bedrooms. It was reserved for important visitors or guests with wealth. Money may not make life better, but it did make it easier.

This privacy was just what we needed. Miaka and Elizabeth had spent their time in the lobby grabbing every possible brochure for any sort of excursion we could take. We gasped at how much people were willing to pay to swim with dolphins. We did that regularly for free. We took the brochures and spread them across the floor. Folding and unfolding, reexamining photos, trying to decide what day to spend where. It was fun work.

The plan was to get started in the morning. Everything opened early, but we had no problems getting anywhere by a certain time. This, however, was not soon enough for Miaka and Elizabeth; they wanted to play tonight. So they started getting dressed to head out to a club. I had been banking on such a moment presenting itself.

“Don’t you want to come?” Elizabeth asked for the third or fourth time.

“No. I just want to relax. I think I might indulge in a little sleep,” I replied. I stretched my body, and as I did so, the idea sounded completely inviting. Any sort of rest would have to wait.

“You and your sleep,” Elizabeth sighed.

“Hush up! You two go and have fun. Have some extra fun for me!” I said.

“That won’t be a problem,” she replied with a smile. No doubts there. Elizabeth could have five peoples’ worth of fun. I watched them dress. Every girl in the room was going to be dripping with envy. They were absolutely stunning. As they stepped towards the door, I drank in their beauty.

“Miaka. Elizabeth,” I called, just before they opened the door.

They paused.

“You both look gorgeous.”

They both smiled.

“Thanks,” Elizabeth said.

“Thank you,” Miaka echoed.

“Bye, girls!” I said. “Love you!” And with that they silently stepped out into the night.

I moved fast. I grabbed a small bag— one of the less noticeable ones. I started packing clothes into it, sensible clothes for traveling. I wasn’t sure if I’d need any of that, but just in case. I grabbed the notes and maps I had hidden from my sisters. It was fifteen hundred miles from Orlando to Port Clyde. That was twenty-four hours of straight driving. Thank God I didn’t *need* sleep. I wanted to sleep now, my heart aching to have Akinli’s face in my mind. But I bargained with myself— if I stayed awake, I could have the actual man in sight within a day. That temptation won over my desire to dream, and I continued to move.

I found my reservation for the rental car and hoped it wasn't too late to go and get it. I got all the money I had and tucked it into the bag. That was it. Everything I needed.

Time to tie up loose ends.

Dear Miaka and Elizabeth,

I had something I needed to take care of. Don't worry! I'm just fine. Stay here and have fun, and I'll be back as soon as I can. I've left the boarding passes for our lovely little cruise back to France. If I'm not back in time, go ahead without me. I'll find another way back. Keep our secret! I really think we can do this. Ok. I love you girls. See you soon!

Love, Kahlen

That sounded as breezy as I could manage. I hoped it didn't seem too secretive. Maybe they would assume I had another surprise for them. If I could manage to find one worth bringing back, I would.

I left the letter and the boarding passes on the bed and walked out of the door with Akinli's face in my mind.

CHAPTER 15

Getting to my rental car was a little more difficult than I had imagined. The clerk was nice to me because I was attractive, but seemed annoyed that I had to resort to pen and paper for everything. I hadn't thought it would be so hard. This kid was killing my momentum. For goodness sake, I had to get out before my sisters came back! My writing became messy in my desire to leave. Finally, after all the stupid paperwork was done, I left excited.

It took me more labor to get behind the wheel of a car than it actually took to get into the country. Interesting.

Driving wasn't something I got to do very often, so it took me a while to go as straight as I needed to. I didn't typically depend on other means of transportation—swimming was second nature for me—and I was irritated with the slowness of motorized vehicles. If I could go by Sea, I would be with Akinli almost immediately, but by car the miles stretched on and on.

Thank goodness I only had to trek up half of Florida. Such a long state. I drove through the South, not seeing much of it by night. I did get a few stares from some truckers in South Carolina when I stopped for gas. It was midsummer after all, and I was covered from head to toe. The sun rose as I entered Virginia and kept crawling up the sky as I went further north. I ticked the states off as I passed: Florida... North Carolina... Delaware... Connecticut... and, finally, Maine.

I felt a strange warmth in my body when I realized I recognized my surroundings. I thought I was going to explode with anticipation. I couldn't help but wonder over everything. How did Akinli look? How long was his hair? Did he ever go back to school? Were Ben and Julie married yet? Did Casey somehow manage to get mauled by a bear?

I could only hope.

As I saw the sign for the village, the one that used to give me hope, I got nervous. What was I doing here? What did I

hope to find? If Akinli was still doing well, what would that do for me? And, if he wasn't, what could I do for him? What was I hoping to accomplish? There were no reasonable answers. Whatever I thought I would achieve, I was going to fail.

As the town limits came into view, I felt it for sure: I was making a mistake. I would suffer for it, but I had to go make it.

I had come this far. I was going to see his face.

I left the car and my bag in the parking lot by the cement barrier we had once hopped. Through the windshield, I could see the little stretch of sand where Akinli laid above me, kissing me until I thought I would faint. It had been nearly a year, but the memory of his rough hands twisted in my hair felt so real that I had to lift my hand to my neck to make sure they weren't really there.

I shook the thoughts from my head and stepped out of the car. It would be easier to go on foot. I took any proof of my stolen identity with me though. I thought that was best. It was still dark out— a little more than twenty-four hours after I had left the girls. I hoped they weren't angry. With the darkness as my ally, I crept quietly into the woods. He rescued me in the middle of the night once, so I was afraid I might pass him on the street. The Ocean could not know, so the trees were my only option. I knew where I wanted to go. I could see the way to the house in my head.

That house was my home. A sudden horror struck me: Would it still be *their* home? So much can happen in a year.

It was a strange impulse. I had to keep going, even if only to discover he was gone. I knew this venture could make me even more unhappy, but I just had to see.

I loved him.

There wasn't a thing to be done to change that. I just loved Akinli. And I was prepared to risk my life just to look at his empty house. And maybe, if there was any luck left for me in this world, I could see him, too. It was all I could have:

glimpses from a distance. And I would take them at almost any price.

Though my body was strong and unbreakable, I didn't exactly have night vision. So I stumbled through the woods on my way to the house. My sense of direction was imperfect as well, but it was like the house itself had a magnet in it that drew me closer. I ached at how slowly I moved, but I felt like I was taking more action than I did when I was driving. At least I was showing the effort.

Then the trees parted, and I saw it. My house. It looked beautiful. It's such an average sight to anyone who might pass it, but it looked like a kingdom to me.

I had my first sign of hope when I looked towards the garage. The garage itself wasn't used for cars. I knew that. It was full of odds and ends in storage bins all piled up next to Ben's guitar, keyboard, and drum kit that he kept "just in case" he ever broke into the music scene. So Ben's smelly car was there, parked in the driveway. They were still here. And then, like the shining prize she was, Bessie was on her kickstand at the side of the house. If Bessie was there, then he was there, too.

I should have worn a watch; I was completely oblivious to the time. It was a flaw in the plan. I would have to depend on the sun to know what they would do.

I studied the house. The lights upstairs were off, but downstairs it looked like there was a glow. No lights on, for sure, but maybe the TV. Someone was awake. That didn't exactly narrow down the time. Looking around, I saw there was no traffic on the road. I took my chance and ran across the street. I wore jeans and a black shirt hoping I would blend in with the night better. I felt like I did. In the shadow of the house, I rounded the back and walked up the stairs of the porch. From there, I carefully climbed the lattice on the north side of the house. Julie must have tried to grow some sort of flower here and failed, but its presence got me to the second

floor. I crept along on the roof of the porch to look into Akinli's room.

As I got closer I noticed his curtains were different. They looked sheer, feminine. Oh... Oh gosh. Casey must have moved in. He wouldn't put something like that up except to accommodate a girl. Even if he disliked it he would have done it anyway. That's just how he was. Oh, Akinli, why did you have to be so obliging? If Casey was living here now, if she was staying in his room, what else were they doing? I might look in this window and see the man I loved with another woman. Would I have the strength to walk away? To forgive him for moving on? To not claw her face myself?

I steadied myself with a deep breath. I would do what it took to keep him safe and happy. From the beginning, I knew I'd always give Akinli whatever he wanted. If that meant leaving Casey unscathed, I'd do it.

I looked in further to confirm my suspicions. The walls were a new color, too. It was hard to make out exactly what they were in the night. And the pictures on the walls had changed. Were those cartoon birds and elephants? That's odd. It didn't make sense until my eyes fell on the crib in the corner.

There, sleeping away, was the smallest, loveliest creature I'd ever seen. I saw her chest rise and fall. She was so beautiful. In block letters hanging from delicate ribbons above her crib, I saw the name "Bex." I guessed that was short for Rebecca. It sounded just right for anyone who belonged to Ben and Julie.

How old was this tiny girl? I counted back the months. Julie must have been pregnant while I was still here. Had she known? Was this beautiful baby her little secret?

I knew she was theirs and not mine, but I still felt like I was missing out. Bex could have been my friend; I could have watched after her. I wondered how Julie was doing. I'll bet she could use even more help now. Did she think about that? Did I manage to hurt her when I went away?

Oh, Julie, I'm sorry I left you.

I watched Bex for a long time, trying to put her sweet, tiny face to memory. Then, when I finally had my fill of her wonderful face, I went to find Akinli.

I thought maybe he was watching TV, so I'd have to go find a way to get near the living room windows, which were all too high for me. Once on the porch, I walked past the guest room. Looking in, I saw all of Akinli's things. Of course this was where he would be. He had just picked up and moved downstairs. But my worries on the walk over had me so riled up, I was grateful he was just still *here*. And, mercifully it seemed, not sharing the room with Casey.

There was his bedspread, blue plaid and so comfy. He hadn't made his bed. His baseball hats hung from nails near the door, less neatly than they had upstairs. There were dirty clothes lying on the floor around his hamper, like he had tried to throw them in but missed every time. On the dresser, I saw the space where he emptied his pockets. His wallet was there, next to his keys and change... and then this glossy, folded piece of paper. It looked like a set of instructions, or something that came with an appliance. Whatever it was he obviously carried it with him. The edges were brown with dirt, and it looked like it was about to crumble at the fold in the middle. I thought I could make out a few bits of dull tape trying to hold it all together.

The door was slightly cracked, and I could see the glow of the TV. It had to be him. So I waited. I was so eager, I had to stop myself from bouncing on my toes. The porch kept squealing, giving me away. I listened for stirrings upstairs and looked around the yard towards the neighbor's house. All was quiet. No one knew I was here. There was no moon tonight, so I blended in seamlessly to the dark blue sky.

The clock by his nightstand showed it to be past two in the morning when Akinli decided to come to bed. I saw the glow disappear, and I ducked down to not be seen as he walked into his room... my room. I saw the light shine through the opened

curtains. I slowly poked my eyes above the ridge of the window, grateful for the darkened night. I saw his back as he stood there at the dresser. He appeared to be arranging things, but I couldn't tell. I watched as he picked up the glossy paper and read it through. It must have been long because this took several minutes. Then he set it down and moved on.

I felt a little guilty about the thrill I got at watching him strip down to his boxers. It was almost as exciting as it was to wear them myself. He was so gorgeous. The muscles on his back moved reflexively as he stripped. I missed the feeling of them under my hands. I could tell his hair was getting longer. I liked that—his hair looked good long.

That warm hunger for him grew under my skin. The way a woman longs for a man. But not just any man—her own. I knew he wasn't really mine to keep, but that urge burned so fiercely it was hard to ignore. I thought there would be nothing to distract me from it until finally he turned, and I saw his face.

He looked vacant. Almost as vacant as I felt sometimes. My Akinli had stubble growing around his chin. It made him look a little threatening. If I hadn't known him better, I might have felt nervous. He looked tired, too. His face was a little sunken, like he hadn't really slept in weeks. And he was much thinner than he was when we met. Obviously, he was handsome. I could still see that underneath it all, but he was broken. I didn't need him to say it. I could read him. The way he could read me. He was hurting, and it was bad. What could have led to this?

Had Casey done something? Hurt his feelings yet again? Looking around, I saw no proof of her existence at all. No left-behind girly sweater or even a photograph of them together. Nothing. Had they broken up? That seemed unlikely considering what a fuss she went through to get him back. Maybe they were arguing. I felt so sad that she wasn't nicer to him.

He walked over to the bed and reached under the mattress and pulled out a thin book. He got into his unmade bed, pulled the covers up and opened the book: *The Giving Tree*. Was that my copy? The corners were bashed in, the cover was scratched, and the pages hung at angles as if they were barely attached to the binding. He sat there and read through the text three times. It was a short story. When he finished, he rested on his bed and gave the book a hug. He adjusted himself so he could tuck it back away and then returned to his back. And I watched as his left eye, the eye closest to me, brought up a tear that slid down his face into his hair. I heard him sniff. He wiped away the tear and turned off the light.

It was *me*.

I was why he looked like this. Why he was skinny, his room messy. If Casey actually had gone, it was because he wanted her gone. He was waiting. I couldn't show it like he could—my body didn't act like his— but I was doing the exact same thing. If my unwillingness to eat could make me frail, if my inability to sleep made my face sag with heaviness, if my reluctance to take care of myself could leave my skin dull, this was how I would look, too.

I missed him. He missed me. And there was no way to fix this. Since we'd met, I tried a hundred times to think of a way around me not growing older, not being able to speak, having to run away to aid the Ocean, and that constant fear of killing him. If I could have found a believable way to make this work, I would have.

But I couldn't. And I suffered for it. And I was fine with me suffering. But it wasn't okay for him to suffer. Not to me, anyway. I had thought disappearing would push him right back into Casey's arms. He had said he cared about me, yes. But if I left, wouldn't he have assumed I didn't care about him? He was supposed to get hurt or mad and move on to spite me. I should have hurt him more. What could I have done?

I should have left my necklace.

I reached up and felt the delicate metal around my neck. If I left it now all that would do was prove to him that I came back, not that I hated him. Maybe he would wait for me to come back again. Maybe he would hold on even harder. I'd have to make a plan. I'd have to hurt him. What would do enough damage to make him let me go? What amount of pain would I have to inflict now to make it better in the long run?

And then I remembered... I already had a plan. The original plan. The merciful plan.

It would be more merciful than letting him lie awake at night thinking I might somehow reappear. All I would have to do is reintroduce myself, and then take myself permanently out of the picture. All I needed was a little time to dream up the right way to do it.

So, while I waited for a good plan, I watched Akinli sleep. It was an uneasy sleep. He did settle down for a few moments in the night, but he mostly tossed. Close to dawn, Bex started to cry, and that woke him up easily. Akinli wasn't sleeping deeply at all. Before the sun rose too much, I headed back into the woods to wait for my chance. I wasn't sure how to step into the picture yet. I would at least need a decent explanation for why I left. While I was still thinking, I saw Ben and Akinli step outside. They were off to the boat.

"You sure you don't mind going alone?" Ben asked.

"No, no. You're a dad now. Sometimes you're going to need to stay home. You just take care of my girl," Akinli said. His face was still tired looking, and he still hadn't bothered with shaving.

"Yeah, I will. Just with Julie having a cold, and now Becky getting the sniffles, she's just afraid they'll keep making each other sick. And I'm germ free," Ben said, proud as he could be of his immune system.

"It's no problem, really." Akinli loved his family. Even under the tiredness, it echoed.

“Don’t go overboard today. Just do the minimum, and I’ll be there tomorrow,” Ben told him.

“Sure thing, boss,” Akinli replied, with a small smile on his face.

Akinli started walking; it was a nice day for a walk. Once he was gone and Ben went back inside, I set off on foot. It was a little easier to navigate the trees in the sunlight. But I would eventually have to leave them as they didn’t go right up to the edge of the coast. It took some work, but I made it out to the same little area where Akinli had once taken me on his boat.

Akinli was on the boat alone. I was far away, but I knew the boat easily. And his shape would be unmistakable to me anywhere. He was almost totally isolated. There weren’t very many boats out today. I didn’t remember if that’s how it was when we had gone out together. I only really paid attention to him.

From a distance, I watched him. It was a strange comfort to be near him. I wondered if it would be a comfort to see him get married. Maybe by then I would have talked myself into losing track of him. I couldn’t say. He did his work mechanically. He didn’t pay too much attention. He dropped the traps for the lobsters, but didn’t pull any in. He did the minimum as Ben had asked. It seemed all too easy for him to obey. I couldn’t stand to see him moving like that.

Akinli looked like a ghost. He, like I, was just going through the motions of living. I’d have to clear this all up. I was thinking up a story for how I would come to the house this afternoon when my plan changed for me.

He wasn’t himself, or he would have been more careful. He did something to make himself stumble, but the siding of the boat hid the reason from me. I saw Akinli plainly hit his head on the stern of the boat and heard the splash of his body hitting the water.

Ouch! It hurt me just to see that. He was going to have a serious headache for the rest of the day. I watched to see where

he would come up.

But he didn't.

There was no sign of a struggle against the water, no sound. I looked to the other boats. Didn't anyone notice him fall? Before, when we walked through town together, it seemed like everyone noticed him. Was that not the case anymore? Was Akinli a ghost to them, too? No one budged.

You would think, all things considered, that I would have struggled more with the decision. But once I knew Akinli wasn't coming up, I didn't have to think at all. I did what I had to do. I dove in.

The Ocean was surprised, of course. She demanded to know why I was there. I was supposed to be in France.

Why do You think I'm here?

She raised Her voice at me. She said I was going to have to move on, behave with more restraint. She went on but I heard none of it. I couldn't find him, and I was getting anxious. The water wasn't that deep, there was only so far he could go. Then I saw him, six feet below me, sinking away from his ship. I wrapped my arms around his chest and started pulling him to the surface.

But I was pulled back down.

The Ocean wanted to know what I thought I was doing.

I have to get him to air!

He fell into the water. He was drowning. He was Hers now.

No! No, spare him!

No, he was Hers to have.

*I'll bring you another in his place. A hundred, a thousand!
I'll do it all myself even, just let this one go.*

That wasn't how it worked.

*I know, I know. I'm asking You to bend Your unbreakable
rules. Please, let him live!*

No.

I started going into hysterics.

Please! God, please! Let him live. Do it for me, I beg You. Please!

It's not possible.

But it is! It is possible, if You would let him go! You can do that. Please! Do it for me. You told me You loved me. If You love me half as much as You say You do, please don't take him from me! Please!

I cried and I cried.

Please!

I pulled him up against the restraint.

Please!

And... I felt Her grip loosen.

Please, for me, let him go!

She released us. I couldn't believe it. I could have run a thousand marathons on the energy I felt in that moment.

I was to get him to the surface and come back to Her immediately.

She was livid.

Of course! Of course! Thank You!

I kept my grip tight as I swam to the surface with all my strength. This was one of those occasions when I was truly grateful for my body. No average girl could swim that deep or hold on for this long. No average girl could have held her breath or been strong enough to lift him onto the boat. I could. I would have to thank Her for that.

I turned Akinli onto his side and hit his back. It took a few times, but he started to cough up the water. I was relieved. He coughed and shivered and fell onto his back. I saw the huge welt forming on his head. He would be in a lot of pain, but at least he was alive. As he shifted, I saw beside him that his

keys and the glossy paper from the dresser had fallen out of his pocket.

From this proximity, it was obviously not a set of instructions. Not even close. It was a tiny piece of notebook paper he had home-laminated with packing tape. When it wore down from folding, he patched it up. It stayed with him always. I picked it up and saw, in my own handwriting, the words he was determined to hold onto.

Maybe one day another life might catch up with me. Or there could be no other life at all. I guess I couldn't say for sure. Either way, I choose Akinli. There are some things you just know. And I know I want Akinli. I hope that will always be a good enough answer: that he's what I would take over anything else.

I remembered with perfect clarity that day with Julie. Oh my. I wondered at all the meanings that had for him. He knew I wanted him more than anything. That's why he held on. He believed me. Even if I had left the necklace, he would have held onto my words.

And another life catching up with me... he had found me speechless and crying alone. He thought I had suffered. Maybe whoever had made me suffer had taken me from him. Oh no! I remembered the little tantrum I threw in my room just before I left. Clothes everywhere, blankets askew, window open from my departure. It would have looked like a struggle, a struggle that he hadn't heard because he was arguing with Casey.

He wasn't just worried that I wouldn't come back, but that I *couldn't*. All this time I knew where he was, but he was tortured, imagining the worse for me. Possibly even blaming himself for not being able to save me again.

"Kahlen," his weak voice said. I looked down to find his eyes half open. Just hearing him say my name felt so good. I smiled at him.

"Is that you?" he asked.

I nodded.

“You’re safe.” He was absolutely weak, but he still managed to find the energy to convey the excitement he felt at that.

“I have to tell you. I didn’t want Casey. I’m sorry. I love you. Stay with me.” His words were mumbled and ran together. He wasn’t all there. At least I had that in my favor.

I wished I could stay. But I had just been given his life as a gift, and now I had to obey.

I shook my head.

“Why? I know I hurt you. But I’ll make it up to you. I’ll do...”

I put my fingers over his mouth to silence him. I couldn’t handle him thinking this was his fault. I bent down and gently kissed him. His body was a little cool from the water, but his lips, so predictably, were warm. The hair on his face scratched my skin. His lips moved slowly with mine. It was a new kind of kiss, one I hadn’t gotten the last time; it was a good-bye kiss.

As I pulled back I saw him smile. His eyes closed again, and he fell into unconsciousness. I didn’t want to leave him there on the boat. He could have a concussion. He wouldn’t even know how he got there. But I had to get back to Her. She had been undoubtedly too kind. I kissed Akinli one more time, though he could not respond. I picked up one of the bricks they put in the traps to help them sink and heaved it at a neighboring boat. The sound was thunderous.

“Hey!” someone called. They would come to investigate. I dove into the water.

Thank You! Thank You so much! I’ll do anything You want to show You how grateful I am. I owe You this lifetime and the next.

She said nothing in return. She jerked me down so hard I could almost feel the fist around my arm.

CHAPTER 16

The Ocean had guided me to places before, but never like this. It was agitated, quick, deliberate. I wondered if this was what Ifama felt before she died. I assumed that must be what was about to happen. I expected it. I waited to feel it. In my head I quietly rejoiced. At least Elizabeth and Miaka wouldn't have to see it.

I was surprised by how sharply I remembered the way it felt the day I thought I was drowning. I remembered being in the Sea and feeling the ache in my muscles. I remembered wondering if all my bones were broken from the force of Her waves. The fatigue that covered me and the grainy burning in my lungs all appeared fresh in my memory. I waited for that moment to resurrect itself.

It never did.

For a long time She pulled me, furious. My clothes faded away, and I saw the proof of my stolen identity tear into pieces and sink. The dress that covered me was almost black. It had taken me years to realize there was significance to the colors we wore— they echoed our surroundings. What did black mean?

In my mind, black meant death. She was dressing me for my funeral. As I was wondering this, I felt my neck lighten by just a touch. My necklace broke away from me. I reached into the darkness for it, but we moved so fast I had no hope.

No! No, my necklace.

I held back the sobs. If I had my necklace, I felt like Akinli was with me. It hurt more to have it disappear than it did for me to think about the unavoidable punishment at hand. But She would not slow. She was angry. I didn't know how much more time I had, so I took the opportunity to speak to Her. I couldn't say if She would listen, but at least I would say what I needed to.

I'm sorry I disobeyed You. I know why You wanted me to stay away, but it just hurt too much to not know. I just had to see how he was. I don't know what You saw, but he missed me. He missed me like I missed him. He looked awful.

She was silent.

When I saw how bad it was, I was planning for a way to set him free. Yes, I was going to visit him. But I was going to come in, stay a day and then fake my death. I was going to drown. I swear that was what I was going to do once I knew what he was feeling. He thought I was going to come back to him. I was going to make sure he knew that I couldn't. I swear, I wasn't going to stay. I was trying to think of a plan to go back and die to him when I saw him fall in...

Still nothing.

I'm sorry. I am. I guess I should tell You while I'm confessing, I brought Miaka and Elizabeth into this. They don't know about him, but I got them to go on a cruise with me. I told them I had something I had to do and left them in Florida. As far as I know, they're still there and clueless.

She didn't say anything, but I felt Her anger surge. It was one thing for me to make a mess, but to use my sisters to do it was another thing entirely. I was bothered by Her silence more than I had been by Her yelling at me. Once we started our conversational relationship all those years ago, we had always spoken. When I was upset or happy, when She was tired or nostalgic. Everything had always been on the table. It was frightening to finally have something we could not discuss.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I disobeyed, I'm sorry I abandoned my sisters, and I'm sorry I asked You to let him go... But thank You. Thank You so much.

Nothing.

I know You're going to punish me now. I understand. But still, thank You.

She remained impassive.

I stayed silent while She pulled me farther and farther down. There had been times when I was so miserable about Akinli that I sank deep inside of Her to hide, but I had never gone this far. Schools of fish dodged me as She carelessly tugged away. I nearly hit so many of them. After a while the schools dwindled, and there were only larger, solitary fish swimming around. Then they too were gone. Not much longer after that, I lost all sign of life and light.

I kept blinking, thinking I would soon see something. I kept one arm in front of my face to protect myself from the things I couldn't see and feared I would run into. The truth was, I probably could have hurt anything I hit more than it could have hurt me, but I was human enough to worry about it all the same. Time and water washed past me. I noticed it was getting cold. Very cold. Not like Antarctica had been, but still. I didn't know how much more of Her there could possibly be.

Then finally, firmly, I landed on sand.

She finally acknowledged me. I was to stay here until She was ready.

Ready for what, She didn't say. I could not ask. And then I was alone. I sat motionless for a few minutes. The minutes stretched into hours... at least it felt like hours. There was no sun or moon to guide the time here.

Finally, I stood. For the sake of moving, I walked blindly forward a few paces. I found myself against a wall. It must have been some kind of rock. As I examined it with my hands, I felt how smooth it was— like glass. Maybe the tiny grains of sand at the bottom of the Ocean had polished it. I ran my hands along it a few steps to the right. A few paces along, I found another rock connected to this one at a ninety degree angle. I placed my fingers in the corner. That was strange.

I found that most things in nature flowed and moved with air and tides and land. Things like straight lines were reserved for the controlling nature of humans. God was happy to let the things he created simply exist. When people came across

them, they could continue to exist... so long as it was in neatly tailored rows.

This was no mistake. It was not natural. It took me several minutes to navigate myself around the space, but it was clearly a cell. A smooth, small, perfect cell. Apparently, I could no longer be trusted. So I sank back into the sand to wait.

It took me a while to realize that my cage was not made of rock or stone; it was water. She had fashioned part of Herself into a holding tank for me. The shape of it changed every so often. I would walk along a sharp edge and feel it melt into a curve. The dimensions weren't always the same either— they ebbed and flowed with Her. Sometimes I would walk right into a wall, not aware of where they were. I contemplated if She would have held me so well if She had not eaten so soon.

I wondered if She was still with me now, if She was so enraged that this part of Herself I was living in was truly separated from the rest of Her. Was She still reading my thoughts? Feeling the confusion as my regret mixed with satisfaction at what I had done? Did any of it even matter anymore?

I couldn't be sure if She was there or not. I couldn't *feel* Her, and She didn't speak to me. With Her silent and my necklace lost somewhere far, far away from me, I felt truly alone.

My mind flew around as I became deeply paranoid. I knew I was in a cage I couldn't see. It wouldn't take much effort for Her to just squeeze these invisible walls together and take me out of existence. I wouldn't even know it was coming. Even if I had needed sleep, there was no way I could have closed my eyes.

Time passed.

Slowly.

I eventually decided that when She moved to kill me, She would at least let me know.

What I assumed was days later, my eyes started adjusting to the dark. I could make out the shadows of things that swam by. The bodies of these animals were unlike any I knew. Sometimes I would see something that looked skeletal. Their shadows would seem all but transparent, like they were held together by tissue paper. Other times, I would see animals so large, I was afraid they might crush me. But I had my bubble. They all seemed to sense it; maybe they could see it. Either way, they stayed away from it.

I wondered at how powerful this cage was. I didn't try to damage it. At one point I dug into the sand to see how far down I could feel the edge. But I ran into rock and knew there was no way around Her. I wouldn't have tried to escape anyway, I just wanted to *know*.

Time in the darkness was scary for that reason alone: I couldn't *know* what was coming. I couldn't see what was coming for me, and I couldn't see what was coming for Akinli.

I had saved his life, but for how long? Was She reclaiming what I had stolen from Her while I was locked down here? That was the only thing that made me cry. I could handle the isolation, and I could live with Her hating me. I could take the darkness, and I could bear being punished. None of that touched me.

But I was tortured with worry for Akinli.

I battled it in my head. After enough time had passed that I knew it was close to a week, I had to mentally will myself into believing he was okay. But that was hard. I was confused as to why She would keep me down here so long. The only thing I could think of was that She was trying to keep me away from him. Or rather, from protecting him while She took him.

In my absolute segregation and misery, I lived every mistake of my long life over and over in my head...

My family was a blur now. I knew I had a mother and a father once. I had brothers, too. I knew I had lost them. It was my father's idea. He was excited about something, and we

were all going on a trip to London. He wanted us to be happy. But mother said we should stay behind. We had school and work.

But I begged. I whined that I wanted to see things. I would not relent. I forced the decision by being childish, I could remember that. If I had only been content, if I had only been satisfied, none of it would have ever happened. And now we were all separated from one another.

I had burdened myself with the love of my sisters. I depended on them too heavily. They gave me the connections I craved so much in life. In my more lonely years, I had almost started to believe I was in love with Miaka. And when Elizabeth came along, so new and exciting, I almost believed I was in love with her, too. But that wasn't real. And in the absence of something genuine, desperation starts to look like love.

I had seen it in the lives of men and women I watched. It's not love when it's the only option. I wasn't *in* love with my sisters, but I did love them. It was a powerful love. And it was cruel of me to risk them to get what I wanted. Still, as I sat in my watery prison, I knew I'd do it again if I had to.

Spending time with the hearing impaired had seemed like such a brilliant idea, but that was just one more thing I had ruined. I cared about them too much, and I never got to stay as long as I wanted to. I let them be stand-ins for the children and grandchildren I should have seen by now. They were the only ones I could get close to, and I took them like they were mine.

I was greedy.

How could I have been dumb enough to believe that I wasn't going to be lethal to them? I was always capable of hurting them, killing them. Jillian's life weighed on me heavier than the thousands of others I was responsible for. Even though it would have happened with or without me knowing her, it was too personal for me to not acknowledge my hand in her death.

By far, the worst was what I had done to Akinli. I had disrupted the path of his life. I hurt his family. I told him I would stay and then abandoned him. I broke his heart. Then, to top it off, I led him to his grave, stole him back from it, and was about to make one or both of us pay for whatever time I had bought him.

I hated that. I kept telling myself it would have been easier if he hadn't been so wonderful. But, easy or not, I never should have stayed. If my presence in his life meant it ended early... I don't know what I'd do.

And, though it was not the worst of all these things, I was foolish to think I could have ever been friends with the Ocean. She was an eternal being. She saw everything, endured everything. She would live forever after me. The most we could ever truly be was acquaintances. She was the Queen Bee, I was the worker. There was a job to be done, and I fit the bill. I was young and beautiful— the only two necessary listings on my resume— so She kept me to work. We spoke to one another, but maybe all I ever did was entertain Her. She was busy with things that were important... sustaining rain and currents. She was holding the life of this planet together, for goodness sake. How could I expect Her, someone who could never have an equal, understand what it meant for me to be in love?

I thought about these things over and over again until it hurt. I only cried over Akinli, but I ached for it all. The shame of all my mistakes felt like lead in my bones. I could literally feel my arms and legs move slower from the sadness within me. I would have to carry this. I would have to pay for this. I knew that sins of this magnitude demanded reparation. It was only a matter of time until She, the only judge I knew, would take it out of me.

So I waited.

It got heavier. I felt lower. My body was caving in on itself. For a moment, I thought She was collapsing the walls in on me. But in that moment of distraction, I knew I was collapsing

on myself. When the heaviness of all my mistakes felt like they were going to crush me, I turned to daydreaming.

I thought about Akinli. I imagined how it would have been if I could have just stayed with him there on the boat. When he came to, I would have been there, holding him and smiling. He would have kissed me over and over, jubilant that I was back with him for good. When we got back to the house, everyone would forgive me for leaving since I had saved Akinli's life. Everyone would be happy. Julie would be my best friend. Ben would be like a brother. Bex would grow up adoring me. And Akinli...

A few days later, the neighbors next door would move. When he saw the for sale sign, he would buy it immediately. He would rush back to tell me he bought it for me so we could get married and propose right then and there with a ring as lovely and personal as my necklace had been. We would paint our house in blues and greens and teals. There would be enough rooms for us to have a bedroom to ourselves and then a room for nothing but reading and playing music and then the other rooms we would fill with our family. A big family— just like he wanted.

At our wedding, I would be the most beautiful bride the town had ever seen. And they all would have come— every soul in Port Clyde, even the tourists. And to top it all off, when it came time to exchange vows, I would be able to speak. I wouldn't need a piece of paper to say the important things like "for better or worse," or "I do," or "I love you."

Hold on... *I love you*... he said it.

On the boat, when I was holding him, he said it.

He said that he was sorry, that he loved me, and then he asked me to stay. I had been so wrapped up in him being alive, I didn't even let it register. But now I could hear it playing continually in my head. Akinli's voice told me he loved me. I felt it in my chest like a bird singing in my heart.

"He loves me... he really loves me."

My voice sounded cracked when I spoke aloud. And then I heard another sound. A pop.

With that, I was being pulled upward. It wasn't as hard or as fast as last time. I heard Her call out to the others. They were to come right away. She didn't specify a location, but Her voice was serious and urgent. They'd be running for a coast by now.

I couldn't believe She was making them come. She was going to kill me and make the others watch. I cringed. There would be no way to talk Her out of it; I was undeniably in Her debt.

It took a long time for us to reach the surface. I could see the light growing clearer, and it burned my eyes— not in a painful way, but I had to work to make things focus. When we reached Her destination, it took me a few moments to gain my footing on the sand. Powder fine sand. I looked up, and even with the hazy blur of my vision, I knew I was at my island. My sisters were all already there; I obviously had to travel more than they did.

I took my time walking up, not quite over the surprise of Her choosing this location. This place had been a gift. I guessed that it was no longer meant to be that to me. Then, I remembered how secluded I used to feel here. If what was about to happen made them cry out loud, no one would hear it here.

My eyes squinted as I looked my sisters over. Elizabeth was standing, looking away from me. Her hands were on her back pushing her elbows out. Miaka was seated, holding her knees to her chest. I couldn't quite make out if she was looking at me or not. Aisling was pacing. That was how she took in almost everything.

I tried to take their faces in as the light stopped burning so much. I wanted to gaze on their beautiful familiar features. I assumed this would be the last time, it had to be. They were all wearing muted blues, the colors of a hazy sky, not quite gray.

These weren't the colors of my tropical island; these were the colors of Her mood.

I was still in black. This was my funeral, and these were my mourners.

She told us to sit. Elizabeth and I complied immediately, going close enough to sit with our feet in the still waters of the coast, near Miaka. Aisling stopped pacing, facing away from us for a moment. She took a few heavy breaths and shook her head, making her gorgeous hair dance behind her. Then she turned and settled on the sand, but decidedly not touching the water. She was in a foul mood today.

The Ocean was still silent waiting for Aisling before She began. Everyone seemed so tense, and it was about to get so much worse. I wanted this to end soon.

She's here and settled, I said. The Ocean was displeased Aisling kept her distance, but no matter.

The Ocean apologized to Aisling, Miaka, and Elizabeth for what She was about to ask them to do, but explained that She was at a point where She could not do this Herself. She paused. They all looked at each other, then me. They all knew something was wrong, but only now, at the Ocean's casual exclusion of my name, were they positive that something was me.

She explained that a year ago I fell in love with a boy.

I looked down. I could feel their eyes darting towards me.

She explained that this was why I had been grieving, not because of Jillian, though that still bothered me. It was this boy who had trapped me in sadness. He was where I had gotten my missing necklace, and he was why I had left Miaka and Elizabeth alone in Florida. She said She had watched him for a long time now and knew that he loved me, too. This only added to the problem.

I wondered how long She had known he loved me. I had only known for sure for a few minutes. It seemed particularly cruel to hold that detail from me.

She explained that She hated that we were both sad, but thought that it would all resolve itself when She found him drowning.

Miaka covered her mouth, clearly saddened.

That was, She explained, until I jumped in and saved him.

Aisling's head whipped around at me.

I had clearly broken the rules. I took a life that belonged to Her, I had risked Her secret, and I had put them all in jeopardy. I had to be punished.

I saw Elizabeth tense up. She was the closest to me.

The Ocean explained that the problem with this was that She loved me.

They all noted this with stunned faces. I don't think they realized She was capable of that. After all, hadn't I just thought it was impossible?

Yes, She loved me, and that had clouded Her judgment. Usually, She felt that She had been consistent over the years, but She wasn't sure that what She would do would be fair when it came to me. The only way to be impartial was to put it to a vote. She was handing the decision over to them. She just didn't trust Herself.

We reflected our shock in one another's faces. How could She put this on my sisters? How could that be fair? It was the height of cruelty to ask them to do this job.

"Does Kahlen get a vote?" Miaka asked this aloud for our benefit. That was a good question. She always asked the good questions.

No, I did not get a vote. It seemed wrong that I should get a say in my own punishment to Her.

Without further ado, She explained the options. The first was that I could have fifty years added on to my sentence. She wouldn't mind me staying on, but She was afraid that I would keep finding ways back to him. She was surprised at how well

I had done it this time. This would be a continual danger. If he saw me in twenty years, and I hadn't aged a day, it would raise questions. She was afraid it would come down to one of the other two options: Either Akinli needed to die, or I did.

I fought back tears. I wanted to be brave. I knew if the girls had to make this choice, I wouldn't make them feel bad about it. I think I may have shaken a little, but no tears gave me away. That old familiar coat— on fire, filled with weights, and now full of glass shards inside to cut me to pieces every time I put it on— slid painfully into place. I couldn't burden my sisters with my sadness.

She gave them a few minutes to choose. Personally, I didn't know what I would have chosen. Definitely not to have Akinli die. But I didn't know if it would be worse to just die myself or live sixty-eight more years knowing how much I'd hurt him.

She told them to decide: more time, my death, or Akinli's.

The silence grew.

I kept my head down for a long time, afraid that my eyes would give something away or make them feel too guilty about what She was asking them to do. And it was an order, if they denied Her, they'd go along with me. I couldn't wish that on my sisters.

Finally, my curiosity got the better of me. I looked around the circle. Miaka's head was bowed, and she looked anguished. Elizabeth was biting her nails, staring into the sky with a furrowed brow. But when I turned to Aisling, she was staring at me.

We'd never had such a serious moment of contact. She was searching my face, my eyes. Maybe she was trying to guess which one of these options I wanted most. I tried to make my face read "anything but him."

Time was up. The Ocean asked Miaka what she felt was fair.

“More time. I don’t want to see Kahlen lose another person she loves. And I can’t stand to see her die. Not like this. And now that we know, we can watch her; we could stop her from going,” she said. “I’m sorry, Kahlen.”

I half smiled at her. This wasn’t her fault.

Next was Elizabeth. The Ocean asked her what she felt was fair.

Elizabeth looked up at me quickly and then back down.

“I’m sorry, Kahlen. I think... I think maybe he should... go. He was already supposed to have died. And if you live like this for fifty plus years... you know you’d try to go back. I can see it in your face. And every time you would just end up here. Eventually, you’ll lose your life. And you worked so hard for your second chance...”

At that I started crying. I couldn’t hold it in anymore. The façade fell to the ground, and I refused to even try to put it back on. Akinli’s death because of my mistake was torture. I wanted to say that if he went, I wouldn’t be staying much longer myself. He was immeasurably important to me, and I would *not* be separated from him like that. I held my tongue to spare them any more pain. I wouldn’t lie about my sadness anymore, but I couldn’t add to theirs.

The Ocean turned at last to Aisling. She asked what she thought was fair. Aisling stared down for a while. Then I could see her chest heaving; her breathing was picking up. She stood, unable to control herself. She started pacing. Finally, she drove an angry foot into the water and answered with a yell.

“Since when is any of this fair? Your concept of fair is ridiculous! Kahlen hasn’t hurt You or me or any of us. This boy has no idea. If You really cared about what was fair, You’d let this whole damn thing go. How in the world can You expect us to judge her for something we all want? That is *not* fair!

“If You want to make some sort of twisted verdict, if You need payment, fine. Tack on Your fifty years. But give it to me. I’ll serve the rest of my time and hers. If You wanted to be fair at all, You’d give the time to me, since I’m the only person here who would actually want it!”

CHAPTER 17

Stunned. I was stunned. We all were. We gaped at Aisling trying to make her statement make sense. Everything about it seemed wrong. First, the fact that she spoke more than a sentence or two was completely out of character. Second, that she spoke to the Ocean so forcefully was dizzying. Not just the action itself, but because it was in my defense. And beyond all that, she was willing to stay in this in-between life for longer than she had to. To take it on for me. It was a mystery.

Aisling looked completely unashamed. Her face was unapologetic as she surveyed our shock. I couldn't comprehend it all, try as I may. Thankfully, without waiting for an invitation, she spoke.

“When I was taken, I was eighteen. I was traveling up the coast from Karlskrona to Stockholm. I had just finished visiting my mother and father, and was on my way back to be with my daughter.”

“Daughter?!” Elizabeth exclaimed, voicing all our disbelief. Even the Ocean seemed shocked at this word. How had She never known?

“Yes, daughter. She was eleven months old at the time. She was supposed to make the trip with me, but she got sick just before the trip. She seemed strong enough by the time we were supposed to go, but I didn't want to risk it... Best decision of my life by far.

“She was the result of a brief affair with a boy who I loved and was sure loved me. But the moment he found out I was pregnant, he disappeared. I don't know what happened to him. I can't even remember his name now. I kept the baby a secret from my family as long as I could. They were ashamed. I think we had been wealthy or prominent maybe... They sent me off to live with my aunt and uncle in the north. They had no children of their own, and didn't mind my company. And when Tova was born, they were so pleased to have her there, too.”

Aisling's eyes were alight with the word. Tova, her daughter.

"I thought about her father a lot in the beginning. But after a while, I realized he was the one missing it all. I would have loved him all my life. I would have given him a huge family. But he gave it all up. He gave up a loyal wife and the most beautiful baby I'd ever seen. I was the lucky one. I had her all to myself."

Aisling was smiling, glowing with the memories of her daughter. I had never seen Aisling smile without malice behind it. All along I had thought she was beautiful, but with this hope behind her features, she was absolutely captivating.

She was right, that boy was an idiot.

When she came out of her reverie, she continued.

"A while after Tova was born, I think my mother was overcome with the guilt of kicking me out. I think I was the only daughter, but I can't remember anymore. I think she missed me. So we had arranged for Tova and me to come back and visit. Of course, even when Tova got sick, I wanted to make amends with my family. I had hoped in the future we could all be together. So I went without her. I left my baby behind..."

Aisling's voice broke. She held her delicate hand up to cover her mouth and hauntingly beautiful tears glistened in her eyes. The careful, hard demeanor she had built over nearly a century crumbled in front of me. She was not the horrible person I had thought her to be. Aisling simply ached with a longing that I could partly understand, but still, somehow not. I knew what it meant to be away from the person you loved the most, but I had never been a mother.

"When the ship went down, I refused to give up. I wasn't going to leave her without a mother if she definitely had no father. He wasn't coming back, so I had to. I was going to get back to my girl. And when I was asked in the dark of the water what I would give to live on, there was no question. I had

something unparalleled when it came to things worth living for. When it's your child..." She shook her head. "Until then, you just can't understand. All I could think was 'Tova. I have to live for Tova.'"

That's how she did it. Aisling would not be in this situation at all if she had simply thought, "I have to live for my daughter." Her beauty and youth would not have saved her had her wishes only taken a slightly different route. The Ocean would never have kept a parent.

It was the same as me thinking of Alex and Tommy. The Ocean didn't know if they were brothers or boyfriends, only that they mattered to me. Tova could have been a sister, a cousin, a friend. And Aisling, after obviously being betrayed in her life, was just naturally more guarded— a quality I obviously lacked.

"When I realized that living didn't mean that I got her back, I was furious. I was so angry. And then anger melted into sadness. I just had to be away from the others. I had to be alone. Poor Marilyn! She tried to live with me, but I was so distraught, I couldn't take her company. I really liked her, but I was just so *angry*. I'll always regret that— that I couldn't tell her why. But at least I get to explain it to you."

Aisling looked around at us, at her sisters, finally being able to enjoy us. She wasn't hiding anything anymore. She was glowing in her new freedom.

"It was then, while I was by myself, that I realized I could watch her from afar. I didn't have to be front and center to be a part of her world. So, since almost the very beginning of my sentence, I've kept this secret. Bigger than Kahlen's, huh?" she said that last line with another one of those life-filled smiles. I actually giggled. Despite the insanity of everything happening around me, I had to laugh at Aisling's first joke in a hundred years. I kept waiting for the Ocean to react, but She stayed still. For now.

"It's been hard. I've had to stay away from the Ocean when we weren't serving, and when we were I had to guard my

thoughts. I knew if I didn't keep this to myself I'd lose it all. I'm sure you've all thought I hated you. That was never the case, and I apologize. It was just easier to watch her and stay anonymous by myself. It was better for you to not know, so I had to make you *want* to stay away. It's been a lonely life to live, but at least I got to see my Tova."

I thought about that. How lonely had I been even with my sisters and the Ocean as my companions? I still felt so lost sometimes. Aisling had *nothing* to fall back on, no one to talk to. She probably never pursued things the way Miaka, Elizabeth, and I did. She sacrificed everything— her sisters, her Mother, her time, her ambitions— everything for her daughter.

"How did you do it? What did you see? How... just how?" Elizabeth begged. I was waiting for the Ocean to interrupt, to say She'd heard enough. But She listened, too.

"Well, I pick up and move to neighboring towns pretty regularly. I have an array of makeup and wigs I've collected. Of course, not speaking was hard, but I learned sign language, and that helped."

I couldn't help but gasp. Something else we had in common. All these years I wasted hating her.

"And the things I've seen!" Her face was swelling with pride. "Precious memories to any mother. I saw her whole life unfold. I saw her go to school, I watched her play with her little friends as a child. I saw her find a boyfriend, a better one than I found. She dated and married that one boy. I saw her on her wedding day. I found out the date by sitting in the right place at the right time, overhearing conversations. I was sad to not be in the ceremony, but I caught a glimpse of her in her dress, smiling at her new husband. That was all I could ask for. And she never knew.

"I guarded our secret like a treasure, knowing it would end her life and mine if I didn't show restraint. Distance was the price I had to pay to watch my child grow up. And I gave it

happily. I understand all too well Kahlen's temptation, but I've had more practice at being guarded. I do it very well.

"So I watched my daughter live and die. But it wasn't so sad, because I got to see my grandchildren. I have one granddaughter and two grandsons. The boys have moved away now, but my granddaughter stayed in Stockholm. Just a few years ago, she had a baby. A girl. Do you know what she named her?"

She looked up at us, eyes glistening, completely full of hope.

"Aisling. They named her Aisling. That means that even though I was never there, my daughter knew about me. Someone, maybe my aunt, told her how much I loved her. She knew who I was. Maybe she thought about me while she grew or on her wedding day. If she passed on my name so that my grandchildren would know it, she talked about me. That means I never really did leave her... in all that time..."

Her mind wandered away. What she was feeling, I couldn't be sure, but I did know what it meant to hope the ones we left behind missed us or thought about us.

Miaka and Elizabeth might have missed the meaning in all of this. Elizabeth's family almost always overlooked her. It was something that, even though the names and faces of her family were slowly disappearing, she still felt she had to fight against. And Miaka had been little more than a servant. It took decades of me showing her how strong and valuable she was for her to start walking around with her head up. They didn't miss the ones they lost like Aisling and I did. Somewhere in the world, right now, we had true loves.

Aisling came back from her daydream and spoke.

"So, now that I have a namesake, I'd really like to see what she turns out to be. But my time is running out. In two years, she'll be gone from my mind, and that breaks my heart. I have no big plans for myself or any great ambitions. I just want to see my great granddaughter, the new Aisling, grow up. I know

it can't go on forever, but this would give me some peace after years of torturing others." She spoke to the Ocean now, more than to the rest of us.

"I would be happy to, and more than deserve to, take on Kahlen's punishment. I'll take the sentence for her. I know I'm not a pet to You like she is, but I am faithful. I can do this job and restrain myself. I am disciplined enough to keep our secret. If I stay longer it will save You the hurt and labor of choosing another girl. It's convenient.

"Furthermore, Kahlen may have made a mistake, and I'll admit it's a serious one, but over all these years she has always put the needs of others before her own. She gave Marilyn the precious younger sister she craved, she helped Miaka come into her own, she tried to curb Elizabeth's wild temperament, and never, even when I desperately deserved it, has she ever struck me." She smiled. "Even now, we're talking about punishing her, but it's not her life she's worried about."

Her voice had a tone of awe to it, as if my thinking of Akinli before myself was any better than her putting her daughter first.

But maybe it was more than that— that I'd almost always put all of them before me. With the outrageous exception of dragging Miaka and Elizabeth across the Atlantic, I couldn't think of another time when I'd let my own wants come before theirs. I hadn't really thought about it, but Aisling was right.

She continued.

"I have tortured my sisters. I've had none of her grace. It may not seem as serious to You, but shouldn't I pay penance for what I've done? Take the two years I have left, the eighteen she has left, and the fifty You're prepared to add and give it all to me."

There were no words. I couldn't fathom that this was in any way an option. And still, here she was exposing her secret that may put her or her family in danger, humbling herself for nothing.

I was moved.

We were all quiet for a while except for the sobs. I don't remember starting to cry again, but we were all weeping for some reason or another.

Finally, the Ocean spoke.

She said She was proud of Aisling for being so selfless. All these years She had doubted Her decision to take Aisling and was glad to see the goodness in her now-eldest daughter. But it was hardly fair for Her to just release me for breaking the rules. It wasn't fair to Miaka or Elizabeth or Aisling to let me go. But Miaka spoke up.

"I think it's fair! Kahlen has been the best of us. I think You should let her go. If you let her go, I'll take fifty more years, too."

Miaka's gesture made me cry even harder.

"Me, too!" Elizabeth chimed in. "Fifty years and then some. Let her go."

I couldn't believe they would do that for me. It was all pointless... still the offer meant so much to me. But I knew that if our roles were reversed, and I had no one and they had someone, I'd make the same offer. Even before Akinli, it was important to me that people who could be together should be if they had a chance.

The Ocean spoke again. She said She was moved by their goodness. It made Her surer than ever that She had chosen the right people to be Her companions. But She had to be consistent. Setting me free early— and as a direct result of disobedience— set a bad precedent. It would be unkind to everyone who had served before, and might be expected by anyone to come in the future.

"You're wrong," Aisling said. "Look at us. You have three sirens begging for *more* time, not less. It's simple. Give me the time, and I'll serve You even better than I have before. Let Miaka and Elizabeth finish their years. So long as you don't add anyone until around the time Elizabeth leaves, no one

would be here to know but me. And I think it's obvious at this point that I know how to keep a secret. It would disappear with us."

The Ocean was silent. Was She actually considering this? Perhaps She was thinking of a way to punish us all for being so rebellious. It wouldn't be hard for Her to wipe us all out at once, but I'd imagine starting from scratch would be incredibly inconvenient.

"Honestly," Aisling spoke cautiously, "I think You know that this is fair. I think You want Kahlen to have a chance at this, too. The real problem is that You're going to miss her too much."

The Ocean didn't respond. Aisling continued carefully.

"You've already said that You love her. You don't want to hurt her. And You know that we don't want anyone to die. I think You were banking on us asking for more time. Except the extra time isn't for Kahlen, it's for You. You don't *want* to let her go..."

A few more moments of silence passed.

"No one understands how hard it is to let go of a daughter like I do... even when it's the right thing."

More silence.

I wouldn't have known what it was if I hadn't been there to hear Aisling's speech. Across the world, I wondered what people were thinking if they were seeing it, too. The water on the surface started to writhe. It looked like huge invisible snakes were crawling along the water, from north to south. Long lashes of wet ripples moved across the water, all the way up to our feet.

She was crying.

There was no sound to accompany it, but I knew. She loved me. She never would have killed me, even if I had begged Her. She would have been sad to kill Akinli because it would hurt me, but She would have done it if She had to. Deep down in

Her heart, wherever and whatever that was, She was hoping they would vote that I would stay longer. She didn't want to me to leave Her.

I felt too much love in too short a time to know what to do. I was finally sure of Akinli's feelings and my sisters were willing to sacrifice so much for me. Then the Ocean was silently weeping at the thought of me leaving Her... the most precious of Her daughters out of reach...

I cried, too.

I walked out into the surf until the water reached the middle of my legs, and slowly, tenderly got down on my knees. I didn't have arms long enough, but I hoped She would feel the gesture all the same. From where I was kneeling, I bent down and pressed my body against Her, stretching my arms out as wide as I could. I hugged Her as best I was able, holding the pose for a long time. I stayed there feeling Her against me. The tears continued to dance down the surface, under my embrace. I held Her, the way She had held me when I had lost something I loved. I had hated Her enough in my life, that was true, but it was only like that because I actually felt passionately about Her.

Miaka and Elizabeth and possibly even Aisling were above hating the Ocean. But they were also below loving Her. I could feel my hate so strongly because I felt my love even stronger. They didn't know Her, not like I did. I had told Her I loved Her before, but She probably never needed to hear it more than now. Even though She was about to make me live this life for sixty-eight more years, because that was Her only option now, I couldn't bring myself to be angry with Her. She was still my Mother.

Don't cry. It's alright. I love You, too. Just please, don't hurt Akinli. I'll never go back to him again. I won't put You or my sisters in danger anymore. Fifty years will be a blessing. I'll use my time better this turn. You don't have to cry.

I thought Her mysterious voice broke when She spoke again.

Kahlen, She said, say good-bye to your sisters.

She was letting me go.

They all jumped up. Miaka and Elizabeth hugged one another, then ran over to Aisling to embrace her, too. I realized that it must have been her first hug in a very long time. They clapped, they cried, they cheered. And finally, they ran into the water patting me on the back as I held my position. I let them dance around while I took my time moving. I didn't want Her to think I was eager to leave Her... I honestly wasn't. I didn't move from my pose until I could feel the wiggles of water beneath me slow... and then grow small... and then stop completely. She was alright now, so I could stand. Before I slowly rose, I whispered to Her.

Don't worry. We'll be alone soon.

I stood and found Elizabeth first since she was closest. "Elizabeth, you have made me braver. I can't thank you enough for simply being yourself. I don't know how anyone ever looked over you; you are a prize."

She smiled at me with tears in her eyes. Elizabeth was usually tougher than that. "You are so good. I hope your new life will be a happy one. Give that boy some extra kisses for me! Love you."

"Love you."

Just behind Elizabeth, absolutely beaming with huge tears in her eyes, Miaka waited.

"My first little sister! You're so creative, and you helped wake that part of me up. Anything I ever create in my next life, I owe to you. You are my darling, and I love you." I held her tight.

"I love you! Thank you for always encouraging me. I wouldn't have known what to do with all this time without you here. You made me. If you ever find a mysterious painting on your doorstep, it's me!" We both laughed. I released her, and turned, finally, to Aisling. The one sister I thought I would never have a good-bye for.

“How could I ever thank you, Aisling?” I asked.

“By really living,” she said simply. “You went through a lot to get him... embrace your new life with everything you have. That will make me happy. And I have to thank you, for letting me have your time.”

“No one could use it better. I’m sure your little Aisling will grow up to be as strong and amazing as you are.”

“We’ll see,” she said with a shrug and a smile. She would see... and I couldn’t be more pleased.

“Good-bye, Kahlen.”

“Good-bye, Aisling.”

“Good-bye.” Miaka and Elizabeth chorused.

“Good-bye.”

It was time to go. I looked at my sisters one last time and then sank slowly away from them.

The mood shifted abruptly.

I could still feel Her sadness, but the Ocean was suddenly businesslike. She informed me there was a huge challenge ahead of us. Most sirens had discovered their passion over the long course of their life. She couldn’t deny that I was passionate about Akinli, more so than most others were about whatever love they had discovered, but the problem was that I’d only cared for him over one short year. That’s barely a drop in a century. I might not remember him very clearly when I woke up in my new life.

I hadn’t thought about this. In my mind, I was still at least eighteen years away from freedom. I would think about it then, when it was a possibility. It seemed like a serious fault on my part to have not considered all of this better.

On top of that, most girls wanted to get a specific job or go to a specific place. I was going after a specific *person*. People move. She couldn’t find Akinli until he touched water, so it might be a long wait. And even then, he couldn’t actually see

me arrive; it would scare him senseless to see my body propelled out of the water, landing however and wherever it might.

I didn't know that was coming either.

The Ocean knew where Akinli's house was, thanks to me, so just leaving me near there was an option. But if he didn't come out and find me before I regained consciousness, I might just wander off. Because he knew me as Kahlen, She couldn't even offer me a stolen identity. She could give me money, and that would help a little, but with or without it, if anyone else found me I'd probably be taken to a hospital. As hard as I tried, I still might not remember Akinli enough to look for him, and he would have no clue I was back or to be looking for me. I would be another random soul.

We'd have to be patient. We'd be leaving a lot up to chance. But She said that if this was truly what I wanted, She would do Her best to help me get it.

I love Akinli. I'd risk being alone and lost in the world to try.

Then She would try, too.

It was done, and I was ready, but I was still nervous about all the chance involved. After all this time, would I remember how to be human by myself? And if I had no help, would I survive alone? I was a girl— young, and not very strong once I left this body— that someone could hurt. There were a hundred “what ifs.” But I had to face them. If that was the way to Akinli, then that was what I would do.

Once that decision was made, we settled into one another. We were going to have to wait for goodness knows how long. I couldn't time my good-bye. I just had to stay in this slow departure until my time with the Ocean was gone.

I really do love You. No matter what.

She said She knew. She felt it over and over again in my head, long before I was ever brave enough to say it.

Do I think it a lot?

Yes, often. In my head, She was like a mother. Since Pawleys Island, it was the undertone of every address I'd given Her. Even when I was mad.

I don't think I knew that I felt it so often. Or all the time I mean. I knew I thought of You as my mom though.

She said there are some relationships you can't just turn off. Once it is, it is. Our circumstances wouldn't change that in us.

Even when I'm gone?

Even when I was gone.

Even when I'm old?

Even when I was old.

I was suddenly very sad.

Will I remember You at all?

She didn't think so. She hoped it all disappeared. She didn't want me remembering things I didn't really want to just to hold onto some of the things I did.

I understand what You mean. If anyone had asked me before, I don't think I would have thought about it, but if I had to keep some of the bad just to know You were there, I would.

She appreciated that, but still didn't want that for any of us, least of all me.

We talked about ourselves. We remembered how casual our relationship had been, the distance bridged between the enormous, eternal Sea and a tiny, breakable girl. We told each other we loved each other countless times, making up for all the opportunities we missed over the eighty years we'd spent together.

We talked about my island. Before today it had been so long since I had been there last. I didn't even take the time to enjoy it one last time. Now I would never see my beautiful escape again. That saddened me.

You should give it to the girls. They'd appreciate it.

Yes, they probably would. But they had the entirety of the world. She was going to keep the island for Herself, a token to remember me by.

I guess when you're as big as the Ocean, an island might be the right size for a token.

We remembered all of the conversations we'd had in places all over the world. Those memories filled up hours. We laughed, and I cried. We spoke about our disagreements briefly. There weren't very many, but they were always monumental. We discussed all the plans I had made— my desires to teach or work with the hearing impaired— and how they were all about to be tossed aside. It was exciting and terrifying.

My Mother wanted me to know, once and for all, that She deeply regretted any pain She had ever caused me. She was sorry about my parents and Jillian and Akinli. She was sorry that She made me feel trapped and restless and depressed. Since the moment She chose me, She thought I was special and admitted She'd been a little selfish with my affection. Still this, our nearness, was better than anything She had ever hoped for.

Please, no more apologies. You know I'm not angry. I'm just passionate. You told me Yourself once that I never love anyone halfway. Doesn't that include You? No more being sorry. If anything, I should apologize to You. I've turned Your world upside down today. I never meant to-

She cut me off. Weren't we past all this now? We knew. And that was enough.

We didn't talk much about Akinli. I didn't worry about my future; I just let Her enjoy my present. I should have given Her more of me. So much time I wasted. But there was one thing about Akinli and Her that I just had to know.

How did you know Akinli loved me? I asked, recalling what She had said back at the island.

She said She didn't usually use this gift of Hers unless She was communicating with us, or in the act of choosing a siren, but this was one case where She just had to know what was going on in his mind. She was always looking out for him, and whenever he went into the water, She paid attention. She hoped to be able to tell me something bright, but couldn't lie to me once She saw how sad his thoughts were. She felt how much he ached for me.

Then later, when he fell in, She searched his mind to see if he was a girl. Although that was admittedly unnecessary with four sirens already in place, it was a habit of Hers that was all but impossible to turn off. But he was thinking of me. She saw me in his head.

Even unconscious, even on his way to death, I was all he thought of.

I couldn't think of the words to express it, but that knowledge gave me confidence again. She was glad to be able to give me hope. And then, as if She had just realized She could give me something for my next life, She told me to wait.

I thought She was collecting money for me. Where would I keep it in this dress? But I was wrong. She pulled deep from within Herself; I could feel the search. After a few minutes, my tiny silver necklace came floating in front of me. Where the clasp had broken from the speed, She had tied it together with a long piece of string. She put it on me. It fell much lower on my chest now with the string, but it was somehow even more precious to me.

Thank You! This means so much to me! Oh... I'm going to miss You.

She would miss me, too. We had been speaking for hours, perhaps close to a day. But I couldn't be silent. I was about to say something else, but She hushed me.

She told me quickly that She loved me.

I love You, too, Mother. Always.

My Ocean told me to think of Akinli. Hard. Say his name, remember his face. Turn everything in my mind to Akinli.

I did what She told me to. I thought his name over and over. While I remembered the name that had become my favorite word in the world, I thought of a feature. Akinli— his beautiful blue eyes. Akinli— his growing blond hair. Akinli— his wonderful smile. Akinli— his strong hands. Akinli— his golden laugh.

Akinli, Akinli, Akinli.

She whispered Her good-bye.

I didn't get to respond.

My body shot forward.

I was traveling so fast, the salt hit my skin at a thousand angles like it did whenever I moved through Her. But it was different. I could really feel it— and it hurt.

The water seemed to squeeze tight around my body. Suddenly, my mouth jerked open. I felt something cold come rushing out of my lungs. As it left my mouth, I saw the dark blueness of this substance float away from me.

For the first time in decades, I felt the need for air. It was a burning need. I searched for the surface. It took me a while to realize which way was up. I turned around in the Ocean. I finally saw the sun breaking through the surface of water that was growing more and more shallow. In the distance, giant leaves of sea kelp were clawing towards the light.

It was too far away.

I wasn't going to make it.

I tried to hold onto my consciousness, but I felt the blackness close in as I moved. All this work, all this time, and I wouldn't even see him.

Akinli.

I held onto his name. It was the last thing I thought. As I slipped into sleep, I felt my body break through the surface.

And everything was black.

Akinli

CHAPTER 18

Fresh. Salty. Clean. Sweet.

The smell of the ocean was something I'd been familiar with since I was a kid. Mom and Dad used to bring me to visit Ben and his parents I don't know how many times a year. But that smell had a new meaning to me now.

Julie had been telling me to stop thinking about Kahlen. And I tried, I really did. But it seemed like every day something happened to put her in the forefront of my mind.

It had been almost a year, and it wasn't getting any better. I was hoping (and dreading) that with time I'd think about her less and less. But, if I was being honest with myself, she was always there.

When my parents died, they were on my mind all the time, too. Every once in a while, something would distract me, and I'd feel normal for a little while. And then when Kahlen showed up, that ache turned into something dull in the background. I could still feel it, but it wasn't so overwhelming. For the first time in months, I felt like myself again.

But now I always felt wrong. Where was she? Was she safe? Did she hate me? No one could give me any answers. I knew I had always been the type to worry. When Kahlen left, she became the biggest and easiest thing to worry about. And now it was getting bad.

Really bad.

It used to be that if a girl with long brown hair passed, I'd have to watch her walk away. I'd wait for her to turn around so I could be sure one way or the other. But these girls with their copycat hair were never her. If someone laughed with their breath, letting out a low sound as opposed to loud chuckles, I'd turn my head, searching around for the source. But again, not her.

Probably the worse was the constant feeling that I smelled her. It was an easy smell to mistake. Almost. Kahlen smelled

so much like the ocean. It was a breezy, watery perfume. As if I didn't spend enough time on the boat breathing in that almost-Kahlen smell, I spent my more pathetic moments out on the rocks, inhaling, filling my lungs.

Like now.

With my feet in the water, I felt sort of connected to her. Like maybe some of that smell would rub off on me, and I'd be tricked into thinking she was near. Maybe I'd sleep tonight if I thought she was close by. I was weirded out sometimes by how bad I missed her. I mean, I'd never noticed how anyone smelled before. It made me feel... I don't know... weak? Shouldn't I be stronger than this?

But I'd be satisfied with being the wimpy guy who missed a girl's smell if that would only be the worst of it. Of course, it got much worse last week when I was a hundred percent sure I'd seen her. I clearly remembered tripping on the trap in the boat. I just wasn't being careful enough. But falling into the water and then managing to get out again... that was all gone.

Funny, that's how Kahlen felt all the time— couldn't remember a thing. It's weird to not remember. Oh, come on Akinli, just try to not think of her.

I remembered slowly gaining consciousness on the boat. Or I thought I did. And Kahlen was there, soaking wet along with me. And we kissed. That kiss felt so final. And then, poof, the next thing I remember was the hospital. I didn't tell Ben about that middle part— the part about Kahlen. After the first few months he thought I should just get over it. I mean, I knew he was worried about me, but he just didn't know what to do. If it had been the other way around, I probably would have done exactly what he did for me: bring him another beer.

I did tell Julie because she was more like a mom and said nice things if I wanted to talk about Kahlen. And I knew she missed her, too. But Julie told me that I hit my head really hard. No kidding; I had a bruise to prove that. She said I was probably seeing things. And there's no way I could honestly say that Kahlen wouldn't be the one person I wanted to see.

Opening my eyes on the boat, with Kahlen close by, felt like waking up. The whole last year came into focus. I saw every moment—the moments I really *felt* anyway— all accentuated by blocks of time that had done nothing more than fill up my waking hours...

After getting over the shock of Kahlen's dismantled room, we went to the police and filed, surprisingly, the first missing persons report for Kahlen. I waited and waited. I worried. Every time the phone rang, I got a weird feeling in my stomach. Maybe this was the call that would be someone saying she's okay. But it never was.

After a month, I decided to toughen up and try to distract myself. Casey had been around enough after that first weekend. She didn't seem too upset that Kahlen disappeared, but she tried to look sympathetic. She could play the part of the supportive girlfriend really well. So when Kahlen didn't come back, I decided to try with her again. It didn't take long for Casey's act to fall. Now I had someone to compare kindness to, and Casey couldn't keep up that level of gentleness for long.

I remembered, in October, the night we broke up. She had been snippy all day about applications and scholarship forms, determined to see me "distinguished." What the hell did she think she was going to turn me into? I felt like one of those show dogs people parade around on leashes. She spent the whole day making me feel like an idiot. Her way of making up for this was by leaning the seat back in her car and making me an offer I'd heard so many times before.

It was tempting. It had been a while.

But then I looked over at Casey, her hands already unbuttoning her shirt, and realized I didn't want any of it. Not her scholarships. Not her degrees. Not her.

We got in a huge fight right then, and I haven't seen her pushy, whiny face since.

When Halloween rolled around and the little girls came dressed like princesses, I was freshly reminded of just who it was I *did* want.

I wanted my quiet girl. The girl who paid attention to what I said, what I wanted—the only person who knew how to respond to me. The girl who wasn't embarrassed by my clothes or my job or my bike, not caring if I was rich or poor. My sweet, innocent, forgiving girl. The one who silently laughed at even the worst of my jokes, who didn't push me to be cheerful if I just wanted to be still. The girl that I knew from the moment I touched her was supposed to be mine.

So what if she was some abandoned orphan? I was practically that myself. So what if she never spoke? I always knew what she meant to say.

I wanted my Kahlen.

I knew I missed her. I sort of made sure I did. But the wave of wanting her hit me so hard that night, it kind of knocked me off my feet... and I'd pretty much been on the ground ever since.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. Days started to disappear, hours were gone. Fall kept moving, but I barely noticed. I remembered Thanksgiving Day, but only because I paused to thank God for letting me meet Kahlen and begged Him to keep her safe wherever she was.

Winter came, bitterer than any I could recall. The cold in the air seemed to settle into my body—I couldn't get warm anymore. When Christmas came, I hoped that she'd somehow show up on our doorstep. I stayed awake all night imagining that, like a movie, if I just waited, Kahlen would come back, complete with a perfect snowfall and a Christmas carol finale.

No such thing.

On Valentine's Day, I had to, just *had* to buy her flowers. I didn't know what flowers Kahlen liked best, so I ended up with the classic roses. Sixty dollars worth of flowers and no one to give them to. It was such a desperate thing to do, I

didn't even mention it to Julie. I ended up taking the roses to my little spot in the woods—the fallen log where I found her. That was my hiding place.

When my parents died and I had to get out of that town, Ben and Julie were cool about taking me in. But the one thing I just couldn't bear to do was cry in front of them. I mean, a lone tear was one thing. But the bawling I was prone to when I really, *really* missed them... it was embarrassing. But here, it was out of the way enough that no one would hear or care.

Some nights I'd cry, when I just couldn't stand how crappy my life was turning out. No parents, no girl, no school, and a job that was okay, but not something I wanted to do forever. Other nights, I'd smoke to get out the stress, but then I'd think about my mom and cancer and how pissed she'd be if I did that to myself. Sometimes, I'd just drink a beer and try to not think at all. Spacing out got easier and easier.

I tried not to go too often to that spot—it made me think of her. But on Valentine's Day, I took her the dozen red roses and waited on my bench. Again, I imagined that she'd just materialize there. I even cleaned up and ironed my shirt just in case. But Kahlen didn't come.

So I spent the whole day remembering little details about her. The way her eyes lit up when I bought her a birthday cake and how she loved to ride Bessie. The way she finally seemed to pull some warmth into her body when we fell asleep on the couch and how she could carry on an entire conversation with just her eyes. The way I felt when I kissed her.

How many girls had I kissed in my life? Between the pecks on the cheeks growing up and the girls I'd made out with as a teenager, it had to be at least a dozen. None of them came close to kissing Kahlen. It was like we'd created kissing ourselves. She made me feel like the rest of the world didn't exist. When I was kissing Kahlen, we were all that mattered.

It got harder to eat, harder to sleep. It just didn't seem important anymore.

The only thing that pulled me out of this stupor was Bex. Seriously, I don't know how two people raise a child alone. A baby needs at least five or six adults around at every moment. I was barely useful, but I think Bex liked me. When the house was empty and it was just us, I'd tell her stories about Kahlen and wish that they could have met.

I forgot to eat, but I could feed her. I didn't sleep much, but I could let her drift off in my arms. I was an uncle, and it was the only important thing happening in my life.

But even Bex couldn't distract me for long.

In May, I forgot that my birthday had come until Ben and Julie started singing to me. Funny enough, my first thought went to Kahlen. I never asked her what she had wished for on her "birthday." When I blew out my candles, all I could ask for was that she was safe and happy out there. Wishing was all I had.

Nearly a year of my life revolved around her. Or rather, her absence. But when I looked into her eyes on the boat, that time didn't seem to matter anymore.

And then I woke up in the hospital.

And she wasn't there.

And I had to accept again that, wish as I might, Kahlen was not coming back to me.

That was the last straw.

I was an idiot. What kind of dumbass was I to fall that fast and that hard for a stranger? It wasn't normal. But then nothing was normal anymore. I wished I could rewind the last few years, rearrange things, and press play.

I wished my mom and dad were back. Adult or not, I needed them. So much seemed to hang on them not being around. My dad would have known what to do about this; he would have had some words of wisdom. He would have told me what I should have done. He would have told me how to deal with her not wanting me anymore.

If that was the case...

Her room was mine now, so I'd cleaned up the mess. But the sight of her comforter and clothes thrown across the floor bothered me still. I didn't like to let my thoughts go there, to think that whoever left her hurt and alone had found her and took her away. I knew it was a possibility, but to think that someone somewhere was hurting Kahlen was much worse than thinking she simply left by choice. I'd take that option any day.

When I read her note, the one piece of paper I carried from her notebook, it was harder to believe. That damn note comforted me and haunted me more than anything in this world. It was only paper, but the things it could do...

Whatever the reason, Kahlen was gone. And I had to accept that now. People leave, and we have to move on. If I could just make my peace with that, maybe I could start to be grateful for what she had given me. I couldn't have Kahlen, but because of her, I knew what I wanted. I knew I wanted someone who was strong but not aggressive, someone who was gentle but not easily intimidated, someone who was beautiful but without being worried about it. I wanted someone simple. These were wants I didn't know I had. If I had known, I wouldn't have wasted those years on Casey, who was obviously the polar opposite of what I really wanted. And thanks to Kahlen, I knew that now.

And there were a couple of girls in town who had always shown an interest before, during, and after Casey. And since I nearly drowned, Sara had been by the house three times. She brought soup and a book one time since the doctor said I should take it easy. That was thoughtful. I mean, she wasn't as charming as Kahlen. Or as funny, though some might challenge a silent person's ability to crack a joke. Of course, she wasn't half as beautiful, but who was?

I remembered that one night Kahlen spent in my bed. When I woke up and saw her face, it was like her face made the room

brighter, the bed warmer. Maybe Sara could be like that, too. Maybe if I just took the time to find out.

Truth was I didn't think I could ever be that enthusiastic about another girl again. I'd felt the height of connection with Kahlen, and I didn't think anyone else would ever come close.

But reading through Kahlen's book of notes over and over and dreaming that she might come home to me... that wasn't doing me any good. How many times in this past week alone had I come out to these rocks, just to think about the way Kahlen *smelled*? If I kept this up, I'd be miserable forever. Hadn't I had enough misery? I wasn't excited about a life without her, but maybe one day I would be. I had to be hopeful.

Looking out over the water, I was sure that was my only option now: be hopeful.

I just had to give it time.

Out of my periphery, something blurred. Did that rock just move?

More focused now, I could see that it wasn't a rock... it was a person. Were they hurt? Hopping to my feet, I ran down the rocky coast unsteadily. I knew the doctors had told me to take it easy, but what if this person, this girl, was injured? They'd just have to deal.

Yes, it was definitely a woman's body. Whatever she was wearing was so dark she practically matched the rocks. Thank goodness she moved; no one would have ever seen her. That low on the rocks, she would have been dragged out to sea... and draped in darkness, like a dress. Why would you wear...?

Oh, God.

I knew someone who wore dresses like that. The thought stunned me for a moment. I looked closer now. *Oh, damn...* pale skin... *oh, no...* long brown hair. *Oh please, God, please let her be okay.*

"Kahlen!" I yelled, "Kahlen, I'm coming!"

I saw the body move a minute ago, right? She would be alive at least. As I got closer, I saw blood. Little scratches on her arms and face like she'd rubbed them along a bunch of tiny rocks. It wasn't a lot of blood, but *any* was too much to me.

"Kahlen!" I called, finally making my way across the rocks and kneeling beside her. I picked up her head and cradled her in my arms. She was so much more beautiful than I remembered. Even with the little scratches on her, she still looked gorgeous. I saw on her neck that she still wore my necklace. It had broken at some point and was held together with string. I don't know what happened, but she made an effort to keep it. Maybe, wherever she had been, she had thought of me, too. I let out a brief hysterical laugh at the thought.

"Kahlen, sweetheart, can you hear me?" I asked. Was I seriously starting to cry? *Pull it together, this isn't the time.* I wiped the coming tears away and focused. I hated to do it, but I lightly popped her on her face trying to get her to come to. It took a moment, but her eyes fluttered.

She *was* alive.

I put my cheek close to her mouth and nose. I could feel her breathing. I moved my ear down her chest, and there it was—her beautiful, steady heartbeat. I could hear it.

Kahlen. She was real, alive, and in my arms. I had to check myself. I hadn't sustained any head injuries today. No one could say I had dreamed her up. How could anyone dream her up? She was more beautiful than any vision the average imagination could invent.

Hope. Finally, hope.

If she was here, maybe I could explain myself. I could ask her to forgive me. I could do whatever it took. I'd learn sign language— why didn't I do that while she was gone? Maybe she would take me more seriously now if I had. Still, I had to hold onto her presence. At least now there was a maybe.

While my head was still on her chest, taking in every drum of her heart, I felt Kahlen's hand reach up and brush my cheek. It was chilly, with wetness in her skin. She had always felt like that, like she just emerged from some mysterious shower. The shock of it brought my wits to me.

"Kahlen, can you hear me?" I asked.

"Yes," she croaked. She spoke! How long had I dreamed about her voice? It was sweet, but obviously labored. In one word I could hear how tired she was.

"Kahlen, you can talk!"

"Why wouldn't I?" She sounded genuinely confused by my words. Her voice was gentle but raspy. What had she been through now? She slowly opened her eyes and focused on my face. I wasn't sure of the emotion in her eyes. Maybe it was curiosity.

"Who are you?" Yes, definitely curious. But not afraid...

"Oh... Kahlen, don't you remember me?" Please remember me; you're all I think about.

She raised a hand and pulled some hair away from her face while she looked me over. I watched, completely in a trance at the way that hand fell gently down her cheek and rested at the base of her neck. She found the necklace under her fingers and looked down at it. She studied it for a moment, and then turned her eyes back to mine. She brushed my growing hair away from my eyes to look into them better.

She touched me. On purpose.

"Akinli?" she asked, almost like she was guessing, as if Akinli was in the same league as Timmy or Brian or Jake.

"Yes! Yes, I'm Akinli. Do you remember... we had lobster? And I bought you a book? And that necklace— that's from me. You were staying with me." My words were tumbling over one another to get out of my mouth, jockeying for position. I wondered if she could even untangle those

mumbles. She was quiet for a moment, thinking. I just wanted to hear her voice again.

“I... I don't remember any of that. But I know you. How do I know you?” she asked.

“Well, we were kind of together. For a little while. And then you left.”

“Together?”

“Yeah, together. Like a couple,” I explained.

“Oh.” She lowered her face a little bit, and it looked like she was blushing. I forgot how modest she had been. I couldn't imagine how that side of her would handle an inexplicable ex-boyfriend. She giggled a bit. It sounded like light.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just... I'm sorry. I'm just surprised is all.” There was definitely a blush.

“Yeah. Sorry I'm not more attractive.” Was now really the time to crack jokes?

She laughed again.

“Don't be ridiculous.” She smiled at me. I felt that same warmth from waking up with her next to me. I knew I was finally coming out of the night. I had to shake my head in wonder. Our eyes locked in the moment, but then her expression faded back into confusion. “Wait. Why did I leave? What happened?”

“I'm not sure. It was either because you were mad at me, which is understandable, or someone took you. Do you remember if you were kidnapped at all?”

She thought. I could tell she was searching hard for something. It seemed like she was digging deeper than last time, but coming up just as blank. I wondered if it would always be like that for her, if no memories stayed for very long. Then again, she did remember me.

“I don’t know. But I feel... I feel... free?” she asked me, like I would be able to name the feeling for her. Of course, I was just as lost as she was. “Something is over. It feels bittersweet.” Her little forehead creased, and she kept thinking.

“Did anyone hurt you? Are you okay?”

“My lungs hurt a bit. I think I swallowed some water. And these scratches burn a little. It feels... I don’t know... painful? I don’t know anything else.” She looked disappointed, like she wished she could offer me more. She started to shiver a bit from the breeze. It was starting to get dark, and the warmth was leaving with the sun. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“Oh.” I didn’t want to explain this. “Well, while you and I were sort of together, an ex-girlfriend showed up. She wasn’t invited; I didn’t know she was coming. She made some waves, and then you were gone.”

She got quiet and thoughtful. “If *she* made waves, then it doesn’t seem like I should be mad at *you*.”

“Well, I really should have asked her to go. I didn’t really want her back... it was... she was part of my past that I missed. Not so much *her*, but the time itself. I didn’t know how to separate them at that moment. Does that make any sense?”

“A lot, actually.” Her face was clear, as if she’d felt it all with me.

“I should have known you would get it. I could always tell you understood things. Even when you couldn’t say so, I could tell.” I could barely take in this moment. It seemed too good. First, that she was here. Second, that she wasn’t even upset with me. Third, that she didn’t seem to have any need or desire to go away.

We watched each other in silence for a moment.

I saw her shiver again, and I took off my shirt to give to her. She looked so tiny when she wore my things; it was adorable. She ducked her head with a blush, but glanced at my chest more than once. I think she might have caught me grinning at

that, but I couldn't help it. Maybe now wasn't the moment to hope she still felt that way about me, but... who the hell cares?

I committed her to memory there... her hair dripping down her cheeks, the shining black dress clinging to her, the warm look on her face, and the complete comfort I felt with her wearing my clothes. Her smile was small when she spoke.

“Where am I exactly?”

“Port Clyde, Maine.”

“But I'm not from here?”

“I have no idea. This is the second time I've found you with no memory of what you've been through or where you've been. I'm guessing you have to be from somewhere close by to end up here twice. Last time you wore a dress a lot like this one— just as fancy but a different color. But last time you couldn't talk. We thought you were in shock or something.”

“We?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. You stayed with me and my cousin Ben and his wife Julie.”

“Julie...” she whispered, like maybe she remembered her, too. If she did, she didn't say so. It looked like she was going a little crazy trying to think. “I don't know what to do now.” She was so confused. I had a few thoughts about what she could do now, but I didn't think a marriage proposal would go over too well at the moment.

“Well, you have some options.” I didn't really want to give them to her, but it all had to be her choice this time. “We can go to my house and call the police— they were very helpful the last time. They can take you and set you up in a home with other women and get you a job. They had said last time that maybe that would be good for you.”

She took this in quietly, not bothered by the idea of shipping her off. So calm.

“Or... you could come and stay with me again.” Did I imagine the tiny smile? “Last time... well, last time I think

you were happy there. And Ben and Julie would be glad to have you back.” I lowered my eyes. “I would be glad to have you back. Ben and Julie have a baby now, so it’s a bit crowded, but if you don’t mind that,” I looked up to her, “consider yourself at home.”

She closed her eyes. She looked like she was searching for some important piece of information in her head. Like she was trying to solve a puzzle.

“I have to be with you,” she finally said, though her forehead was still creased. She made the decision, but didn’t seem to know why. I didn’t care. I was happy. I knew I had a stupid look on my face, but I couldn’t help it. I’m a weird guy. I checked myself before I got too excited.

“Great,” I said. “Perfect.”

We held a smile between us for a moment. But before I could settle into this being real, I had to know something.

“Listen, could you do me a favor? If you want to leave again, that’s alright. I just need you to tell me, okay? Will you promise me you won’t just disappear again?” I had to know that if she changed her mind, I’d at least get a solid good-bye. I didn’t think I’d survive a second round of that worry.

She looked at me with unending tenderness in her eyes. It was a familiar sight, as if she had unknown amounts of patience. She put a hand to my cheek and stared into me. If she was trying to make sure I was paying attention, she didn’t have to go that far.

“Akinli... you are the only thing in this world that is familiar to me. You’ve opened your home to me. Twice now, right? And I think I’ve hurt you before. I see the hurt, but you’re the one doing the apologizing here. I don’t remember anything you did from before, but you’re being more than generous to me now. Why would I ever leave?” I think my breathing went a little haywire. I couldn’t focus for a moment. “I’m sorry I hurt you,” she whispered.

And she meant that. Kahlen didn't really have it in her to lie. She was sorry she had hurt me, and she wasn't planning on leaving.

Maybe I could hope for her. Maybe I could finally have some peace in my life. The hope filled me up, and I had to share it with someone. I had to get her to Ben and Julie. Now!

"Let's go home," I said. Her eyes lit up at the word. She nodded her head, and we started to move.

She was very unstable as I helped her up. I shouldn't be glad for that, but it gave me an excuse to hold her closer than maybe I should have. I had one arm around her back and the other held her hand as we took uniform steps across the rocks. At one point, I just couldn't hold it back any longer, and I kissed her on the top of her head. I wanted to do so much more, but I kept reminding myself that she didn't remember all of that... and she probably almost drowned today. But she didn't seem put off by it. Instead, she made a tiny, happy gasp when I got close to her. I tried to look down and read her face, but she had buried her head into my chest. I didn't mind that.

"I remember your smell! I know your smell!" She was beyond excited.

I looked forward and walked. And smiled. And a damn tear got out anyway.

CHAPTER 19

Luckiest man on earth. If she said yes, there would be no one who could deny it.

I couldn't stop wringing my hands and tugging on my clothes. I just had to stay calm. How was I supposed to stay calm?

Kahlen.

The whole day spun around her, but the only thing that could stop my world from shaking was Kahlen. So I settled on the couch, pretending to watch TV, and gazed at her.

It worked like magic. I felt an immediate peacefulness in my body when she was near me. It never failed. Even now.

She wasn't doing anything special. Bex had fallen asleep on her blanket, surrounded by toys in the middle of the living room floor. Kahlen was hovering over her, hair tucked behind her ear, but still almost brushing the baby's face. Kahlen was gently stroking Bex's face over and over, completely content. Though she had no memory of a family, she must have had an amazing mother—it came to her so naturally.

Natural. That was a good way of describing Kahlen's fit into the family. Ever since she came back, it was as if she was always meant to be here. I couldn't believe how simple it had been.

I thought I had lost her trust forever after the huge mistake of not immediately turning Casey away. But Kahlen refused to hold anything against me that she couldn't remember. She said, as far as she and I were concerned, we were starting our friendship on a clean slate. I was a little discouraged that she used the word "friendship" instead of "relationship." I thought I had made it clear in our first conversation on the rocks that she was much more than a friend to me.

But I was a determined man. I knew I loved her. I had spent a year without her, and that wasn't ever going to happen again.

So I got to work. Every day was an opportunity to prove to Kahlen that I could deserve her one day. That was my mission.

She moved in again, but this time I wanted to make it more permanent. We essentially shared my room, but at night she got the bed while I took the couch. She kept insisting I should keep the bed because it was my room. I assured her that it was *our* room now, and it would personally offend me if she took the couch. That settled it; she was such a lady she couldn't bring herself to bother anyone. But it sucked for a couple of reasons.

First of all, I wanted her. All the time. Every freaking night I was wishing she'd ask me to stay with her and just say we could share the bed. I dreamed it up a hundred ways. But, in almost all of those dreams, she ended up naked. And I was determined to be a gentleman with her. *This* was the girl I was going to keep. Second, it's hard to get comfortable on the couch. It's not bad, but my body's too long for it. So I slept less, which was a pain; I really love sleep. But if it meant that Kahlen could sense that I cared about her, I would have slept on the rocks outside. Besides, it was much better than the sleep I'd had while she was gone.

I also helped her get clothes so she could get a job. It was hard to get a job in a prom dress, and she couldn't buy non-prom clothes without a job, so someone needed to start the process. Once Kahlen was employed, she insisted on paying me back. I couldn't stop her, so I just spent the money she gave me on her. She kept saying I was ridiculously lucky around the third or fourth time I told her I found a twenty on the street and she should let me take her out to dinner. I wouldn't deny my luck, not with her around, and she was much too innocent to question me. I really loved that about her — that she was just sweet. Not obnoxiously sweet, but kind in a way that she saw the best in everyone. In her eyes, I was above lying. If it had been any other circumstance, I don't think I could have lied to her. I loved Kahlen too much to hurt her.

When she was finally normally clothed, I helped her start job hunting. It was hard because she wanted a job before all the legal identity stuff was done, but she managed to get in at the library just outside of town. She was absolutely perfect for it. Kahlen loved stories, had a mysterious tolerance for silence, and really liked having a job. Kahlen started some story time programs for kids, bringing some fresh ideas to the old ladies at the branch, and they genuinely appreciated her energy. It was great. I tried not to laugh when she dressed up as a bunny for story time, or covered her head in green yarn when she chose to read *The Giving Tree*. Her enthusiasm was contagious, so I found myself helping out a lot.

I prided myself in being pretty macho, but one day Kahlen did a handful of princess books, and I ended up wearing a green sweat suit and these cheesy looking horns pretending to be a dragon. This was before I realized that the parents usually stayed for story time... and that I knew a lot of them from high school and living in such a small town. Some of the guys razzed me for the whole dragon thing. But I looked over and realized that I was doing this for the girl in the tiara. The girl in the tiara was going home with me. The girl in the tiara might love me back one day. I'd dress up however she wanted me to.

These were just the things I did. It wasn't always easy or fun, but I put her first in everything. I figured whatever life she led before this, whatever family abandoned her *twice*, she had earned the right to be number one to someone. And that someone was going to be me. It was slow. It was hard. But in September when the seasons started to change, it paid off.

It was starting to get cold and Julie showed Kahlen how to knit. Kahlen ended up making this scarf for me. It was possibly the most ragged thing ever created, and it was made out of purpley girly scraps from Julie's yarn collection (which was admittedly the most masculine color option), but she made it for me, and I wore it every day. From the first draft in late September until spring started to show in April, I wore my

purple scarf. I loved that stupid thing. Loved it! Kahlen made it with her own two hands, and she made it for me.

Around the time the scarf made its appearance, I noticed she started sensing things in me. It was weird. I would be thinking I was thirsty, and she'd just be leaving the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn and sodas for the both of us. And she could always sense when I had a rough time sleeping. Kahlen was just attuned to me that way. She would come out into the living room when stress or aches or the uncomfortably small couch kept me up. It was precious to see her peek out the door to double check if I was awake. Kahlen would settle herself on the floor by the couch and run her fingers through my hair. It was so soothing.

She would make up stories for me until I fell asleep. They were incredible, and we were always the stars. We would go to Antarctica and hold baby penguins. Or we would go to Spain and run with the bulls. She and I traveled the world doing things I hadn't known were possible. Lots of times we swam in the ocean, far out into the middle of the sea, without needing to breathe. Those were my favorites. I'd been a fisherman for a while now; I'd really gotten close to the ocean. Kahlen dreamed up a lifetime of adventures for us, and just her presence calmed me to sleep.

Kahlen took care of me when I was sick and rubbed my back when I ached. She encouraged me when I was down, and laughed along with me when I was in a silly mood. It may not sound very exciting, but she gave me a constant assurance that I was gaining her affection. It was steady. I tried to be encouraged by it, but it was hard in comparison to our first week together. Last time, her feelings seemed almost as immediate as mine, but this time around, she seemed disoriented and less sure of herself. I couldn't guess at her feelings.

I was man enough to be willing to bring up the subject; I was sure about how I felt and was ready to tell her when the right moment came. Dozens of times I just wanted to tell her, but I was too afraid to scare her. Kahlen seemed confused

sometimes, and I wanted her to feel steady and safe here, even if that meant I didn't get to tell her how I felt about her for a long, long time. The moment came unexpectedly.

We were getting ready for bed. It was October, so she was bundled up, sitting on the bed and watching the ocean out the window. Even covered from head to toe, she looked so sexy to me. Sometimes I just had to wonder if there was something wrong with me, if sweats were becoming my new idea of lingerie. I'd wanted to kiss her since I found her, but I knew I had to wait. Last time, I practically forced our first kiss on her. This time she had to want it.

And I had to earn it.

I was grabbing an extra blanket out of the top of the closet to keep myself warm. I was moving slow on purpose. She looked... lonely? Sad? It's hard to know an exact emotion by the back on someone's head.

"Akinli?" she asked, still staring at the ocean.

"Yes?"

"Have you ever... have you ever missed something you weren't sure was really there?"

That was a strange one, but not hard to comprehend. I thought about how, after she'd disappeared, I was convinced I'd dreamed her up. And it was hard because I wanted her to be real... because I knew how I felt about her. But if she wasn't real, it would hurt less that she was gone. I hadn't felt that emptiness in a while, but it came back clearly just then.

"Yeah... I think I know what you mean. I mean, I know what it is to ache for something and not be sure why or if you should. But then that doesn't matter, because you miss it anyway." I didn't like to think about her being gone. Moments like that made me revert to that habit of taking mental snapshots of her, in case she ever disappeared again. I looked at her hair— it was getting longer. I noticed how small she managed to make herself when she curled up. I watched her

hands— she twirled her still-broken necklace in her delicate fingers.

“You always understand me,” she whispered.

I watched as she slowly turned and met my gaze. There was something new in her eyes just then. I couldn't even bring myself to blink, she looked so beautiful.

“Akinli?” she breathed. It seemed like every other day she found a new way to say my name, and every time it caught me by surprise. This one was breathy, heavy.

“Yes?” I replied, almost as quiet as her.

“Have you ever just known something should be? Without knowing why or how, that something was just *supposed* to be?” Her eyes were locked on mine. Her breath was coming fast. Was she thinking what I was?

My heart was thrashing in my chest. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't pretend this girl was my friend when I knew she was infinitely more than that to me. She had always been. I dropped whatever I was holding as I started across the room.

The “yes” barely made it out of my mouth before my lips hit hers. The second they did, her hands were in my hair. And she was definitely kissing back. I took these invitations as a sign that she and I were, yet again, on the same wavelength. I meant to be gentle with her, but it wasn't my fault it didn't stay that way. When Kahlen got started, she was always very passionate. It didn't make things easy for me, but I enjoyed it all the same.

She fell back on the bed, and I stayed above her leading this kiss on and on so it just wouldn't stop. Ohhhh! And she wrapped her leg around me like she was trying to keep me from getting away. I loved that; it was so damn sexy. When that happened after so many of our kisses later, she always said she didn't mean to do it. That was my favorite involuntary impulse in the world.

I kissed her, tasting her breath and taking in that warm, oceany smell of her body. My hands were lost in her hair, and I thought it would be perfectly fine if they never made their way out. She held onto me tight. Well, as tight as she could with her little body. And, for the first time in a long time, I was completely happy in the moment.

Who knows how long we kissed like that. It could have been days and I wouldn't have complained. But when I finally pulled back and started kissing her neck and jaw and ears, I noticed tiny tears in her eyes.

“Kahlen, what is it? Did I do something wrong? I'm sorry.”

Damn. I thought she finally wanted me the way I wanted her, and I had misread it. Now she would never want to be alone with me in the same room again.

“No. Of course not,” she sniffed. “It's just... I feel like I've been waiting forever for you. It's a strong feeling, and I don't know why it's like that. But I can't ignore it. I can't *not* feel this way about you. There are some things now that I feel confused about, and I don't know why. Like time. Time feels strange to me. Ben talks about days being long, but each one feels too short, too fast to me. Or if I hurt myself, I feel panicky. Even a little pain confuses me. I don't understand any of it.

“But you... it just breaks my heart to think of being away from you. And to have you kiss me... to know maybe you feel what I do...” She ducked her head. I felt a little ashamed then that I hadn't brought it up first, that she had to put herself out there.

I pulled my Kahlen close to me. She buried her face in my neck and I just held her. I couldn't help but wonder what she'd managed to survive to get here. Lots of nights I was up late worrying about her past. So often it seemed like she just couldn't figure out what she was doing here. Two or three times now, I'd found her sitting out on the back lawn in the rain, like she was waiting for something. I couldn't understand

everything she was bewildered by, but I knew one thing she could be absolutely certain of.

“Kahlen. I’m sorry you feel so confused sometimes. But you’re safe here. I’ll look after you.” I tucked my mouth by her ear and dropped my voice to a whisper. “I love you, Kahlen. I know sometimes you feel lost, but if you want, I could be your home.”

She cried. Not the ugly, selfish tears that Casey used to use to guilt me into something. Gentle tears, quiet tears. Like she almost felt embarrassed that I saw them. So I kissed them away. I didn’t think I was much of a romantic. I didn’t try to say things that would move her to sadness, and I don’t know what possessed me to kiss her tears. Maybe it was that there was never anyone before now whose tears were worth kissing. When she calmed down, she looked into my eyes and said, by far, the most wonderful thing I’d ever heard in my life.

“I love you, Akinli. It’s the only thing I know for sure.”

And that was it. My whole world settled into place. Kahlen loved me. I loved Kahlen.

Every bit of her drew me in. Her kindness, her humor, her body. Even when she was low or moody, it was in a way that just made her seem vulnerable, not mean. She was more than I hoped for.

I wasn’t letting her go again. But even better, she was holding her grip on me just as tightly.

When it came time to get Kahlen a legal name, she let me be a part of it. At first I suggested things like “Kahlen Marie TeaCozy” or “Kahlen VonEataburger.” She told me I nearly had her sold on “Kahlen Loves Cake.” That would have been killer name! I just imagined myself going up to people and saying, “This is my girlfriend, Kahlen Loves Cake.”

But when I realized she really wanted help, I got serious. I’d always wanted to give her *my* name, but it was too soon to suggest that at the time. So I settled on Woods. Kahlen Woods — named after where I first discovered her. She liked the idea

so much, she asked if I had any suggestions for a middle name. I went with Ocean— after that delicious, clean smell she always had. Kahlen Ocean Woods. It was very earthy, and it suited her.

So for months I'd been dating Miss Kahlen Ocean Woods. She was it for me. Kahlen was my girl. I wanted to wait for something special, but I just didn't think I could bear it anymore. So all I had to do now was wait for Ben to come home and deliver his lines. Any minute now.

Kahlen kissed Bex on both cheeks and looked up, catching me in the act of watching her. She just smiled and went back to stroking little Bex's head. Was I too young to be thinking about how much I wanted her to be kissing *our* children? Images like that assaulted my head daily. I was in deep.

Kahlen Woods, I love you.

I heard the footsteps on the front porch. The door opened and closed. I heard Ben's voice in the kitchen as he greeted Julie and grabbed some food. It was well after lunch time. He walked into the living room and saw us all there. Perfect.

"Hey, Akinli, how was it this morning?" Ben asked casually.

"Good. Had some good numbers. It was too cold though, so I didn't get the last few traps."

"What?" he exclaimed. This was good.

"Shh, Ben, your daughter is sleeping," Kahlen shushed.

"Well excuse me, but your boyfriend here is slacking off, and I have every right to be upset." He turned to me. "Dude, if it's just the two of us doing this now, you can't be lazy."

"I told you, it was cold," I said, trying to sound a little whiney.

"Well, it's warm now. Get off your butt and pull the rest of the traps," Ben replied.

"Are you serious?"

“Yeah, I’m serious.”

“Fine, whatever. Let me go get a jacket.”

“Awww. Akinli, do you want some company?” Kahlen asked, not missing a beat. I knew it! Yes!

“Oh, no sweetheart, you stay here and be warm.” *Take the bait, girl, take the bait.*

“It’s not that cold out now, not with the sun. Let me come, too, I can help!”

“If you insist,” I sighed, winking to Ben as I passed. I knew she’d come. That’s just how she was. Always thinking of how to make things easier for someone else.

We bundled up in our coats, and I grabbed my purple scarf. It really wasn’t too bad out now. Almost spring. Still, we took Bessie as opposed to walking. All I had to do now was keep calm. Having handlebars to grip helped.

As we got into the boat, I couldn’t help but think about how normal it felt to have her in my life. I really knew nothing about her except what she was since we met. Some people would probably say I was making the biggest mistake of my life. They’d be wrong. If anything, she was getting the raw end of the deal.

I would be getting a princess. An artist, a comedian, a friend, a model, a lady. She’d be getting... me. Poor girl. Still, I had to hope.

I held her hands for longer than necessary as I helped her into the boat. And I gave her a kiss that lingered a bit, but she didn’t push me away.

Luckiest man on earth.

I drove the boat slowly. She would assume it was because I didn’t want to kick up the water. Truth was I was scared out of my mind. How would I live with her if we had this giant “no” hanging over us? Ughhh. This could go so bad.

I searched for the buoy. I had painted this one with a special marker to tell it apart from all the others. I slowed even more, looking for the black dot that would separate one buoy from the dozens we kept. It took a little while, but then there it was... and I felt I'd found it all too soon.

Suck it up, Akinli. She loves you. You love her. This is no big deal.

I pulled up beside the dotted buoy and started reeling it in.

“What can I do?” Kahlen asked.

Say yes.

“Nothing for now.” I smiled. “Just look pretty.”

“I’m on it!” She laughed. “I wonder why Ben was so grumpy today. He’s usually in a much better mood.”

“Blame it on hunger. He was home later than he wanted is all,” I said, continuing to pull.

“I guess. How many traps do we need to pull up?”

“Not many. This’ll be fast.”

“No rush. I like it on the water.” I was distracted as she leaned her head back and let the wind pick up her hair. She had really gotten over that fear of the water, and now she seemed like she could practically live out here.

One of her mysteries.

“Yeah, I know you do.” I could see the outline of the cage coming into sight.

“It’s so beautiful out today,” she commented.

“It is.” I started to sweat.

“Do you need a hand?” She could see the trap breaking the water.

“No, I’m good,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Oh, that stinks. It’s empty.”

“Oh well. No loss.” Maybe I didn’t have to do this now. Maybe she wouldn’t see the box, and I could just pull up the traps I had set earlier today. She didn’t have to know.

“Wait. What’s that?”

Okay, never mind. Back to plan A.

“What’s what?” That was smooth.

“In the trap— there’s a box.”

I took a calming breath. I got down on my knees. She would just think it was to get into the trap better. I pulled out the black metal box, the waterproof one I’d borrowed from a friend. I’d tested it last week— worked like a charm. My fingers trembled a little as I opened the hatches.

Kahlen had gotten closer now, bending over to see what was inside. I opened the box, and pulled out the smaller, velvet box inside. She whispered a “wow.” The way she said it was inquisitive. She was still in the dark, thinking we’d stumbled upon a treasure.

Hands shaking, I opened the box. Inside was the small, delicate ring I’d picked out months ago. It wasn’t much. I had plenty of money put away by now. I adored the girl so much I wanted to put an ice ring on her finger. But she wasn’t about flash or show, so I went for understated— something like her.

“Oh my gosh!” She covered her mouth. Now she got it.

I couldn’t find my voice.

“Oh my...” she whispered. I looked up. My Kahlen had tears in her eyes. Now, so did I.

“Kahlen Ocean Woods.” The words came out stronger than I thought they would. “I love you more than anything in the world. I managed to lose you once, and it...” I choked. I cleared my throat. “And it nearly broke me. I don’t ever want to be separated from you again. I know I’m not much, but I promise to keep you safe and to take care of you. Would you please do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Terror. Absolute terror.

It was out there now. Was I crazy? What in the world did I think I could offer this girl? Kahlen loved me, sure, but I was a nobody. Hadn't Casey made that clear? I was an orphaned, uneducated loser. How could I have presumed to be something good enough for Kahlen? I should have done more to prove I deserved her. I couldn't even bring myself to look into her eyes. I wasn't worth it.

"Yes," she breathed.

What?

"Yes, yes, yes." She could barely speak the words.

I looked up at her face. She was smiling. It was brighter than any smile she'd ever given me. Tears sparkled down her cheeks. I had never known a girl who looked beautiful when she cried. Kahlen was the exception for every rule I'd ever known.

"Umm, really?" Oh man, did I really just say that out loud?

She laughed, completely delighted. "Of course!"

"Oh, you poor girl. You have no idea what you just got roped into!"

"I'll take my chances."

Between both our hands shaking, it took a minute to get the ring on her finger. She fell onto me, covering me with kisses. I don't really remember much after that.

CHAPTER 20

Kahlen kept telling me I was a hopeless romantic. I didn't think so at first, but she was right. When she walked up to me in that white dress, I cried almost as much as she did. Though I'd had reason enough to in the past, tears weren't something I liked to show. But I figured this would be one of two forgivable times for me to cry in public: the moment I became a husband, and the moment I became a father.

By this point, my collection of mental snapshots nearly filled all the space in my head, but I couldn't help myself; I lived in a constant fear that she would disappear. Even though this day meant she would never be apart from me again, I couldn't help but put it all to memory. She wore her hair down, which was perfect. It was full of gentle curls that tumbled down past her bare shoulders, accented by the delicate veil. The dress was strapless and sparkled its way down to her waist where it hugged her curves and flared out gently near her feet. She said she didn't want anything too fancy. And this wasn't; this was perfect. Of the three shining dresses I'd seen her in, this was by far my favorite.

The wedding itself was in the bright white church on the way into town, and we all walked the distance to the reception on the dock. We exchanged vows near twilight so that even those who worked on Saturdays would be done, and people wouldn't mind us taking up the space. Kahlen had planned ahead for the size and feel of our town. While only so many could fit into the church, she'd invited most of the village to the reception. I even spotted her talking to a few tourists in shorts, insisting they at least have a glass of champagne.

The entire Schaefer clan had turned out to see this. I knew a lot of them had worried about me when my parents died. I think they were elated to see me settle down, even with a girl whose only memories were of me. To the women in my family, that was the most romantic thing they'd ever heard.

Everyone doted on my new wife, which was easy enough to do. At the reception, they hugged her and kissed her and made

her pause for photographs. And while it was all important to me, my favorite moment of the evening by far was when we came upon Casey.

Kahlen had insisted we invite her, saying she held no ill will against my former girlfriend. Admittedly, I'd done everything in my power to keep them from meeting again, but if Kahlen wanted her at the wedding, I couldn't stop her.

Casey came and sat at a table with the handful of friends that stayed in touch from college. The dress she chose was scandalous: red with a plunging neckline and not nearly long enough... and with heels at least four inches high. A friend explained that she wanted me to see what I was missing. All I could do was roll my eyes. Casey was petite and attractive—I wasn't an idiot. But she was also venomous—a quality that she hid well and I easily overlooked for a very long time. I hoped with all my heart she didn't choose to be rude to my wife today. I'd never hit a lady, but I wasn't above tossing her out of our reception.

“That's her,” I whispered as we made our rounds. “In the red dress.”

Kahlen gasped. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” Oh, this was going to be bad. And then, to my surprise, she started laughing out loud. Kahlen was so tickled, she actually had to pause and dab at her eyes.

“What's so funny?” I asked, finding myself smiling, too.

“Nothing, nothing. It's just... really?!” And she started laughing again.

By the time we reached the table, Kahlen had composed herself. She hugged all of my friends, saving Casey for last. I realized then that besides Ben, Julie, Bex, and me, everyone she embraced today was a stranger. Casey was as smooth as a snake. How had I missed all this for so long? She hugged me, lingering too long to be friendly, and then turned to shake Kahlen's hand.

“Well, hello Kahlen, dear. It's nice to meet you again.”

“Casey, it was really nice of you to come. Thank you.” Kahlen tilted her head to the side, trying to hold back a laugh. Casey didn’t miss this and went to strike.

“That’s a nice dress. I mean, for *you*. I guess if you’re marrying a fisher,” Casey crinkled her nose and dropped her voice, “you can’t afford the nicest dress.”

Someone at the table gasped, but Kahlen didn’t miss a beat.

“I wonder who you’d have to marry to afford a *whole* dress.”

The table erupted. Casey’s mouth dropped in outrage. I had to bite my lips hard to hold back the laugh. Kahlen slid into place on my arm, winking as we continued around the room.

“Kahlen Ocean Schaefer! What’s gotten into you!?” I whispered as we strolled away.

“She insulted my husband,” she said simply, looking up at me with absolute adoration.

Casey, for some reason, didn’t stay for the cake.

That was a shame because Kahlen had picked the cake out herself. It was delicious. There was no denying Kahlen had an above average palate. She could probably be a chef if she had the inclination. But her love of food was something that she found obnoxious. She’d complained that she’d gained at least ten pounds since she came back to Port Clyde.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Somewhere between bouquet tossing, line dancing, and relative hugging, I lost her. I assumed she would be with Ben and Julie, so I started hunting for them. I found Ben beside the dock with Julie there holding a sleeping Bex in her arms.

“Have you seen the bride?” I asked.

“How can you lose the only girl wearing white?” Ben snapped.

“I know! Just too many people, and it’s getting too dark. Do you see her?” I craned my neck, searching around the dancing

couples.

“Here she is,” Julie said. And I whipped my head around to see Kahlen walking with her eyes downcast. Her arms were full of boxes, and she looked like she’d been crying. It startled all the champagne out of my system, and I took her in my arms immediately.

“Kahlen, sweetheart, are you alright?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine. I just met some more of your family, and they were just so kind to me.” She paused to sniff. “Why didn’t you tell me any of your family members were hearing-impaired? We could have had someone sign our ceremony.” She looked disappointed.

Sign language. It was one of the mysterious leftovers of her unknown life. Kahlen had patience that would outlast a saint’s and an amazing sense of taste. When Bex cried and I’d go to change her, Kahlen would say, “No, that cry means she’s hungry,” like the sounds were all different. She had lost her knowledge of certain favorites—like now she preferred spring to fall (something about rain, she said), and she couldn’t recall how to play poker at first—but her ability to sign stayed with her. We attributed it to muscle memory.

“Sweetheart, I don’t have any hearing-impaired family members.”

“But you do; they just gave me all these gifts. See.” She motioned towards her full hands. She held three things. First, a bottle of dark blue liquid with sea shells floating in the middle, refusing to settle. The next was a black velvet box that looked like it must contain jewelry. And the last gift was rectangular, about the size of the boxes my checks came in, only much sturdier looking.

“What are those?” Julie asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, the one is just water, I think.”

“Wait, wait.” We couldn’t get off track just yet. “Kahlen, who gave you these?”

“Three women. They were all deaf and said they were your family. Well, they *signed* they were. I mean, isn’t everyone here your family?”

“Yes, except for the tourists you keep feeding,” Ben said.

“What were their names?” I asked. There were a few distant cousins whose names were a blur, but they’d probably ring a bell.

“Oh,” Kahlen said. “Actually, they didn’t tell me their names.”

She looked up at me apologetically, afraid I was upset. I shouldn’t push her so hard. Here she was, getting married in front of a bunch of strangers, and she was obviously in over her head.

“Hey, I’m sorry, honey. It’s okay.” I stroked her hair and wiped off the last of her tears. “What did they say to make you cry?”

“Oh, no, nothing. They were very kind. They just looked sad as they walked away. And I felt very close to them. It hurt me to see them go.” She looked confused again. Poor kid. I wondered if she’d ever feel completely settled. I’d do my best to make sure she did.

“So they left?” I asked.

“Yes. They held each other and walked away.”

Well, whoever these girls were, at least they were nice to Kahlen. I’d figure out who they were later and thank them for their gifts.

“I wonder why they didn’t just leave these on the gift table,” Ben wondered.

“Yeah, it’s awfully generous of them to give them to you directly.” Julie’s comment was a little bitter. Some of the family members hadn’t accepted their shotgun wedding so easily. But I don’t see what the big deal was. Ben and Julie were always going to get married. And really, every one of them should be thanking their lucky stars *any* woman was

willing keep up with how spastic Ben could be. And could anyone possibly deny the beauty that was Bex?

“Why don’t you celebrate a little early? Open them up!” Ben commanded. Kahlen smiled a little slyly at the thought. How was I supposed to fight that face?

“Yeah, let’s,” I agreed.

“Don’t open the bottle, okay?” she asked. “I really like it; I want to put it by my bed. Oh! I mean *our* bed.” She smiled.

I was momentarily sidetracked by the thought of Kahlen and beds. She did look positively distracting today. Gorgeous. Her shoulders and neck looked so inviting, begging to be kissed. And the way her dress fell over her curves— curves I would finally get to see— was remarkably tempting. She was blushing, obviously thinking in the same direction. We were brought back to the present by Julie’s voice.

“Open the velvet one then. That has to be jewelry.”

Oh, well. Soon enough.

Kahlen passed the bottle of water over to me so she could open the box. There, set in the black cushions, was an emerald surrounded by tiny diamonds on a delicate gold band. It was just her taste— beautiful, yet modest.

“Oh my! It’s lovely,” she sighed, admiring the gift. This seemed a little unfair. If the women were in my family, why was *she* the one getting all the gifts? What was I supposed to do with a bottle of water and a ring?

“It must be an antique! Kahlen, you have to try it on.” If Julie was jealous she was covering it very well. I appreciated that.

“No, no. I’ve got enough new jewelry today, thank you.” Kahlen looked over at me significantly. I thumbed at my own ring. It felt comfortable.

“You don’t have to keep it on, just see if it fits,” Julie insisted.

“Fine, fine.” Kahlen rested the last box in the crook of her elbow as she pulled the little emerald ring onto her right hand. It fit perfectly.

“Wow!” Julie exclaimed. “Kahlen, it looks beautiful on you.”

She slid it off carefully. “Then do me a favor and wear it for me while we’re on our honeymoon. I’d probably lose it.”

So generous. Kahlen and Julie were practically the same size. The ring would fit her, too.

“Ok, let’s get to the last one,” Ben said with a yawn. “Maybe it will be some chips. I’m hungry.”

“Shut up, Ben,” I said, knocking him in the arm. He just laughed.

But we were silenced quickly, because inside the box were a bunch of neatly stacked bills. I didn’t want to take it out and count it, but it had to be tens of thousands of dollars.

“Kahlen... are you sure they didn’t give you a name?” I asked.

“Positive.” She was stunned as well. “They were just signing how happy they were for us.”

“What did they look like at least?”

“There was a tall blonde with blue eyes, and a brunette girl who looked kind of Italian, and then a tiny Asian girl.”

“Asian?!” Ben, Julie, and I said all at once.

“Yes, Asian.”

“Ben, we got any Asian branches in the family?”

“I don’t think so...”

We spoke in circles trying to figure it out, asking an occasional aunt or uncle if they’d seen any such trio at the party. No one had. It was all we could talk about until Kahlen would move to stretch a certain way, and I’d be distracted again by the thought of holding my wife. I’d sneak up behind

her and kiss her neck and she'd make the sweetest little sighs. It was very encouraging considering how modest she usually was.

I was aching to get away with her, but before she would leave there was one last thing she had to do.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked for the tenth time.

“Definitely,” she said, taking off her shoes.

Kahlen had seen something somewhere and wanted a picture of the two of us jumping off the dock into the ocean. Considering how much time we spent on the water, it really would be a great picture. But even in the summertime, that water was going to be cool. This wasn't Florida; this was Maine.

Still, she wanted it, and I couldn't deny her. So we ended up on the lower dock, ready to sprint off the edge with a photographer poised behind us and the remaining guests watching with giddy faces.

“You're going to ruin your dress,” I argued.

“We're about to leave anyway. Besides, don't all of my nice dresses turn to dust? Might as well make the most of this one.”

That was a good point. I had a suspicion that Kahlen's little evening gowns were all dry clean only; they disintegrated.

“Besides,” she whispered, “if the dress is all wet, we'll have to go take it off...” She winked.

Now there was some motivation!

I took off my shoes and socks and reached out for her hand. Her cool fingers laced through mine and it felt like the whole world was right. Kahlen was here, she was my wife, and I got to keep her for the rest of my life. I couldn't ask for more.

“You ready, Mrs. Schaefer?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Schaefer.”

“Take a deep breath, Kahlen. Hold on tight.”

And with that, we jumped.

EPILOGUE

Akinli's last words to me struck something deep in my mind. A memory?

Take a deep breath, Kahlen. Hold on tight.

The words sounded familiar somehow, but not in any way I could name. Things like that happened every once in a while, but what could I say? There was nothing to tie the random thoughts to, no image or name or place. It was confusing, like having the pieces to the puzzle, but no clue what the picture was supposed to be.

Still, broken as I was, Akinli loved me like I was perfect. He provided for me and protected me before it was ever his job. And I loved him desperately. Sometimes it seemed unfair that I should get to be this happy.

But I couldn't really process any of it— Akinli's words, my confusion, or the joy I felt at being his wife— because as soon as we hit the water, my mind was pulled in an entirely new direction.

There, in the purple-blue waters of Port Clyde, I swore I heard some mysterious, joyful voice call out my name.

And though there was no face to tie to the word, the only thought that came to mind was: *Mother?*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I have to thank God for words.

Thanks to Callaway for being so patient with me when I wanted to run off and write and for supporting me so fully in this endeavor. You're the best hubby ever!

Thank you to Bethany Stevenson for taking a picture that was so beautiful it came to mind the moment I knew where this story was going. And thanks to Kelsey McNally, her model, for capturing such a lovely and mysterious emotion. You can see more of Bethany's beautiful work at <http://www.coroflot.com/BethanyLStevenson>.

A world of thanks goes to Liz McClendon and Michelle Thuis whose creative minds shaped the world this story encompasses. Kahlen and Akinli owe you their lives.

Thank you to Emily Russo, Sarah Holloway, and Emily Stanton for your mastery of the English language. These pages would have been a wreck without you all! Thank you so much for all of your hard work.

Thanks to Shel Silverstein for writing a book that made me decide to become best friends with a tree in the first grade.

And, of course, buckets of thanks to all my crazy supportive fans. You're all at least six different kinds of awesome. I adore you!