

A watercolor illustration of a woman whose body is a colorful parrot, perched on a branch with blue grapes. She has human-like features, including a face with striking yellow eyes and a necklace made of various colored grapes. The background is filled with green and purple foliage.

BIRD SONG

a novella

CLARA HUME

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Bird Song: A Novella by Clara Hume

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Clara Hume's novella draws you into a dream-world whose chorus lures you—like the sirens themselves—into a seductive dance of paradox and choice. A beautiful and seductive coming-of-age fairy tale of self-discovery.

-Nina Munteanu, author of *A Diary in the Age of Water*

An appreciation for the natural world pervades the island of past and future. Sirens struggle to protect the environment from man, tied to the mast, and ship, dashed about on the rocks. But that's the joy of it, to see the metaphor of industry undone by its own gluttony and cursed pretension.

-Christine Wambui, writer, Kenya

Bird Song is a contemporary mythological tale, a fable for adults written with an intense and musical language, rich in assonances and alliterations, an essential language that makes it clear how intense the art of writing can be and how it does not need twists and turns, rotation and suspense if the depth of the story has an intrinsic strength.

-Emanuela Chiriaco, *ZEST Letteratura Sostenibile*

TO MY MAMA

When we die, we will turn into songs, and we will hear each other and remember each other.

-Rob Sheffield, *Love Is a Mix Tape*

CHAPTER 1

I lingered in half-sleep that first morning. Eyes closed, basking in ancient sea whispers that brushed my body the way Mama used to groom my long, black hair. Slowly. Meticulously. Making time for small talk and other things. From somewhere an owl called. Ocean waves smoothed over bare legs, tickled by hot sand. I could dream here for an eternity. I wanted to, but I had things to do, snow to shovel, breakfast to cook, a job interview to get to. I lingered for a while but finally opened my eyes.

In the distance, a calm sky mirrored a glassy sea, cerulean reflections fading in golden edges. A windswept oak angled in front of me, crooked like my confusion. The cyclic rhythm of surf, up-lifts of wind, and the fresh smell of recent rain jarred me. It seemed like an island. As far as I could see was water, no sign of an isthmus or other land out there. Whatever it was, it wasn't Chicago.

Yesterday morning's snowfall had been chased by below-freezing temperatures, making our small apartment a place where frosty breath mingled with the smell of Uncle Chamin's gin. He could not afford new shoes for me but had recently bought another bottle of booze, the kind that had glitter in it that was supposed to taste like cinnamon, which was a new fad in the city. I allowed myself the pleasure of the unordinary this morning. Just this one morning of not getting up to run about the icy city, doing the things I would do on any day. Watch my back. Shiver beneath a poorly insulated coat. Take buses. Shop for bargain food.

Eyes closed again. Dream some more. I figured I could buy my own shoes if I got the job at the Old Soul Kitchen. They needed a cook, and if there was one thing I could do, it was to make southern food, because

my mama had taught me. She grew up in Kentucky and had learned from my mamaw to make the kind of food that melted inside you: biscuits and gravy, fried green tomatoes, applesauce cake, fried chicken, gravy, shucky beans, and cracklin' bread. I was nervous about the interview. I'd get the job only because Uncle was friends with the owner, and even though both men were up to no good, I'd at least earn money and go to college. But I froze up sometimes when talking with strangers, especially adults. My peers had already started at university last year, but I didn't have the money. Let's be real: I should have started working in high school, but with Mama being sick and then dying at such a young age, I was taking care of her and the house and trying to ace my exams.

I didn't want to think about that now. I needed to wake up, for real, so I sat up quickly, waved my arms about, and arose from the sand, but still I was here on the beach and the dream felt more real by the minute. I turned around to get a larger view of where I was. Light-colored sand stretched seemingly forever before curving into a green forest under which rioted wildly colorful blossoms. Rocky cliffs jutted into the sky further up the beach, which I figured was north because the sun appeared slightly to the west above, but then I couldn't see much more than that as the beach turned and disappeared into a blue-green-brown corner.

South of me was much the same; the sand went on and on and met with the sky. Toward the interior, about two-hundred feet, the beach met with a curvy line of foliage. No footprints led into the forest, and there was no other sign of people. I jumped up and down, wiggled my arms again. This must be real, I thought. I'd never been to a beach of

any kind except for the concrete shoreline along Lake Michigan, which didn't count.

I said loudly, "Uncle Chamin?" If I said it, maybe it would come true. My voice flew away like a bird that would never return, and I scrunched my eyes against the brightness of the sunshine, which was high above, singing across the sky...no bellowing a statement: I am king! In the distance to the east, above the menagerie of trees, were rain clouds, but they were scooting further away from the blue above me.

Uncle Chamin was not here. Of course he wasn't. And there was no sane reason I should be either. I thought about last night. I'd come home from my best friend Judy's house, and it was almost dark. I knew I should cook supper for Uncle, but when I got inside our building and walked up the dark stairwell and into apartment 305, on the left side of a dingy corridor, I could see that he was already sauced up and merry as could be and not too concerned about dinner. I looked out our small curtainless kitchen window while boiling macaroni and viewed the bare tree bones of Washington Park against a twilight sky partially lit by a pale moon. Before long, the steam from the macaroni covered the window, blurring the moon into a puddle. To the dinner I added sliced wieners, powdered cheese, and a side of sweet pickle. I picked at my food and laughed with Uncle until he started slurring his words, and finally, not in the mood for him, I retired to my bedroom.

Uncle Chamin was not a mean or abusive drunk; he was a talkative, jolly guy who would fill my ears with stories about the old days of Harlem jazz, which was interesting until he began to slouch off his old wooden rocking chair and not be able to focus. He would eventually fall asleep and later snort awake to see if he had anything left in his mug, and then he would finally drop it. It was a heavy stein, out of which he drank his

glitter gin, and the thing never broke. When I heard it clunk down to the tiled flooring, I would come out and move Uncle's feeble body to the couch and cover him up and take off his boots. He would snore loudly and sometimes stopped breathing, due to his "hapnea," as he called it, and sometimes I'd stand over him making sure he started breathing again.

Last night I had done all those things and gone back to my small bedroom with a baby dresser and a cot, things I'd had all my 20 years of life. The baby dresser, small as it was, seemed to still be the perfect size as I had so few clothes. The room was icy, and I'd hung up my mama's old knit blankets over my window, just to keep the frost out, while I slept in pajamas and as many blankets I could find, some of them from the thrift store down the street. I had also gotten from there a book called *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, by Thomas Hardy. By reading that book, I was able to keep my own life in perspective. Even though I was poor and often hungry and cold—I didn't have the heartbreak of poor Tess, nor the entrapment. Not exactly.

And especially not now, now that I was on this beach. And I was still here! I whirled around one more time, and finally figured that I had died and gone to heaven. I'd just fallen asleep reading, that's all. Must've had a heart attack last night. Or maybe someone broke in and killed Uncle and me.

I called out a few more times and, feeling faint after a while, I thought it was time to see if any of those trees had fruit. I didn't know much about island food, but I did know about survival. As I walked slowly toward the trees, for it was hard to walk on sand, I realized I was barefoot and not wearing what I had worn the night before, which had been my penguin-patterned pajamas I'd gotten from the Thanksgiving drive at

the local church five years ago. They still fit, because I was the same size I'd been in high school, but no, now I was wearing jean shorts and a short-sleeved, cream-colored blouse. They were clothes that had been my mother's, I realized. And ones I had not known where they'd gone off to after she died.

I looked at my legs, and they were my legs, not my mama's. She was darker than me. My father, at least I'd been told, had been Latino. He gave me olive skin and hazel eyes, but that was all he passed down to me as far as Mama ever said. All she had told me was that that he was a sailor in the war. Which war, I never knew. I touched my hands to my face and smoothed over my high cheekbones; those came from Mama. Convinced I was myself, even though I mysteriously wore her clothes, I shivered in fear of being alone in a strange land, even though by now sweat was snaking across my forehead and down my neckline. Goosebumps climbed my arms, and I stopped at the forest's edge.

A scolding screech of a sea gull frightened me. It flew above, its wingspan longer than normal and the shadow of it extending over me in such a way it appeared like a marionette, clunky in movement, before it soared away to the sea. *What was that*, I kept asking myself.

I had seen enough photos in books to know that olive trees and cypress and oaks and ferns and wild flowers and even alien-looking plants were common in other parts of the world, but as I stood here now I was amazed at the greens, golds, reds, and pinks waving back at me. The largeness of petals and blossoms, the way they glistened from the earlier rainfall, the way they seemed to smile and attract the weirdest of moths and insects and butterflies, seemed not of this world. I was afraid to touch any of them. How often had smiling faces been a facade for bitter

sorrow. I simply stared, eyeing the perimeter of the forest, looking for fruits or anything else I could eat.

It seemed entirely possible that not only was I alone here but that no human had ever been here before. If I had to walk into the trees to find food, there was no trail of any kind. Nothing seemed to be disturbed. I would have to slash my way through; how difficult that would be without shoes or any sort of bush whacker. I walked along the forest's edge, up to the north, where I'd seen the beach curve inward and disappear after the rocky cliffs. I walked and walked, dizzy and hot and hungry and thirsty, and found nothing familiar.

I headed back to the water, unsure of where else to go, and stepped into the waves. My eyes scoured the clear sea for fish, but I didn't see any. And if I found fish? I would have to catch one with my hands. At least the warm waves soothed my sore feet, and for a time I just stood toes in ocean, staring out, looking to the sky for any sign of civilization: electrical or phone wires, airplanes, ships.

Nothing.

I washed the sweat off my face, tasted salt on my lips, and headed northward again. I kept walking until I noticed that the curve of the beach I'd seen before was getting closer, and now I could see high above a large wet rock plateau that jaggedly bent toward the sea below dangerous-looking cliffs. Crashing waves frothed angrily, throwing up white-water and reforming in the sea only to thrash the rocky land again and again. Above, another gull soared, shrieked, and disappeared near the water. If there were birds, there must be fish, I thought.

I pondered how to build a net as I hiked along, and envisioned a way to sew up reeds and vines. My thoughts were in the clouds when I came across a familiar smell, just a whiff of it. I followed the scent to my feet,

where a patch of wild mustard sprouted. Mama had grown it in her garden back home and also planted it in a window box in Chicago, and it had done okay in the summer but never as good as it was in that garden. I knew the look of the greens, which she used to dab with hot bacon grease. I really wanted water more than food, but food had water, and I picked a handful and bit off an end leaf, to be sure I was right and this wasn't poison, and the tart leaf was just as I thought.

My eyes grappled with the large sea not fifty feet away, and seeing all that water made me thirsty. I didn't think I was in the tropics, for there weren't the usual palms and coconut trees I'd read about in books. No, this land seemed Mediterranean, but really, I kept telling myself, it seemed different, ghost-like.

CHAPTER 2

A woman's voice sang out from near the cliffs. I felt hazy, having slept through part of the late afternoon, but upon the high tide I heard her. Her voice came between waves, soothing and seductive. I sat up, feeling the warm breath of the ocean, and listened more closely. I quickly arose and faced the ocean. The wind came from the north, and upon the wind came her singing. I couldn't hear her exact words, but the melody was haunting, moody. I walked north, drawn to her music. She didn't have the raw sounds of some of the blues singers Mama had turned me onto, nor the chirpy voices of modern stars, but her voice seemed pure, without makeup. As I grew up, I sang in church choirs and school plays, but not I, nor anyone I knew, not even Mama, who used to sing down at the Pelican Club, could sing like this.

Oh, Mama, I thought as I walked forward, my feet sinking into the warm night sand, why did you have to leave me when you did? The thought of it made me want to cry, but I thought maybe I just felt lonely anyway, being here, which was making me more emotional than usual because I didn't know where here was. Not to mention that now the blue was fading from the sky and out came the moon and thousands of big stars, bigger than I had ever seen before. They turned the sand white and provided a silent orchestra to the singing lady.

I finally saw her in the distance, but not precisely, for she was too far away, a spirit wrapped in white, now illuminated by the night. She stood on the slanting plateau above the shoreline but below the cliffs. She wore a long gown and even though her voice ebbed with the tide, I could hear her, but she was too far away for me to make out her words. The idea of the *Solitary Reaper*, a poem by William Wordsworth I'd read in high school, suddenly dawned upon me. Waves crashed just below

her stage, a mesa that rose above the sea, and though everything was too dark for me to see well, I could make out the pale, angry foam as the waves spit across the rocks.

To reach her, I'd have to climb up to the plateau. I didn't see a way to get there. I headed east, hoping for a hill that led up to the mesa. The very last of the sunlight had left the sky, while moonlight befell, shadowing the forest to the south and east. The forest pealed with calls of night birds. Even though I could still hear the song, I became more aware of other sounds that rose above the constant rhythmic waves that had gently eroded rocks over time. Even the noise of my footsteps on the beach and the way the waves hissed and pushed sand up my legs and then scattered made me feel like a part of a low-key band playing a melancholy vignette.

I was at the edge of the forest when I saw it. At first there was one out of the corner of my eye, floating among the trees, a movement, not a definitive thing. Though the night was dark, the thing was not black—translucent to a degree. I quickly turned to see it head-on, but it vanished into the forest, where it then whispered something, but not words I recognized. Like the woman singing, the language was too far off or just not loud enough for me to decipher. Then another shape flung itself by, just out of my direct sight, and no turning toward it would make it appear to me. It, too, hid into the trees, and I froze, wanting to see if it were a person, but something inside warned otherwise. They might be ghosts, I reasoned, though I realized such thoughts were not reasonable in the least. Then I saw more, or rather, as I stood back and watched, realized there might only be the original one or two things; they were elusive and hushed. I wasn't even sure there was anything here. Maybe I was hallucinating because I was lost

and tired. They did not cater to my direct vision or hearing, but my eyes adjusted under the moon and stars enough so that I would occasionally glimpse these things' essences, which were amorphous and secretive. They danced and whispered, and eventually I ran westward, back toward the cliffs, for these were not ordinary things and their strange movements frightened me. Later I was sure whatever I thought I'd seen was a trick of my imagination.

I ran, not looking back. I reached a hill, hoping it led to the woman, who still sang wistfully. I ascended the dark slope, which was covered in aromatic herbs whose scents made me hungry: tea and sage and marjoram. I did not know all the names of bushes and most trees but would learn later that the land was full of oleander and orchids, with white, pink, and orange faces. I scrambled up the hill, paranoid that those things were behind me. Occasionally, I felt a rush of an unnatural breeze or heard a voice that might be a whisper, but I hoped the sounds were only winds and waves.

The hill was much steeper and longer than I figured it should be. I climbed for too long, feeling safer from ghosts with each passing step, and could hear the lady better, though I still did not know what her words were. Occasionally I heard unrecognizable sounds, but, like the shadow beings in the trees, reality here, other than the ancient and long-lived rocks, trees, and water, seemed ephemeral at best. At one point I was sure I heard the lady sing a phrase that sounded like "and thee muse," but it left me as soon as I heard it, like a dream in the morning.

Then, another shape took place right before me, and I became a statue as it manifested more closely than the others. Or maybe it was one of the previous ones, having followed me. I hushed my quickening breath and felt a balmy wind absorb my chills as I stood on the starlit hill. It

seemed that every light in the deep sky reflected off the nearby sea, and this gave the illusion that sky and sea were simply mirrors to each other, and that I was not standing on anything solid, even though I could feel prickly grasses below my feet.

As the thing emerged from freeform shape, it made soft noises and at one point I thought I heard laughter, but it all happened so fast. The blob turned into a real person, dark and foreboding, though the longer I looked at the person, the quicker I realized it was a woman. And I knew her.

"Thelsie," she said, trying to find a voice that seemed to be only forming as her shape did.

"Mom?" I cried. The singing from the distance stopped. My sobs were long-coming, for I had never cried right when she died and only had begun to when it all sunk in and I knew she'd never come back. And even then, I had never truly let go and bawled like I did now. Mama hugged me, and her thin arms felt young again.

She had only been forty when she died last year, and though it was not completely a shock, for she had smoked and drank too much, it had been too soon for me. For all her faults: sleeping around, partying as if she were a teenager, never being able to hold a job, she had taught me to cook, read, and sing, and she was a philosophical woman who loved me. "Mama is a rolling stone," she would tell me.

"Cry, cry," she said deeply.

I stood back and dried my eyes to look at her. I could see her face under the moon, and she was healthier than she had looked in her last few years. Her face was not saggy, and her black eyes were large and covered with her trademark long lashes. Her lips were full and almost sad. Her

features were thin like mine, but her skin darker and flawless. I hugged her again, feeling every memory of her come back, the way her kinky hair smelled like jasmine and tickled my cheek, the way her arms held me tight as if to say, "It sucks out there, but, really, everything is going to be okay." The way I knew she was looking upward, not to a god but to the sky or something up there. Maybe her dreams.

Just then I remembered how, even though she was so busy and social all the time, she'd watched every single episode of *Game of Thrones* with me and would tell me about the importance of the Children of the Forest, the lineage and corruption of kings and leaders from every age, the old gods and how they were probably better than the new seven, the crazy and delightful animals and plants she found in reading the books. Those nights were our nights. She'd even told Uncle Chamin to go out to the pub then, so "us girls can make some popcorn and have time together."

These memories I clutched onto, until I realized I was probably hugging her too hard and let go.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"This is an island of the past and future," she said. But then, "I can't stay here, Thelsie. I wanted to come and welcome you and tell you not to be afraid."

"What? No. Please stay."

"It is impossible," she said with regret.

"All of this seems impossible. What island, Mama? And how are we together now? Did I die too?"

She smiled broadly, her pearly teeth showing. "No. But you are safe. Safer than anywhere you have ever been. If you become frightened, just remember me and my words. I will always be with you, Thel."

She began to dissipate.

"No," I cried. I had a million more questions for her. "Please stay. Give me five more minutes," I begged.

But she was dissolving into nothing, and I could only hear a whisper left behind. It said, "I never did get to say a proper goodbye. I love you. Goodbye, Thelsie." There was more, but it faded out so that I could no longer recognize the words.

And like that, she was gone. I wondered if she had been the one singing and led me toward her, for when she appeared the singing ceased. But now I heard the other woman refreshing her song. I could have climbed higher but sat down and cried even more. Maybe Mama was still here somewhere and could hear me; maybe she would feel so badly that she would come back.

CHAPTER 3

While grieving on the hill, I saw that the singer had climbed even higher above. Had she wanted to see the reunion of mother and child better? There was no way I could reach there from here. I called out, "Hey!" but the wind seemed to take my voice away. Maybe the wind brought it to the lady, for she stopped singing and soon I could see her head peeking over the top of the rocky cliffs, about 200 feet above me. Her hair was long and white-silver, but other than that I could not make out any details except for her white gown.

She waved, and I could imagine her smiling. She yelled something, but I could not hear what, and then her head disappeared.

I decided to wait and realized I must be filthy. I had walked for hours, waded in sand and water, and sat on a hill crying. I sat down again and leaned my head against a wind-blown scraggly oak tree, which stood in a clearing on the dunish hill, and was surrounded by dark low plants. I was very hungry, and so thirsty that my lips felt blistered. I could fall asleep again, I thought, but hoped the woman would come and find me.

She would have to climb down the cliff, and I wondered how she would do it. I had seen nothing on the hill that would make a connection to any part of the plateau, cliff above, or the beach below. But then, in time, she made it down to me. I had almost fallen asleep again. Up close, it was too dark to see her face well, but she neared me and stopped at an angle that caught the moonlight. Silver beams washed over her sultry face. Her blue eyes caught the moon, and her deep red lips were moving. I realized her lips were moving because she was talking. She was saying hello and was out of breath. As she reached down to a small pack on her thin waist, her languid platinum hair

swirled. I couldn't have imagined any woman being more white; she reminded me of an ice princess.

"My name is Aglatha," she told me. She had a wine skin in her pack and gave it to me, but only after taking a sip first. The skin had water, not wine, and I began to guzzle it, but she said, "Slowly, Thelsie."

"How do you know my name?" I blurted out, water spilling down my chin.

"Your mother told me that you would come. She told me all about you." The woman's speaking voice was as smooth as her singing voice.

"I saw her," I said. "I couldn't believe it. She died a few months ago."

"She is still dead, Thelsie."

"Are you?"

"Not—" she hesitated, "exactly."

"That doesn't make sense. You either are or aren't."

Aglatha shook her head slowly. Her face seemed sympathetic. "You will understand more in time," she told me.

Then she grabbed my hand and said, "Follow me."

She took me down the hill, which was much easier than climbing it. Along the way she handed me a piece of thick bread with raw sea urchin on top. I was going to protest but was too hungry. It tasted delicious. As I followed I noticed that her cream gown was so long it covered her feet; she seemed so agile. I would have tripped over the fabric, I was sure.

Near the bottom of the hill was a cave I had not seen. The cave was a passageway through the bottom of the cliffs, and once we crossed to the other side, cool waves doused my skin with their salt spray. The roar

of the waves nearly took Aglatha's voice away as she urged me to follow her up a rope ladder that led all the way to the top of the cliff.

I followed her up the ladder, and it was a scary climb because one little slip, and I'd be a goner. But she assuredly climbed, without tripping, and it was weird because her gown still hid her feet. There wasn't anything to hold onto besides the rope, and because the wind was strong here, the ladder swung precariously. One foot at a time, I pulled myself up, dizzyingly. I would have been just as happy to stay on solid ground, but I assumed that Aglatha lived up here. On our climb, we passed the plateau I'd seen. The rope ladder swung precariously close to it.

At the top, I was surprised to see another woman who was just as beautiful, but in different ways. Whereas Aglatha seemed sparkling with her white ringlets and shiny eyes and white dress, this other girl was very pale with long, wavy, hair—golden, almost reddish. Her eyes were almond-shaped and light yellow, like a cat's.

She held a torch up and smiled at me. "Hello," she said. "I'm Peisina," she said. She pronounced it "Pie-see-nah". She extended a hand and said, "It is good to finally meet you, sister."

Her hand was delicate.

Peisina seemed friendlier than Aglatha, who was charming but a little self-inflated. Peisina reminded me of a fairy godmother, like in Cinderella, who granted things you wished for and had a voice like butter and would do anything for you. That was only an initial impression, but the way she sat me down on the rock, on top of a silk blanket, and gave me water without taking some first and fed me herbed greens and more bread, all the while smiling softly and ever so generously, made me feel that deep inside she was a sweet person.

She was dressed in a gown too, only hers was peach-colored, and it too was longer than it should have been, covering her feet. Both their gowns were a bit revealing above the waist, though, with delicate sewing work. They had only perfection to reveal, I thought. Perfect bods. I felt strangely out of place, but at least I had found other people.

After our brief meal, Aglatha said, "It is time to sleep, but not here."

"Why do you hang out all the way up here?" I asked.

The two looked at each other, and Aglatha replied, "It's a lookout."

I glanced out over the sea and couldn't see a darn thing, so I shrugged and followed them down the rope ladder, past the slippery rock mesa, through the cave passage, and then toward the forest. At its edge, I stopped.

Peisina asked me what was wrong.

"I saw some things here earlier," I explained. "Ghosts."

Aglatha broke out into a shrill laugh. "Ghosts, really?"

"Maybe. I don't know." I fumbled with words trying to explain, which made Aglatha break out into a fit of the giggles.

"Now, sister," Peisina told her, "Don't make fun of her. The island is strange if you're not used to it."

"So what were those things?" I asked the fairer sister, Peisina.

"I don't know if your language has a word for it," she admitted.

"But you speak English."

"I know how to speak English, but it's not my native language," she said.

"Oh? What is?" I was hoping it was Spanish because I had taken Spanish in high school but would never learn it fluently unless I could speak it with someone else.

"Old Greek," she said.

"Oh, interesting." I replied, thinking how truly exotic it seemed. "Are we on Crete or another island then?"

"Not quite," Aglatha said, still chuckling.

Peisina playfully tapped Aglatha on the arm and said, "Enough."

Aglatha led through the forest as her sister tried to explain the forest creatures. The tall trees cut out the natural lights blinking from the sky, making it dark and muggy here.

"You might call them nymph spirits," explained Peisina. "They won't harm you if you just leave them alone."

"Then my mom is a nymph?"

"What?" asked Peisina.

"Well, I saw her in a similar form to the others. You know, sort of hazy, in transition, blobby."

The sisters glanced at each other, and Aglatha said, "You ask too many questions. There's all the time in the world to find out what you need to know. Now, hush, we are here."

Their home was difficult to see at night. It was another cave near a thin creek. Insects chirped nearby, and the call of a nightingale echoed through the forest. The bubbling of the creek downstream was the treble to the ocean bass.

I had to crouch to get into the cave, but once inside, as Peisina lit two torches on the wall, I could see that the cave was quite large and I could

stand inside. There were bedrolls and ancient scrolls. On one wall was a hand-drawn navigational map with ship routes around a land mass. So this place *was* an island, I thought. The map was not named in the drawing, but I could see that it was not a large island. Not like Hawaii or anything. More like something tiny in the Canary Islands, relatively small but still large enough to take a few days to fully explore by foot. We were near the northwest side of the island, where the majority of shipping lanes were drawn. It was the most jagged part of the island, with the southern part showing mostly sand and the eastern part undermarked, except for a few northeastern shipping lanes. Three mountainous ridges rose in the middle of the island, surrounded by valleys and forest groves. A lagoon sat slightly south and away from the beach of the northwest cliffs of the island. Fresh water, I thought. If I would have walked more inland, I would have seen it when I arrived. There were many more details on the map, but Aglatha warned me that I should sleep.

Peisina rolled out a bed for me, and I lay there looking around the cave, which had a small section in the back where they kept amphoras, sacks of food, and more scrolls. The place had a cozy vibe, and my eyes grew heavy.

CHAPTER 4

After a few days on the strange island, I was finally convinced that I was no longer dreaming, and wondered about poor Uncle Chamin. Even though he was an older adult who was supposed to be looking after me, he was an alcoholic and might need me. Who would be putting him to bed at night? He was getting Disability, so had some money, most of which went to booze but some for food and rent. Despite the warmth and magic of this island living, I missed home, even if there was hardly anything there for me. But I also wanted to stay here because I thought Mama was here, and being close to her made me feel safe. I knew the idea was ironic, for when she was alive she made me look out for myself. I couldn't lean on her.

She always told me, "Girl, if you don't learn how to take care of yourself, who will when I'm gone? You know damn well that your uncle won't do it." She had a point.

Every day, Aglatha and Peisina showed me how to collect greens and roots and fruits. They gave me a gown like theirs, only mine was pale green and complemented my eyes. They had a beautiful way about them, and I was beginning to adopt their behavior, just a little at a time. I had told them about where I was from, and though they found it interesting I was sure that they didn't believe me. I had gone to a dangerous school where dealers stood outside classrooms and you never knew who you could trust. I didn't have nice clothes, and my world was spent amongst discolored walls and people with selfish motives. I had lived my entire life in a small apartment where in the summer, the humidity washed over the hood and the smell of rotting food drowned your senses, and in the winter the temperatures were so cold my number priority at night was to stay warm.

But here, the sisters' lifestyle was enviable. They were graceful, and I tried to follow their light movements. They worked hard each day, carrying water, washing their gowns and themselves in the lagoon, collecting nuts and fruits, roots, and greens, and studying the sea. On the fifth day, they said it was time to return to the cliffs.

"Why?"

"We help sailors navigate," said Peisina. Her answer seemed too formal.

Aglatha laughed and flitted her white mane of hair behind her.

"How do you help sailors?" I asked.

"We have our ways," Aglatha replied, almost rudely.

I followed them through the forest, to the beach, through the cave passage, past the plateau, and up the rope ladder to their cliff top. They had brought their waist packs with fresh water and food. Our hike was silent, and so I observed the island below; it's the first time I saw everything during daylight from this perspective.

Gulls soared above, and I was mesmerized by the waves slamming into the dark rocks far below—such a dangerous place, I thought, and yet there was such beauty in danger. Hundreds of thousands of seabirds nested in the cliff walls. Around us were inviting vistas: the blue of the lagoon south of us, the peaks of the inland mountains, the tops of the plane trees, along with oaks and chestnuts and cypresses, and the idyllic meadows of red poppies, orange and lemon blossoms, white oleander, and golden daffodils. Below the lush green were small mammals, but I couldn't see them from here; Aglatha had told me about them, from wild goats to wild cats. She said that we should not eat the land or sky animals, but rather derived protein from almonds and chestnuts. And sometimes seafood.

The wind above the cliffs could be strong, and we each had lacy outer garments with our gowns. Our attire flapped in the wild gusts, along with our long hair. The sisters seemed to be muses. I wondered if, in their culture, they were supposed to have proper etiquette, because if they were supposed to, they did not. Peisina was the most collected, never acting melodramatically, like Aglatha did, but both women seemed a little wild. They flaunted, they teased, and they made surprisingly lewd jokes, and I would double over in laughter, not so much at the jokes but at the unintentional humor of the otherwise graceful women making them.

On one of the earliest mornings I had known them, I asked them if they'd had any relationships. I figured they could advise me about guys. Of course Aglatha screamed in laughter, and Peisina blushed a little but gave her sister a sly look. Aglatha, the loudest of the two, went into a soliloquy about men. No, there were no men here, but they had known them in the past.

She said, "Ah, their erect gifts that fit so beautifully inside us. Of course men have their good points." She snickered. "We came here from another island, and before that another. Remember that one village, Peisie? Men were everywhere, looking at us sideways. Gnashing their teeth in delight. Longing to be with us. Mother wouldn't allow it, but we had our summer evenings out, away from her gaze, and we learned what men do."

Peisina glared at her sister and changed the subject. "Up here, dear Thelsie, we sing. It is the best place to sing because it is high enough so that the wind carries our voices. The problem is, we sing in ancient Greek and you do not know the language, so you will simply have to learn. But first, I want to hear you sing."

Aglatha said, "I could hear you crying on the trail the other day. You have a beautiful voice. Don't be afraid."

I was not afraid to sing, not even in front of these two beautiful women, whom I felt slightly inferior around. Despite the fact Mama had sung the blues, and I liked that style, I had learned to sing rock songs. My friend Judy and I sang a lot, with her sometimes on the guitar.

I sang a song that Mama had taught me; it sounded hopeful. It wasn't her style, but I liked it.

Wash away my troubles, wash away my pain

With the rain in Shambala.

Wash away my sorrow, wash away my shame

With the rain in Shambala.

I sang on and on, and the sisters got very quiet, their normally lively faces stunned.

Peisina told me, "Your voice is like a dove's. And your song, so different. Maybe you should teach us your music rather than us teaching you our old songs."

Aglatha began to protest, but once again Peisina told her to be quiet.

Peisina began to hum the same song I sang, an old one by Three Dog Night. As she hummed, she grew louder and louder, and I noticed that the wind began to rise and the sun hotly shone on us, sweating our skin.

Aglatha began to join in. We sang and sang, until they got it right, and then we were in unison, our voices craning out to the sea. Before long, the wind became more insistent and the waves churned angrily. For what seemed like forever, we sang and stopped briefly when we messed up, laughed, and started again. I was surprised at our harmony. I didn't remember ever sounding this good, but the sisters both complimented

me, even Aglatha, who was normally not as kind. I trusted their judgment and had not felt so free, not ever. Singing on a cliff top was far better than singing quietly in my room or over at Judy's; we tended to disturb people.

I sang along happily, even when the sisters went quiet. I noticed how hungry their faces became as they were intent on something at sea. I turned to look toward their gaze, to the southwest, where an ancient trireme with two burlap-colored sails headed toward the island. Above deck were a few men shouting orders. Others were rowing the beast, attempting to correct its path from what seemed like an impending crash in the storm below. Even though the sun was still out and the sky held few clouds, the sea whirled in its own storm. I couldn't believe my eyes. The two sisters began singing my song again, though this time I could only stare quietly. The large boat would have best been rowed to the southern shore, but was headed to the rocks below the cliffs.

"They are going to crash," I said.

The sisters ignored me. Their voices were melodious, sensual. I thought I heard another sound. A lyre. Or something so old and ancient I would never know for sure except learning about it in music class, but who was playing it? It was rich and vibrant and though melodic also provided a sort of rhythm to the song. Surely, Peisina and Aglatha would have introduced me to any friends on the island?

The boat was coming in way too quickly, and I ran to the rope ladder and began to climb down to the cave far below. Sprays of water jetted up my bare legs, and I could see that Aglatha continued to sing while Peisina ran after me.

"No, Thelsie!" she screamed down. "You can't stop them. Come back!"

In my hurry to get away, I slipped on the rope, catching myself just in time to not fall twenty feet onto the hard rock below.

Peisina came after me, and I descended more quickly. I knew there was nothing I could do but wave my hands and warn the people on the ship that they were headed toward the fatal rocks.

Finally my feet found the wet surface of the rocks below the cliff, and I slid and then ran toward the sea, just to the edge. It felt like a mad thing to do, standing there, arms wildly waving, my gown drenched by waves, the uncertainty of whether I would get washed away. But I screamed and flailed my arms to let the boaters know to go back and not try to dock here. Men onboard yelled in frantic disorganization as they tried to tie down their crates of goods and then bind themselves to the mast and other parts of the tireme. They tightly hugged the lightwood railing of their oaring windows. The captain yelled orders, but it became clear that the ship was caught in a path it could not recede from, and it was doomed to crash.

Peisina came up behind me and grabbed my hand, pulling back away from the ledge of the rocks, but I would not budge. She tugged and yanked and yelled for me to come back and said, "You cannot save them!"

I knew I could not. But I could at least try.

The stern and rudder of the boat finally hit the rocks, hard, swinging its body sideways and tipping over, whereupon the wind became wild, tossing the trireme like it was made of paper, turning it around and wildly thrashing it. Aglatha was still singing above. Damn her! I thought. How could she sing when people were going to die?

The last remaining intact part of the boat barrelled into the rocks again, wood splintering loudly and falling apart; the sails whipped about in the wind and were shredded easily. Sailors went overboard, screaming. I could see their heads, like bloody fishing bobbers, floating in the waves. Crates of goods were dished into the sea.

I yelled again, tears stinging my eyes. I headed toward the beach, with Peisina following me and urging me to come back. I yelled at her that we must help, but behind me she said, "We can't!"

That didn't stop me. I had to push her hands away as she tried to pull me back. Just a week on this island and my feet had begun to get used to having no shoes, but now I wish I had them as I ran across the rocks, sliding on their slimy surfaces until I reached the grass on the other side and worked my way to the rocky beach below. Around the rocks I went, toward the very waves I had feared. I would be no match for the strong water pushing onto the island like it wanted in. The briny rolled back and marched ahead again, like an army hoisting a catapult.

Finally, Peisina stopped following and screamed and screamed. It sounded like a harpy from a video game I'd once played at Judy's house. As her voice rang out, all wind ceased and the waves calmed, even against the rocks. I ran forward, toward the shore, still hearing sailors cry out as they drowned. The water was streaked with red as limbs floated along the now peaceful current. Above, Aglatha finally stopped singing.

I reached the water and dove off a rock, straight into the warm, salty vat of dying men and blood, hoping that the ocean remained this remarkably calm while I was still in it. I passed dozens of men, already dead, most likely from hitting the rocks head on or drowning, though I wondered how many had gone into shock. I thrashed around in

attempts to find life. The ocean floor here was far below what my feet could reach, and I found a piece of broken wood to use as a float. I paddled toward the largest, most unbroken part of the ship, which seemed to be its transom, but it was hard to tell as the entirety of the ship seemed like a broken puzzle floating in red-tinged waters.

I swam for half an hour, checking men, now seeing less of them floating and more of them having submerged. Hundreds of bottles of wine had spilled out from broken crates and escaped into the depths, some broken, their plum red vintages mixing with blood. Did no one survive? How incredulously impossible, I thought, but my spirit sunk with each passing second that I was out there among the soup, not finding anyone alive. The two sisters were both now at the beach, calling and waving for me to come in, but I couldn't give up yet.

I dove deep into the water, checking for anyone who showed signs of life. I could not see as far as the ocean floor, for the murkiness of the blood and churned-up sand prevented it, but I had the feeling that the floor was not too far down. What scared me the most was the number of bodies I could see having died here before, some in decomposition already, some skeletons, not all having sunk, but many having become wedged in rocky crevices.

So this wasn't the first time, I thought, sadly. I quickly swam back to the surface and realized who these sisters were, but I couldn't think about it just yet. I still hadn't figured out why I was here, but to then tie that in with an ancient myth was not anything I could even begin to fathom. My head was simply too muddled.

I suddenly heard a man's voice call out and whirled into the direction I thought I could hear it. Toward the northern rocks. I swam and noticed

the wind began to pick up again. I felt a strong push of a wave that neared me toward the rocks.

No, I thought.

I had never considered myself a real athlete, though I joined track in high school, but to me, running was a pleasure. It was hard sometimes, but also got me out of my head and inspired me to think of my life, dream, and imagine things. If you counted walking two miles to and from school every day in order to avoid crazy people on the bus, or if you counted running from undesirables trying to get a piece of you, even if it meant your meager lunch money—then perhaps I had learned to rapidly get away and to things out of fright and was more agile than I knew. My body cooperated in getting me closer to the rocks, but I had no true plan to avoid hitting them now that the waves were returning to normal. I only had a vague plan to help one sailor who still seemed to be alive.

I noticed as I reached one of the rocky outcroppings below the cliff that indeed a man had managed to get to and climb onto it. Yet, he seemed hurt. He was holding his side, which was bloody, and scrunching his face in pain. With cursed waves now pushing me forward, I had trouble staying above water. Salt tickled my skin, burned my eyes, and began to fill my lungs with each stroke.

I reached the water's edge just as the waves seemed to return to their normal wild force and was knocked against the sailor's rock, hitting it so hard that my left arm went numb. I went under, salt gagging me and causing my stomach to want to empty its contents, when I could feel someone grabbing my free hand and begin to pull me up. It was the sailor. I grabbed on to his hand as tightly as I could and with my other hurt arm helped pull myself up over the rocks.

Together we moved as far back as we could toward the wall of the cliff base, for now the waves were washing over most of the lower rocks and pulling back strongly. I could not see the man too well, for all was a blur. He looked my age, maybe slightly older. I saw blood and dark, strong arms. I saw fleeting high cheekbones and tan eyes. I saw black, wavy hair and muscle. I saw choked panic in his expression. I saw ripped clothing and wounds. His energy reminded me of a horse that had been caught in mud, straining to get free.

Water filled my eyes with each wave, but finally above, the pleasant face of Peisina appeared before the sunlit sky, wavering. She was lowering the rope ladder. The sailor man hoisted me up to go first, and I began climbing to the safer cliffs above, which the water did not reach. My hurt arm was bleeding and scratched, and beginning to bruise, so my movement was slow and clumsy. I hurried as much as I could, noticing that the man would not begin to climb until I reached safety.

Aglatha's hand reached out to jerk me over the big rock when I got to the top, and she attempted to grapple the ladder from Peisina and throw it down toward the sea.

"You...bitch!" I cried. I tackled Aglatha to the ground and told her. "Don't you dare kill him."

She looked so astonished at my first show of command toward her that she simply lay there in awe, with her gown crumpled around her.

I quickly returned to the ladder, helping Peisina with it. I noticed that she had tied a strong knot and a sturdy rope to the top of the ladder and secured the rope around a nearby rock. We hoisted the man up, while he continued to bleed and climb.

"This will kill us, Peisina," Aglatha hissed.

When he reached the plateau, he fell onto his back, arms splayed, eyes open to the sky.

CHAPTER 5

Aglatha said we could not help the man. She made us leave her cliff top, following, arguing the whole way.

"Why not?" I asked, on solid ground below, as I soaked up the blood from his wound with my outer garments.

"You helped him," Aglatha said haughtily. "But it will be the end of us, and he must not come into our camp. That was not a pleasant sailing ship, my dear. It was a warship."

"Have it your way then," I said, speaking way more calmly than I was feeling. She could do whatever she wanted. I would do what I thought was right. Even if the ship was full of war-faring sailors, I was sure their destiny wasn't us.

Peisina looked at me helplessly, but whispered that she would bring me supplies. Before she left, she dipped her shawl in the ocean and swabbed at my bleeding wounds. She wrapped my hurt arm with a slice of her gown. Then she was off, running past a moping Aglatha who had decided to not help at all except to get the sailor out of their precious lookout point.

I made a camp on the beach, tending to the sailor's wounds, ignoring his sounds of pain. First there was the blood, which seeped out of an area below his left lung. He said he'd gotten hit by something sharp after being thrown from the ship.

I did as Peisina had done with me, using the cleansing powers of the salty sea to clean his sores and soak up his blood. He might need stitches, I thought, but did this island come with a needle and thread? Probably not. I realized finally that the wound was not as deep as the blood seemed to indicate, and I thought he would be okay.

Peisina had given us a skin of water and some bread, but we had no fire or extra shelter. I knew I could not take him to the sisters' cave but thought as soon as he recovered some, we could get to the lagoon. There we could amass our own fruit and nuts near the fresh water. We would have to sleep under the open sky unless I could find some kind of shelter.

"Where did you come from?" I asked the sailor.

Now I could get a better look at him. He was a sturdy type, even good-looking. His freckled face and curious grin hinted at mischievousness. His eyes were very large, which made me think he could see into my soul. As I sat there, I began to feel intimidated by him.

Though he had a strong Mideastern accent, he spoke perfect English. "I'm from the northeast," he said. "What about you?"

"Chicago."

"I don't know of the place."

"You wouldn't."

I stared longingly into the western sky, which was still bright and shimmering.

He said, "You know, the rumor of these women has been going around for ages, but most sailors think it's a myth. Once our captain was lured in, we could not escape the trap. Are you one of them?"

"Huh?" I asked.

"One of *them*."

I knew the legendary story from Homer's *Odyssey* but had not put it together until the shipwreck. Only now the old myth of the sirens

solidified, as he warned me about it. "No. I only arrived here a few days ago. I don't even know why I'm here."

"But you were singing. We heard three of you."

"Yeah, but I didn't know the consequences of it."

"I guess Chicago isn't nearby then?"

The sailor looked at me, confused, but I assured him, "I have no desire to lure sailors in to be killed, if that's what you're thinking."

"I saw you waving and warning us off," he agreed. "Now if I could only get back to my homeland and tell people of you, the brave heroine. I don't believe any man has lived to tell the stories of the sirens, for as sure as the sirens' songs cease to lure mariners, the women themselves will die."

"And why is that?"

"It is their destiny," the man said simply and sincerely.

He eyed me up and down and grinned. "Of the three sisters, you are the most beautiful. And the kindest."

I felt a slow blush creeping up my skin. I arose and told him that he should rest and recover from the wreck. "I'm going over to visit the sirens. They better have some answers for me. You're staying here, right?"

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere, sister," he said with an amused grin.

I hated that he was charming like that. He was making me feel certain things I'd never felt before. I marched away, toward the cave.

Aglatha was the first I came across. Prior to today I had felt welcome there, like it was home, and would have walked right in, but now I felt

like a trespasser. Aglatha was spread out on a bedroll with a clean white gown, lavishing herself with the luxury of a fresh orange and the comfort of her blankets.

"Where is Peisina?" I asked.

Aglatha smiled coyly at me, the creamy skin on her face deceiving the ugliness beneath. "She is out gathering kindling. Come in and sit down, my dear. You did a terrible thing today, and it cannot be repeated."

I entered the cave, my eyes adjusting to the darkness at the depths of it. I sat down near the door while Aglatha angrily told me, "Our job is to kill the men who get too close to the island, for if they come ashore for any reason, the paradise here will become corrupted."

"But you lure them here with your singing! Of course they will come."

"What you say belittles our true fate, Thelsie. Our singing can only be heard if men approach to begin with. If they get too near, we draw them into our deathly rocks. Then they have no chance of coming ashore."

I tried to remember the story. "I thought you were supposed to be mermaids, or maybe have feathers and bird feet? And were supposed to distract men and kill them?"

Aglatha laughed and sat up. "The thing about old stories is that they're never quite as genuine once they've been passed down. You, of all people, should know this. Think of your legends. How many are completely true?"

Even as she said it, she dared not show her feet, the gown always covering them. For sure, there were no wings or feathers. I didn't even know how to answer her. I tried to think of myths we had. Of course we had religions, but nobody called them myths, except for the

unbelievers. Yet, those beliefs were based on things passed down, not on first-hand experience, unless it was feelings, I thought.

"How do you know the men would have come here at all? Why not just let them pass on by?"

"Simple," Aglatha said, her voice becoming tinny, "We don't know. But the alternative is that they would see the island and row ashore anyway. And it's too big of a risk to take."

"So, in order to save this island from corruption, you act corrupt yourself and kill any potential interlopers?"

"You got it!" Her voice seemed way too cheerful.

"You're like...a Stepford wife," I said.

"What?"

"Oh, never mind."

"Darling, you are going to have to kill that man."

"I'm afraid that is not possible," I told her.

"It is not only possible, it's what must do, Thelsie. If you do not kill him, he will pollute the island."

"How? By being a man?"

"No. By bringing to the island what men live for."

"Which is?"

"Conquest."

I thought about it. I said, "But I wasn't well-versed on your story. I had to read *Odyssey* in English class a couple years ago. It's the only reason I've heard of you all. So let me just get this straight. The island is

pristine...or whatever. And you want to keep it that way. So if any men sail nearby, you are afraid that they will come aboard, and—"

She looked utterly confused at my mention of *Odyssey* but said, "They will kill us and tear down trees and hunt our birds and take everything that matters in this special place. We are the island's guardians. All Edens have their cherubim," she said.

"Well, it sounds okay, what you're doing. But this sailor down there. I cannot kill him. He can't really do much on his own. The three of us could take him down if he tried. Right?"

Aglatha's smile pursed wickedly. "We cannot take the chance. I'll give you three days to do it."

"Well, how the hell do you expect me to kill him? Even if I wanted to, which I don't—there's no way I could physically do this. He seems very strong."

"It's all about seduction and wit," she told me. "I think you can figure that out. Oh, and I'll give you a hint. East of the mountains, on the far shore, is an area with deadly wasps. I will give you a potion of immunity. All you need to do is to lead the sailor into the trap."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, not at all."

"Wouldn't it be easier to get him on the cliff and the three of us push him off?"

"Now you are thinking." Her eyes twinkled.

At that moment Peisina returned to the cave.

"Thelsie, are you okay?" came her soft, caring voice. She dropped her wood and hugged me tightly. I returned the gesture without all my heart being into it.

Peisina began to gather up a bundle of things for me to take. While she worked, I noticed that she put wood, more fresh water, and food into a pack. She said, "I'm sorry you cannot stay here, my friend, but that man is not trustworthy. You can come back when he is gone though. But in the meantime, it is very important that we keep you alive, so if you insist on helping the sailor, the least we can do is to help you. But please do not take this as a sign that we want to help you help him. You must kill him, just like Aglatha has warned."

So, they had decided this already.

Aglatha added a small vial to the pack.

Ah, my potion, I thought. "I don't suppose you have a needle and thread?"

"Well, we do, but if it's for the sailors' wounds, then no, we cannot help with that," Aglatha said wryly.

"Talk about tough love," I answered, and walked off with the pack thrown over my shoulder. But as I walked back toward the beach, I realized that the muses had a point. They were the guardians of this strange island, and they were protecting a beautiful place. It was like protestors guarding old-growth trees that might be logged—only protestors normally did not kill to make their point known.

I understood Aglatha's and Peisina's viewpoints but could not reconcile my moral thoughts with saving the island versus causing death to people who might cause harm to the island. Yet the more I walked, the more I realized that the sisters were right. It was just one island in a sea

of others, where conquering, logging, development, and ruin were off limits. What's more, if I remembered correctly, the sirens were daughters of the gods and were appointed this duty. Without their fate, they simply wouldn't exist.

As I reached the sailor, I could feel a certain amount of distrust growing. I gave him some fresh water anyway.

"Ah, the angel returns," he said. His smile teased me, which made me feel uncomfortable.

"I'm no angel," I said, being honest.

"Sure, sure," he said. He seemed to be feeling much better. I noticed that where his stomach had bled out, the seepage had stopped and all that was left was dry blood. His clothes were tattered, and by the looks of them had been plain to begin with. What was left were long, gray pants and a once-white shirt. Where they had torn I noticed his dark skin and black hair, now with sand particles clinging to him. The sight of him turned me on, but I tried to avoid those feelings. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on me. Like the sirens had seduced the sailors to their death, this man's mere existence was equally tempting. However, my instincts told me that he wasn't trying to lure me in or whether he had nefarious ideas on what to do with me afterwards.

He'd kept a satchel tied to him, even when he almost drowned, and now he sorted out some of its contents: skins, fruit, more clothes.

"I went to see the others," I said.

"I bet they want you to get rid of me," he said. His face didn't seem too happy now.

"Yes," I said. "But I don't think I can do it."

"That's good to know."

"But they don't want us on their side of the island. We'll have to go to the eastern shore."

"Exiled already?"

"Pretty much."

I wasn't convinced that I wanted to kill him, or could, but I had only three days to decide, and if I decided to, I wanted to be near the wasp nest.

We headed out, having only the mountains and sun to help us navigate. I thought there might be a couple routes to try. One, we could cut straight across the island to the eastern beach. But I had no idea how passable the mountain ranges were. They were not jagged, high mountains, more like the Appalachian hills Mama had described to me long ago. Or we could hike around the northern perimeter. That seemed to be the longer route, and the beach seemed to be too rocky to traverse. I chose to go straight east and hoped we could make our way across the mountains. From my view of them so far, they had seemed mostly covered with arcadian forest without too many bare rock areas.

We headed toward the lagoon first, though, which was in a valley below the foothills we would cross. A waterfall shimmied down rocky walls, with silver and white flumes collapsing into an emerald pool of water. Around its cascaded rock edges grew two cypress trees and several pink flowers. They were unlike any I'd seen before. They were huge and human-like, with an ovule that bulged out tremendously, a sequence of sepals that arranged into an eerie smile, and two bright, yellow anthers that stood out among smaller ones. They looked like eyes. They blew in the wind as if they were watching us, and I felt chills. The green stigma

moved in such an odd manner as if it might open up and swallow anything passing by. The filaments whirled around when we got near, like a red snake. The lagoon waters were warmer than the sea's, separated by a long peninsula of coral reef and sand.

The man began taking off his clothes.

"What the heck, dude?" As I said it and noted his completely innocent face, I realized this was probably no big deal. Except I had never seen a naked man before except the one time I had to get Uncle into the shower to wake him up from a drunk black-out. I had thought he was going to die, and that was not a pretty sight.

He grinned at me, throwing off his rags, and then sat on the shore of the lagoon to rip off the tattered edges of his clothes so that he would have what resembled shorts and a t-shirt instead of ripped clothing that had been dangling all over the place. When finished, he climbed into the water. I figured his gut would heal properly, as it was no longer bleeding. And I could see below that too, but averted my eyes.

"Come on in, lady," he called. His voice seemed low and seductive. I thought I was supposed to be the seducer.

"I'm fine," I said.

I was still wearing the gown from all week, however, and knew that I should wash it out soon. But not here, not now—not in front of him.

I sat on the hot rocks and dangled my feet in the water. I watched him as he stretched and bathed and swam about.

If there were a perfect day in my life, I thought, this would be it. Fresh breezes, warm water healing my tired feet, a beautiful man swimming around naked in front of me, a hot sun above warming my shoulders, a backdrop of flowers and trees and mountains. Too bad the feeling was

interrupted with the knowledge that in order for me to live, I must kill this man.

CHAPTER 6

Three days, I kept thinking to myself.

On the first day of our trek, after his naked swimming, we receded deeper into the island, where pumice-colored rocks formed vague faces of gods and the shrieks of birds tore us out of the reverie of quiet walking.

Before dark, the man said, "Let's take a break."

While I prepared a picnic of bread and fish, he went off into the forest, but not far. I could see the dark curls of his hair just reaching the nape of his neck, his broad shoulders, his tanned arms—bits and pieces of him flitting through the foliage. He returned with large pieces of young Aspen bark and some vines, and sat down to make us some shoes.

"Are you a craftsman?"

"I worked in Abdera as a fisherman."

"I suppose in those days everyone was a craftsman."

The man looked confused at my reference to "those days".

"What is your name anyway?" I asked.

"Dion," he replied. "And yours?"

"Thelsie."

"Pretty name for a pretty woman," he said, giving me a dark stare as he glanced up from his shoe-making. Figures, I thought. He *is* about conquest.

His hands were tanned and covered in calluses, no doubt a side-effect of sailing the seas, yet he seemed agile and deft. He flattened the bark

with rock, dipped the material into water so that he could mould it, and then came over to measure my foot with it.

As he held a piece of bark against my foot, he withdrew a hunting knife. The handle of it was made of carved bone.

"Whoa, where did you get that?" I asked.

"I carry a few things on me at all times," he said. "Not even the sea can separate me from them." He patted the satchel forever at his waist.

He cut the bark and used twine-like material he had found from vines that grew in the forest. He used the very tip of the knife to make the smallest of holes in the bark so that he could thread the twine through. By nightfall he had made us both a pair of sturdy sandals.

"Thank you," I said softly. How could I murder a man who had made me a pair of shoes?

The first night we didn't build a fire. No need to unless we cooked. We ate bread and salted fish and drank fresh water collected from the waterfall. Oranges topped off our meal as dessert.

Afterward I unfolded two bedrolls that Peisina had loaned me, thinking it was funny she had not wanted to help this man but had given him food and a soft place to sleep. Fattening him up for the slaughter, maybe.

I unrolled my bed as far from him as possible but within close enough proximity that we could hear and see each other. A nightingale warbled in the trees, and I lay with my back to the ground looking up through the leafy sky to the midnight blue backdrop. Trees softly rustled, shaking the night.

Dion didn't talk, and I remained silent, focused on the effortless beauty of the island, the calm, dark night with scents of jasmine, oak, and fish. Laying on my back focused my gaze upward to infinite stars that spread as far as I could see. Occasionally I shut my eyes, still seeing tiny pricks of light.

Then I saw the shapes again, the ghosts, or nymphs, as Aglatha had told me they were. They were in the trees, floating higher than the last time, at first as blurry glass-like amorphous shapes and then metamorphosed into people-shaped fairies. The term glass ballerina flashed through my memory.

"Do you see those?" I whispered to Dion.

"Yes," he said soberly.

"Have you seen them before?"

He moved his bedroll closer to mine and said, "No. What are they?"

"Some kind of nymph, according to the blond."

"Amazing," he said.

"They aren't supposed to be harmful, so long as we leave them alone," I said. I wanted to believe that. Their shapes continued to flutter around, making swishing noises that whispered in the trees. What they were saying, I couldn't make out. Too quiet. Too from another world. As I watched them, I felt my eyes get heavier until I rolled off into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Dion was gone when I awoke. I thought he had left permanently, which made my task of killing disappear. But by mid-

morning he returned with a crate from his ship, I assumed. It was full of wine skins.

"You went back to the ocean to find that?" I asked.

"After the wreck, I found it in the sea while you were up at the sisters' place. I stored it among a grove of trees near the water's edge."

"And that's your cargo?"

"That, and sugar cane and spices. Mostly wine though."

I shrugged. Wine didn't sound good to me. Nothing like that did after my experiences with Uncle Chamin.

Our hike that day became easier with shoes but fraught with memories of the night fairies and how they had lulled us to sleep. The idea I had come to was that this island was something I found strange but not altogether terrible. Even if I had died and was now surrounded by magical beings, this would be preferable to the life I had left, though I worried awfully about Uncle and missed my friend Judy.

Dion and I didn't talk much as we walked, for the hike was tough and took our breath away. We had reached an area where soft inclines began to erupt through the land, and then the ground ascended. Here and there, amongst the green shrubbery and myriad blossoms were bald faces of limestone. The higher we walked, the more water we drank from our skins. Sweat crossed our brows and trickled down cheeks, necks, arms, and legs. It took a few hours to reach mid-way up the first hill that held merely the shortest peak of three ranges that escaped into a lush valley below and then onto the next hill to the east. From up here we could see a larger view of what I figured was the Aegean or Mediterranean. The blue far below turned pure green right at the shore,

except for around the cliffs where tiny boats of white lather shaped the cliffs.

We sat at a clearing so that we could eat while viewing the scene below.

Dion said, "I could never tire of the island mountains."

"Have you been to many?" I glanced over at him. His curly hair was glistening with sweat, which looked like tiny clusters of diamonds. His brown arms were also damp, but his smell was not unpleasant, like a mix of salt and musk. He had the beginnings of a beard today.

He gazed at me, his look hungry, even though we had just eaten.

"Yes, of course. I sail for a living. But I'm thinking that maybe it wouldn't be so bad to be stuck on an island like this. With beautiful women no less."

"Oh, I don't think the other women care too much for you," I blurted out.

"But you do?" He winked at me. My mind blurred with how to reconcile his potential assimilatory intentions with my own pathetic desires.

I just stared at him, feeling conflicted over what I was to do. I honestly couldn't do it, could I? Kill a man? I'd come from a neighborhood where that was not so uncommon, and even though it was daily news, the bigger world didn't care and sometimes I forgot quickly who had been shot down.

All I had was the word of the two women that somehow my fate was to rid the world of this man, who happened to be here rather accidentally and by their luring him here. Oh, maybe there was some big legendary example that the sirens set: to destroy men who were attracted to

temptation, resulting in the lesson that one should stay on course. But who was I to say that this particular man was caught in a curiosity trap brought on by beautiful singing. And so what if he was?

Over that ridge and down its valley, and then up another ridge and another. We hiked all day long and by nightfall were almost too tired to make camp. One more day to go, and that was it: my deadline.

Even though we were exhausted, we talked more that evening. We were at the eastern valley now, downslope, near a small stream.

The third day when I awoke, he was gone. Again. He'd plucked one of those weird pink flowers and left it for me next to my sleeping roll. The smiling face was gone, and in its stead the green of the leaves had grown even brighter but drooped into a frown. The ovule had burst, spilling not one but several seeds too large to have come from it, which had rolled onto the ground nearby, ready to open as if they contained a Russian doll. The anther eyes looked at me, not literally, but seemingly, as if to accuse me of death. When the wind moved them, they rolled back up to stare in my direction. Meanwhile the seeds, as big as walnuts, made clicking noises in the wind among the dry dusty ground in this area—it sounded like little feet scampering across rocks.

Maybe he had just gone to pee or get some of his cargo, I thought, but the flower seemed like a farewell gift.

I ate dried fruit and dipped into the stream, which was fast enough to be cool. The waters revived me, and for several moments I didn't think about the fact that a man I was to kill had just escaped. I thought of the healing water, its arms around my aching body and the way the wind rustled in the oaks above. I wasn't in the slums of Chicago anymore. I was in a paradise with weird plants and strange faerie ghosts. Yet, I could stay here. I would still worry about my uncle, but I'd be far away

from that dark city. The unease the island brought was less fearful than real life. At least maybe. The unknown usually had some knowns, didn't it?

I didn't know what to do nor where to go, and something told me maybe I should just stay right here. Forever. Away from the evil women, with the good little folk of the forest, whatever they were when they came at night. Here was a woodland that had food; it seemed anywhere on the island I'd be within a day or two's hiking distance to a fresh water source.

CHAPTER 7

Tonight was my deadline for killing Dion. I spent the morning at the camp, wading in the stream and warily watching the strange seeds that had been spilled from the pink flower. I sat idly for an hour or more, observing my surroundings, as if I were in a movie. Maybe the ghost nymphs were around, or maybe it was the pink flowers that put a spell on me, but I felt sleepy and noncommittal. What was the worst that would happen if I never saw Dion again? Would the women hunt me down? I couldn't imagine Peisina doing me any harm, at least.

The landscape was weird. Trees were taller than they seemed yesterday. Flowers too. Their anatomies were part animal, ready to bite or devour. At the same time they were also more beautiful than I could imagine. It's not like I had ever been to any sort of island before. I'd never seen much past the concrete slums of Chicago. This made me full of awe. It was hard to move or make a decision about where to go next.

Mid-morning, the sky clouded over and a strong wind came. Though I did not hear any singing, it was like the climate the singers had changed when they were shipwrecking the men on the boat. Then it started to rain. The rain brought plant life into a vivid beingness, brighter even than in sunshine, moving frantically as if dancing. It might be just the wind, but it seemed that they moved on their own accord. I packed up my bedroll and headed east, the flowers freaking me out, their eyes following me.

The rain had come on so suddenly and strongly that it quickly began to pool in the valley between the third mountain and the eastern coast, which surely I would reach soon. The island had no map except the crude one at the women's place. Seemed it had no presence in the real world either. Fifteen minutes into the relentless onslaught, my new

shoes were covered in mud and my feet began to sink into the grass and soil and flowers, making it tough to hike anywhere fast. With the trek becoming a more and more impossible task, I noticed the sky darken too. And then I heard it. Far away singing.

Now, I was never a physics expert, but I figured the island to be at least thirty miles wide. There was no way I would be able to hear the sisters singing from the west coast, could I? But of course, the island didn't seem very logical thus far. Maybe east and west were up and down or a geographical oddity. Maybe I was in a time warp. I recognized Aglatha and Peisina's voices. It had to be them. Maybe they were luring in more men from the other coast, or maybe they were following me. Their voices, though, still seemed far away, carried on the wind.

The darkening sky brought on another sound, that of harsh buzzing. An annoying sound, worse than a dental drill. Higher and more animated, the obnoxious buzz seemed to join the song, providing a warning that suffocated me with an inchoate fear. I dropped into the mud and covered my ears. It was that intrusive. But then I remembered the wasps, my mission, and my failure once more.

I reminded myself that a known in an unknown land was comforting, even if the known was that the tinny sound came from wasps and not something more sinister. As I sunk into the mud, now my knees and butt covered, the gown forever ruined, I realized a wasp was staring at me from the ground, and it was not a little stinger but big—one foot in length—its body striped with black and green instead of yellow, its antennae six inches long and its wings with translucent lines of spider web patterns. Even its legs were green, like the stripes, a strange pea-lime green that glowed from inside. What kind of wasp could this be? Its ovipositor was another several inches. Its eyes were like you'd think

an alien's to be, black-netted, almost devoid of expression, yet possibly curious and intelligent. It just stared at me, me at it. It backed up, and I figured maybe now was a good time to reach for the cure in the bed roll. But as I thought about moving at all, I caught movement behind the wasp.

Dion, my captive. He picked me up and ran in a different direction, toward the eastern beach but north of the wasps. I screamed, "Where did you go!" I felt my gown, now soaking wet, stretch below my feet. My body felt like a rag doll.

He said, "Not now, m'lady. We'll talk later."

My first time in his arms. I would not swoon like real "m'ladies" but felt safe just for a moment. He'd made me shoes. He helped me find food. He did run off, twice, but he also left a flower for me and now he was trying to save me from a strange, huge wasp. Rain flooded us, making it impossible for him to run, so he painstakingly hiked steadily, one foot stuck in mud and then another. Not exactly quicksand swallowing us alive, the mud was like the bottom of a creek bed's, deep and sticky. In moments, the wasps were far enough away that the buzzing grew distant. He kept going until we could see the eastern shore ahead, the white but dull sand in the rain, the gray sky and water blended into a soup. There, he finally sat me down, exhausted, and fell onto his back on the sand, arms stretched wide open as if to say, "Take me now, ocean and sky," and I fell beside him.

Flooding or no flooding, the rain was warm enough it didn't matter, really, that we were drenched. I remembered a time in high school when I joined track and often ran for miles through the dull sidewalks of the city. Whenever it rained, especially in those drastic, humid summers, I

would welcome it, take it in, loving how cool it made me feel and how being close to natural elements freed me in a way.

I realized too how there was no more singing, and I asked Dion if he'd heard it.

"Yes," he said. "I imagine Aggie and Peisie have another blood bath on the other shore."

"Why did you leave me?"

He did not answer me right away. He slowly sat up, wiping mud and sand off his face. He did not look at me but stared at the frothy ocean when he said, "I know you were supposed to kill me. Not that I had anywhere else to go, really, but I couldn't put you in that dilemma."

"Oh." I knew he knew I was up to no good. I felt embarrassed.

"Honey, those women are pure sorcery. I put two and two together. Out on the ship, the captain heard the singing, and we knew there were women on the island. He started steering in to see what was here. You have to understand, we hadn't seen any women for months on end."

"And you thought you could just have your way with them?"

Dion laughed. He said, "I am sure that thought ran through the captain's mind."

"And you?"

"Intrigued yes, cautious yes. But taking women isn't my way. As soon as the captain ordered to go ashore, the storm hit and we had no control over anything."

"I don't understand how they could physically net you in like that just by singing. How is it possible?"

"You were singing too," he reminded me. "I don't know. I really don't. But something tells me you are not of this world. In this world, there's gods and goddesses and magics."

I thought of my world. There was plenty of mythology there too, things that science went against. And weird things happened too, like people being convinced they'd been probed by aliens.

"What year is it?" I asked him.

"I don't know," said Dion matter-of-factly.

"How do you measure time? Don't you have a calendar?"

"We measure time with the sun, moon, and stars. We measure distance by travel, my lovely."

"Quit calling me sweet names," I told him. It was becoming bothersome. And now I felt truly agitated. I stood up and walked to the edge of the ocean. The rain was slowing down, and I fell into the water.

I heard Dion laughing at me. Screw him, I thought.

"And you shouldn't have killed that flower and left it for me!" I yelled back at him.

CHAPTER 8

By dusk, Dion had made a small campfire, finally opened some wine, and said he'd found a rabbit. I had not seen anything but birds and fish here, so it surprised me, but I ate hungrily, ignoring what the sisters had told me about eating land animals. Now in the evening of the third day, I almost knew I would not kill this man. Or at least I wasn't going to make the deadline for doing so. As frustrating as he could be, he did seem innocent enough to me and there's no way I could overpower him now. If I told him I wanted to go for a walk and could he come with me, he'd surely not take a pleasant stroll back toward the wasps, which had been my only real plan. And I think he knew it, that I was just a young woman from a faraway land where killing did not come easily, or really at all.

I felt humbled by the power of the island, unnerved by the uncanny nature of it. A pristine place of beauty it was, but the strange light, trees, and flowers felt off. Any comfort I got from being in its spell was often broken by the unfamiliar. Tonight the rain had ended nearly as quickly as it had started, and the land seemed to dry up faster than normal. We sat on the sand after dinner and watched the moon and stars appear one by one. Even in the drab city, if I could look up at night and see stars, it made me feel peaceful somehow, as if the whole chaos of humans was tiny and there was something bigger out there, even if scientifically it was chaotic too. The perspective of the night sky lent to me comfort and paralyzing beauty. The way it all shone down put me in a spell. The eastern shore was softer, less rocky, at least here. No cliffs nor caves. Just white sand stretching on forever, with a gentler llop of sea than in the west.

I lay in my bedroll, listening to Dion's thoughts tumble out the more he drank. He was almost as strange as the island, all-knowing yet with an odd pretense of naiveté. It also seemed he had been teasing me about time and his knowledge of the women on the island. Or maybe he was truthful about wherever he was from: that in his world magic existed, men on ships dreamed of women, and there were no such concept as calendars, at least the kind I knew.

Dion told me about his days growing up near the coast of a distant land and how his father had shown him the lively birds in the sky, the insects that flew, the way the wind and air pressure and clouds changed when a storm was coming. He would spend hours with his father, eyes to the sky, sometimes laying in grassy meadows. They would watch clouds and say, "That one looks like a mighty oak!" or "That one resembles a fish swimming through water."

"It was during those fluid days," explained Dion, "that I learned about the continual changing of life. That nothing would remain the same, day to day. That when I would grow up, those innocent days, which had been so profound, were just simple ones and I may never look at the sky the same again as a man. By the time I was a young boy I knew from the way a tree branch blew and from what the clouds behind it looked like whether it was going to be a calm day or a stormy one. So many days and days of this gaze and idleness just laying there looking up...when I became an adult and went into the grape business, I realized that there was something that could take you further than the sky, deeper than a cloud, more intense than the biggest winds that tore down trees and homes. Red wine, my dear, became my star-gazing."

"Getting drunk is no spectacular feat," I told him. "Look at you now, drinking from the skin, half-sprawled out on the ground. Still looking up."

"I have never gotten drunk once in my life, m'lady."

"Quit calling me that."

"It's true, Thelsie. Drunkenness is a feat of sleeping through life. True inspiration comes from a moderated form of drinking. Even if it produces ecstasy and brings you alive. You see, I can lie here on the ground and spin through the universe."

I just looked at him as he went on, getting further into discourse that frightened me but also drew me in.

"I realized as a man that a child can look up and dream and imagine the impossible. Yet, it is when you're intoxicated and look inward and combine it with the dreams of the sky that everything then makes you enlightened, frightfully heady and, dare I say, happy. *Open your eyes.*"

I had once watched the movie *Vanilla Sky* but learned it was an American remake of a Spanish film called *Abre los Ojos*. Open your eyes. And that's what I thought about now. Being awake meant not just opening your eyes but looking around you intently. Lifting your gaze beyond the initial seen things. Understanding not only what was above the surface but what was really inside—something I had failed to quite grasp so far on this island.

He went on, the wine covering his lips like blood. "Open your eyes, my friend Thelsie. It will elucidate everything."

A sharp wind came in from the west, blowing out the campfire, though it had been dwindling anyway. The gale was cool against my hot face. How was I supposed to see better in the dark? I thought of lighting

candles in the darkness and how my generation was supposed to be so *awake*. We were slapping down the sins of our ancestors, crumbling their statues of slave owners, righting the wrongs of greed and destruction, loving others. And it was good.

I remembered Sunday school and my teacher Ms. Hartung telling us about false idols and also about parables that should make us think. Yet, where these stories were clearly to me, and to my mama and friends and other relatives, lessons, how many had turned that religion into something more fundamental, into salt? I stopped going to church, even though Mama still went because she liked singing in the choir. Like the rest of the youth in my generation who weren't trusting of ideology that had evolved through time yet still called itself the only truth, we couldn't find any scientific evidence of it, so we walked away from religion, for the most part, trying to keep in mind some of the parables. It's funny, even Uncle Chamin was a god-fearing man, and yet it seemed he too had closed his eyes. But there was something deeper to opening one's eyes than being simply awake, and I hoped I was on the edge of it just by being on this island. It had already changed my perception vastly, even though I had more questions now than answers.

"I would argue that drinking keeps you from seeing everything," I said. All I knew of it was Uncle Chamin's experience. I told Dion all about Uncle. And during the several minutes that passed, it felt good to talk about it. I had told only Judy, but not in this detail because of the embarrassment of it all, though she'd been around him enough to know what was going on. I guess there was a little part of me that thought Dion, if his eyes were truly open, might get it and comfort me. And while I was talking, Dion arose into a sitting position and handed me the wine skin.

I shook my head no and kept talking. But at the end of it when I finished telling the strange man about my life in Chicago, he smiled and I took the wine, tasted it, and realized it didn't seem so bad after all.

Dion and I shared more wine and stories, but nothing happened to open my eyes. In fact, I just felt more sleepy and dozed off eventually.

It seemed I had just fallen asleep when I woke to the sound of a horn. It was lower in resonance than a flute, more rich. It sounded first, and then the singing came. Aglatha and Peisina sang the song I taught them. Shambala.

I can tell my sister by the flowers in her eyes...

I can tell my brother by the flowers in his eyes...

"Up here, dear Thelsie, we sing. It is the best place to sing because it is high enough so that the wind carries our voices," Peisina had said.

I was so tired, it made no sense. I looked over to Dion. He was sleeping soundly beneath the moon, his hulking body a silhouette against the sea of rising foam and wind. I then wondered if the witching hour had passed. The hour of magic, the hour of destruction. The forest between the beach and the mountains was silent. No birds. No ghosts. The siren song lifted throughout the entire island like an ominous choir in the sky, with the low sound of the horns and harps. I wanted to run; the sound was fearful for reasons I didn't know.

Ever since I'd come here, I had not known which way to go. From that first day when I sat on the sand, scratching my head about where I was, nothing and everything had changed. It seemed to be a haunted island now, and so many things had happened. Yet the same questions remained. Where was I? When was I? And why was I here?

Dion finally stirred and sat up, his dark eyes taking me in. Discomfort washed over me. He listened to the night, to the sisters singing and the other music, seemingly in the sky hovering over us. "We have to leave," he said dryly.

"Wherever to?"

"Just stay with me." He seemed completely sober now, though, as I recalled he had indeed not gotten drunk—not like Uncle Chamin. He had spoken clearly and philosophically earlier.

When we started out on our night hike, the sisters stopped their song. I felt as though they knew we were on the move. Or had they wanted to just wake us up?

Dion was not in a good mood now. Maybe he realized his death hour was near, or maybe it wasn't going to happen after all. Regardless, I wasn't going to argue with him. I had some trust in him, more than in the two sisters. What time was it, anyway? The sisters had told me midnight was my deadline. In this land of seemingly no time, what had they meant? Like, literally 12:00 a.m.?

I followed Dion north on the white beach, and then he skipped closer to the forest. He didn't talk, and yet I was full of questions. Where are we going? What's going on? What are you even thinking?

Time seemed to stand still as we crossed streams and as the deep, silent night began to once again show signs of life. It's almost like we were just going in a huge circle back to the western shore. Nymphs began to whisper from their nooks in trees and small caves, and their voices frightened me. Their dusky language joined with the constant waves slipping onto the northern shore, and while I'd never understood the strange whispers the little folk sung in the preceding days, tonight their

voices seemed to have shushed the song from the cliffs far to the west, and I began to almost make out what they were saying. It was like a universal language that these little folks sang. It was everything and nothing, happy and sad, fluid and yet not predictable, light and heavy, rich and simple. Because Dion wouldn't talk with me and grimly marched forward, alone with himself, I kept pace behind him soberly listening to everything else.

The whispers had so far not been sensible to me, more like a soft discombobulation, seemingly mature but child-like, but just now and then, as if a drawn-out echo on the wind, I picked up an almost word. It sounded like ay-eeh-ah. Over and over.

Slowly, a song that came from the innards of the past broke through time. As I listened I drew into myself, my eyes occasionally fluttering to the white beach, growing further in the distance, and to what's his name up there who seemed rude tonight. I got taken away by the song. Hooked into it and the way it fell across the trees that had blown so heavily in the wind it seemed they were bending...praying. I had heard the song before, I realized. Or something similar. Then it dawned on me that it sounded like "Light of the Seven" from *Game of Thrones*, and it seemed to be repeating a name over and over. Was this Mom breaking through to me, from death? I'd found out later that, in the midst of the actual song, two boys were recorded singing something that sounded like Ah-ree-ah, and I had come to the conclusion that they might be singing about Arya. However, the composer later denied it, that it was supposed to sound Valyrian. But who was Ay-eeh-ah the forest singers now sang about? And why did it sound like the other song going through my head?

Dion stopped his hike, and his ears pricked up. He'd heard it too. I could tell by the expression on his face. Night was still over us. First light seemed afar. He looked southward, where the beach disappeared into the forest. He flinched. I could smell something distinctly decomposing. He gave me a scarf from his backpack of wine skins. I did as he did, wrapped it around my face to cut out the terrible odor.

I asked him about the whispers surrounding us hauntingly, almost musically.

"*Aeaea*," he said. "That's where we are. Once home of the witch Circe, now the home of your friends who want to kill me. It's a place of life and death. The sirens left Anthemoessa long ago, leaving behind other protectors, and came here to guard this, what you might call, paradise. They bound through time, through flawless places. That's what I know, and what I must tell you now, because it is nearing midnight."

The way he said Anthemoessa reminded me of earlier on the island, when I thought I heard the words "And thee muse." I was aghast. "How did the sirens get here?" I asked him.

"You open your eyes, and you *are*."

It didn't make sense. *Are what?*

I shivered grotesquely. This was just too much, I thought. I had to comfort myself in realizing that the appearance of my mama meant I was here for some reason, and that reason was good. She said I was safer here.

While pondering these things, I blindly followed Dion toward the smell. The forest was so thick here that it hid the night stars and moon, and the trees stood like living sentinels, their leaves rustling in the night. Underbrush was so thick against our bare legs that I could only guess

what things were by the vivid feel of them: mushrooms, ferns, moss, and lichen on tree limbs we stumbled across. We guarded ourselves against tall weeds and sticky branches. Spider webs butted up against our faces, arms, and legs. Thick, moist leaves carpeted the forest floor.

But then we came to a clearing, and above it, the moon shone again—and this was where the odor had emanated, I was sure. And here, it took me a while to figure out what I was seeing. Moon against piles of bones. And more bones, white and agleam from the stars flickering above. It was not a dug grave. Nor, I realized, when I saw the freshly decomposing bodies of sailors, was it anything but a charnel ground, not a facetious cemetery where death was conveniently hidden but a place where life could rot and re-feed the soil below and bring new life. Human skeletons in the ground. Humans decomposed just like animals, not more importantly, I thought.

Everything else that was happening made no sense, but the more I thought about it, it really did. Aeaëa depicted the circle of life, death, and after life. But we already knew about the circle in the modern world. We knew the cycle of it and the symbols crafted by the hands of humans to depict that circle. I would hesitate to guess that the majority of people from my world either believed in some kind of afterlife or hoped for it. For me, personally, afterlife meant a biological breakdown of matter that would recycle back into life. Decomposition, I thought. A. E. A. E. A. Of course, a palindrome, though I was sure its earlier spellings in ancient Greek were different. And the island was mythical. Still, the word circled around itself.

This island was...my kind of afterlife.

I asked Dion, "What is going on here?"

"This, my dear Thelsie, is where the bones of corrupted men are buried by your friends on the cliffs."

"Do you mean that you aren't the first sailor to make it onto the island?"

"Of course not."

That shook me. I was so sure all the men had died in the sea, wiping Aglatha and Peisina's hands free of having to do the dirty work of bringing their bodies here. "You mean, they...?"

"I'm sure that I'm the only man you saw alive, and they put the test on you to kill me. Oh, right about now it would be time for that, by the way, and I must commend you for not trying, but you wouldn't get far. Before me, there were other men who came broken from the sea, up to shore, dying, and the sisters saw them to their end."

I couldn't believe it. I got it that maybe men would try to take over the island. Colonialism was the oldest trick in the book. But plain out murder? Plain out luring? "Why don't the women just let the sailors pass on by rather than enticing them in, when they hadn't planned to come here anyway?"

"Oh, but we will come," Dion said.

THE WAY HE SAID IT BROUGHT IMAGES OF AGLATHA LAUGHING IN DESIRE.

CHAPTER 9

Nearly paralyzed like statues in the place of the dead, we realized that numerous night snakes were slithering throughout the bones and white fleshy maggots, bigger than I'd ever seen, their translucent pearly skin glimmering, feasted on the newly deceased. I could almost hear them, their maws slurping the rot of those who were no longer men. My sandals did not feel protective enough now, and I was downright queasy. I wanted my real life back more than ever now. I would earn money as a cook and go to college. I'd get out of the poverty-stricken area of Chicago, which is all I had known until, well, at least before the island. And I would make sure Uncle Chamin would be taken care of. As I realized my life goals anew—not that I'd never realized them before, but never thought I could really reach that life—Dion pulled me close as the sound of a large squawking bird flew above us. I looked up, astonished.

Because the moon and stars lit everything, increasingly in a weird green way, resembling phosphorescence, the raptor's shadow hulked and flapped over us and it not just called but almost roared. From physics class, I knew that true phosphorescence was not an immediate effect, though. It was caused by absorption of radiation on a slower time-scale. But that's all I could think of when trying to figure out the glowing bird. Dion wrapped himself around me. He must know this bird might cause harm. I looked up to watch the glowing green bird as well, but realized that the glow came from another light source. Somewhere.

Dion whispered, "We cannot run from it. Just be still, my love."

I had never been this close to a man before, and while he didn't seem that much older than me, his mind did. I would listen to him, I thought. I looked up through a hole offered by the crook of his arm to see more

of this bird. Its wingspan seemed to be a good twenty feet, larger than any condor or vulture I'd ever seen, even in a book. As the bird flew around the clearing, it did indeed change color, from black and back to green to black again, and Dion said that an energy in the sky was changing color due to a strange phenomenon that had to do with wind and sunrise. He pointed to the northern sky, where I saw it myself.

"It's the Aurora Borealis!" I said almost too loudly. "I've always wanted to see it." Ribbons of green and blue and purple and yellow swirled above, with green being the most prominent of the colors. And when the bird's flight hit the northern sky, against the light, the vulture turned green and when it hit the darker southern skies the bird hid in the shadows and appeared black. Physically, that didn't make sense, but I was going to go with it because nothing made sense here.

"You are strange," Dion said, but he held me tight. "We cannot escape it."

It was a beautiful bird, outside its tinny, obnoxious voice. It sounded much like an old woman screeching, even though its wings were most classically artful, like drawings of angel wings on cathedral ceilings that I'd seen in books, precise and delicate and curved like many bows. Its head remained hidden under wing as it flew, though its white crest was long. Its flapping exerted enough energy that the trees around the circle genuflected and thundered each time the thing passed by and the sound of the wings was magnified, a slow and steady rip through the air as it swooped down. It wasn't until the bird finally drew back its wings as it began to land that I noticed its human face. I began to let out a scream, but Dion covered my mouth. It's as if he knew what the bird was, and he knew, too, once I recognized it, that I would be terrified. But nothing could have prepared me for the long, silver hair shimmering

around the face of that bird, strands of white that I had previously mistaken for the crest, and as it grew nearer to the bone-studded Earth she morphed into who I knew her as, Aglatha.

As she landed in front of us, in a spotlight of gently sliding green and blue and pink hues, she stood upright, her winged feathers drawing back and morphing into the long flowy drapes of her gown. Her feet were not human feet, I could see now that her gown didn't cover them; they were gracefully elongated talons, three digits and a hallux, carefully splayed against the muck of the open funeral grounds. And then her white gown folded over the feet too, and Aglatha seemed to be embarrassed that I had seen her feet like that, even though I was still peeking through Dion's arms.

"Let her go, sailor," said Aglatha.

"You don't know me," he chided, and then, "No. You took this naive young soul and asked her to kill me. She will remain safe with me."

"You told him this, Thelsie?"

"No." My voice shook.

Aglatha gave Dion the once over. "You must let her go," she repeated.

"I will not," he said. His arms tightened around me, almost as if he were suffocating me.

Aglatha began to sing, but it was not anything I recognized. When she did, the forest ghosts began to pipe up with their own aeaea lyrics again, the ones I'd heard earlier. The ghost song whispered from decrescendo into crescendo and back again, and when the quieter thoughtful melody fell into a minor intonation, as if the spirits were grieving—but they were also having a conversation as they rose out of a plaintive mood into something not exactly joyful but more uplifting. This seemed to

upset Aglatha, as she began to sing more loudly, trying to outdo them, even though the other voices were delicate like flowers and barely audible. Mom is leading those voices, I thought.

Maybe the sisters were not the real guardians of the island, but the ghosts were! I thought. Isn't love louder than hate, even if quieter?

Aglatha's song was old and rich-sounding, like something ancient coming from the sea, causing winds to rise up. At the same time her voice sounded both sensual and mourning. It was an attempt to silence the nymphs. Her song, too, was a desperate one, which lifted and fell like ocean waves, another reciprocal conversation. Mama had once told me that where her ancestors had come from, some of their musical tradition was a dialog: a call and response. It reminded me of this. Creatures talking with birds and ghosts. Birds talking with wind. With oceans. And it was all a song.

I could see how the beauty of this woman and her pure voice could put someone under her spell, for I began to feel soft and without a care in the world. I could feel Dion gripping me as if to hold me up. "Don't you dare let her under your skin," he whispered.

Soon, another bird joined and another. And two more after that. They circled above us, slowly transformed by the curtained lights flowing around them like some kind of strange disco. I wasn't surprised that the other birds also landed and showed themselves as beautiful women. I should have guessed that Peisina was one, her peach gown and red hair reaching far down her back. She joined her sister in song, though her alto voice, I always thought, was more comforting. Only this time even Peisina seemed not so kind and was as much a stranger to me as her colder sister. The other women all had long hair too. The first was dark like my mama, and I searched her face to find similarities, but it wasn't

her. I just knew. The darker one withdrew a harp from her gown and played expertly, while the other three donned other instruments: lyres and a flute-like pipe. What began as a sweet song turned discordant when the forest spirits continued their song-chant in the background, meanwhile with the trees around us beginning to shake with the wind. I had to hold my ears to cut out the sound, for it felt that everything was coming at me from every direction, and slowly I could feel Dion letting go, and me sliding into the rot of the soil and bones and maggots. If this was hell, I was in it, and my life flashed before me as I descended into the soil. I had died, after all, hadn't I?

Flashbacks

I recalled Mom the most, from when I was young, as she stood in our humid kitchen stirring gravy or frying up bourbon-glazed ham slices, and she'd sing so loudly and perfectly, anything from the traditional bluegrass tunes, like "The Great Speckled Bird" to the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," and she'd start dancing around the hot kitchen, with her heels clicking on the greasy tiled floor. It's a wonder she didn't fall, but she was agile. Mama was so good-looking and thin and everyone loved her, and the downest person hanging around the place might get up and dance too. And she might pat their cheek with flour and blow a kiss. She memorized songs and had the right inflection, and she had the moves.

I remembered how summer would waft through the windows, with cars roaring outside along the run-down street and stale air sidling into our home—or how Uncle Chamin used to toss me up in the air and catch me, before he got all old and drunk. I recalled Judy and I hiding away in my closet-sized bedroom, which yes was tiny but held a vast imaginary whirlwind of ideas, the kinds of secrets that little girls would tell only

each other and promise to never tell another soul. The secrets had to do with the people we liked, and how we wanted to grow up and marry them and who we wanted to be when we got older.

I would go back to that world gladly. I dug my dirty fingers into rotting ground and wanted to bury my face in it and say, "take me down," and soon I realized I was crying and Dion was not with me anymore. Still, the women sang and played that awful music, and the wind was so vicious it sounded like a hurricane.

Then the rain came, unceasing, and I had to get up. *I would not die here.* Something pushed me to rise up even though I felt submerged in mystery and darkness and had no way to get home. Rain streaked down my muddy face, along with my sad tears, as I arose and saw that Dion had not left me, at least of his own accord, after all. He was still near but bound by rope on top of one of the piles of skeletons, with the bird-women around him, their song reaching its peak, which led into Aglatha's frantic aria—wherein a murder of crows alit on the dreary, rain-soaked night and began pecking at the newly dead sailors' eyes. Her agitation rose to hysteria that was more a scream than a song, a deeply embedded anger at how events had usurped their island.

As the song finally ended, the sounds` of crows and the strange ghosts still occasionally whispered in the woods surrounding us, like echoes, and the rest of the women once again took flight form and circled over Dion. Aglatha, their clear leader, squawked at the others and they soared away into the four winds, their wings barely able to keep course in the growing storm. Aglatha in bird form plunged down to Dion and began plucking out his eyes, then picked at his gentle face and arms and legs, until he slumped down to the ground.

I guessed it must be midnight now.

CHAPTER 10

I had not lost my will to survive and knew that the bird-women could find me, but I ran back into the thick forest, sliding over muddy grounds lined with dewy reeds and stems of various sorts. I couldn't see.

Open your eyes.

Inwardly, as I felt my way ahead, I pleaded silently with my mom. *Please come save me*, I said to her. Although nothing made sense, she had come to me that first day on the beach. *Please find me again*, I said.

It went on like this for what seemed an hour. The woods here were the quietest part of the island. I heard no whispers, no night sounds, just felt things. Damp things, rotted things, moldy things, soft and slimy things, hard and pokey things. After fighting through what I hoped was one direction—out—I felt a strong pinch on the skin between my thumb and index finger of my left hand and reflexively brought my hand to my face. The iron odor of blood instinctively drew me to suck the wound. Might have been just a sharp branch or maybe a venomous spider. I wanted to run away from it and this forest, but pace had to be steady because of the dark. I would not turn around. I would move forward, I thought. But I couldn't tell what was straight. I had to maneuver between thick-trunked trees and unfriendly bushes, some with briars and thorns.

Finally, feeling broken, I saw a sliver of moonlight from above, angling through a thinner wood. What is this place, I thought. A crazy forest surrounding a charnel ground, where my friend Dion was just killed.

Tears had been with me since that shocking sight, but I had to stop and take a breath. I stopped crying and made my way out of the predatory

forest, finally reaching sand again. There I sat, sad for Dion and terrified of everything else. I couldn't keep crying. I must fight. I had to save myself. But how? There's no hope during powerless moments when nothing in the world makes a lick of sense. Small steps, one at a time, I thought. I arose and walked into the ocean, feeling its pre-dawn chill lick my wounds with salt. I waded out until the water was waist high and sat, immersing myself into the womb of the cleansing water, stretching out my legs. Kelp tickled my feet. By now my previous gown was but a long shirt, coming to my thighs. A faint purple light began to grow in the east. The northern lights were gone, the lady-birds had flown away, and normal sounds eased back into reality. Now it was just me, the waves and wind, and the occasional cry of what I hoped was a night bird, probably an owl, calling out in sweet notes that sounded like a truncated, low whistle.

That repeated note soothed me as I tried to forget about Dion's fate and remind myself of the fact that the sisters had not killed me or come after me. I allowed myself the luxury of bathing for a long time, so long that I lost track of how much time had passed and suddenly realized that the eastern sky was agleam with the earliest emergence of the sunrise. The water rose up to my chest. As the sky slowly lightened, I noticed how bruised and scratched my arms and legs were, and I assumed my face too, since it burned and stung like everything else. But I was no longer bleeding. I would have been happy to soak here for an eternity and found it hard to make an actual move that might get me somewhere else. Feeling catatonic, I made no decisions. I would submerge myself in this warming belly of the sea, basking in its softness. Forever, maybe.

Giant splashes from the west startled my bliss. I didn't want to turn around. What else could this day possibly bring? A shark? A monstrous squid? I froze for an odd moment, and then slowly turned around.

There came Dion, grinning, only, was it Dion? His beard was gone, and he seemed slimmer, his face more feminine. Was it a sister disguised? But no, that was Dion's freckled smile and goofiness, which I had seen in moments—like when he teased me.

"You're alive?"

He reached me and plopped down next to me, hugging me with one arm. "Well, of course I am. Those women cannot kill me." His sandy legs touched mine, and I shimmered inside.

"I saw Aglatha skin your face, peck out your eyes, and you died!"

"Yes, all that did happen, my friend."

"Okay, well nothing on the island has made sense to me since day one. Please tell me what's going on." I could hear the whine in my tone.

His face gained a layer of sensuality. Oh, I had seen that look. Often. I had ignored it. Most of the time. I did not need to be romantically swayed in this crazy dream. I had to look away for a moment, but angrily refocused on his face. "I want some answers."

He giggled broadly. "I'm more than just a man," he finally said.

Was he a god? A man-woman? A shape-shifter? He wasn't going to tell me more, I thought. I gave him time, but he said nothing else. He seemed interested in the sea and gazing out at it. I was getting sleepy, but he wasn't going to give me any answers; his facial expression had grown distorted, from flirty with me to concerned about whatever he saw out in the ocean, which I didn't see.

He stood up, and reached for my hand. "We need to go."

"Again?"

"You can't sit there forever, Thelsie, not doing anything. Come on."

Tiredly, I let him pull me up. I would follow him. He hadn't gotten me killed yet, and my mission to kill him was over, I assumed, given the others had done the deed. But I really wasn't in the mood for another nightmarish trek. I hadn't eaten or slept for too long and lacked the energy. He might have detected this and gestured for me to ride piggyback. I hadn't known he had that kind of strength. He bounded to the beach, his stride strong and quicker than a normal person's. And he took me inland again, although this time heading south—skirting the death forest and heading west before going toward the death wasps. Death, death, death, I thought—but when I looked around me, all I could see was life, an abundance of weird, flowery, pungent and sweet, crazy life. I felt like I was riding a horse, and I looked down to make sure he had not turned into one—for as mad as that sounds, it did not seem impossible.

The soft day lacked whispers, the screams of bird-women, and rose around us, like a paradise that could only exist in times of yore, before concrete or steel. Eerie wild grasses, as tall as us, gently waved, and in the midst of them loomed large lilies of all colors, mingling with each other, their faces poking through the weeds, their many anthers like eyes watching us sprint by. Enormous oak trees bellowed above, their branches working with the wind to create a song of panache and force.

Dion easily began climbing a mountain, and other than the hard rise of a wicked wind, I was enjoying being carried too much and remained nonchalant about most anything else except that for the first time in a while I felt safe and surrounded by pleasantries. I wondered how long we

would ascend before seeing their canopies at our level. And then we were there, a sea of green leaf clouds before us, blocking the sea and everything else in the interim. It was here that Dion set me down and, sweating, pulled a wine skin and a snack of dry bread and fish out of his pack.

"You think of everything," I teased. Now I was feeling flirty, and was a little disappointed that the skin contained only water, instead of wine, though I knew that was best. I was giddy from lack of sleep. I only thought later that my goofiness to him was because of being so downright groggy because I had had no real time to thoroughly gauge the possibility of a relationship with him. Even a temporary one. I watched his dark face as he sat there, sipping water, his tenacious and clear, brown eyes regarding me curiously. He looked, of course, different with no facial hair, younger, maybe more my age than slightly older, as I had previously thought. Maybe when he got reborn, or whatever, he chose a slightly different face.

His gaze was too intense, and I looked beyond him, toward the tree boughs that at this distance looked more like green blobs than detailed oak leaves and branches. But then his hand touched my face, and turned me toward him. My face heated under this hot sun. Everything was hotter than usual, I thought. The heat was more tropical than I'd felt on the island thus far and came like a stormy wind whistling through a desert.

Our faces were too close to each other's, and it made me uncomfortable, but in the best way possible. He smelled like salt, with a faint memory of wine.

"Where are the sisters?" I asked. The thought was a genuine curiosity, but I wasn't ready for any other outcome, such as him pulling my face to his.

"No doubt pondering what to do with you next."

"They going to peck my eyes out?"

"No, Thelsie. They like you. They are probably just letting you recover from the events of last night."

"Do they know you are still alive?"

"No. They have no idea who I am, nor that I could survive such an ordeal. They thought I was a mere sailor who was out to corrupt their island."

"Were you?"

"I'm not a mere sailor."

"Were you out to corrupt their island?"

"Depends on what you mean by corrupt. I am a wine grower, but when I sail it is not to look for new places to grow grapes. It's to find newness in the world, to trade wine for other things I'd never known about."

"Aglatha said you were on a warship," I said.

"Perhaps it was used for that at one time, but not now."

We were still way too close to one another. I could tell him that, with the way the modern world worked, early commerce like his had the capability to corrupt wild places—but that didn't mean it had to have led to the extreme way things had gotten. Or did it? Could there be no other outcome? Did he even know the modern world? How many times had he been reborn, reinvented himself? But I had no answers myself just then, not any more questions either.

"Thelsie," he started. "We have another ordeal in front of us. You'll see when we get up the mountain. But for now...."

His face shadowed the sun.

The kiss came with a sound that had no particular focal point. His hard lips on mine, softening once we touched, wasn't something I could linger in. That noise. It sounded like what would happen if there were multiple winds that could be conjured all at once, along with rushing waters of the four corners of the earth. But in this case, it wasn't exactly from corners as much as the rush came from everywhere at once. Maybe he was a god, and that was the effect of such a kiss. This time, he did not carry me, but grabbed my hand, bringing me back to reality. The sound followed us up the mountain.

The island mountains reached around 3,000 feet max, I guessed. So far, we'd not climbed one all the way to the top. Above the oak tree canopies were more areas of exposed rock, expressing themselves as pink boulders or, at times, we could see now, in a complexion of small white and gray cliff faces. Above us, we could just make out what looked like three wild mountain goats climbing over the diminishing grasses, the taller trees turning to scrub the higher we climbed. At least some of the heat also went away, and the winds nearly toppled us over. From the beyond, the sea seemed angry, even on a day that showed no hint of storms. Blue upon blue stretched above us, with just a few distant cumulus clouds dotting the sky. Yet, the waves seemed higher than usual. From up here, they appeared like white wiggly lines, but even I could tell that they were reaching further inland. Late in the day would be high tide, and I wasn't sure what time it was—perhaps that late, for we'd been trekking since morning—but the waves were reaching beyond the sandy edges of the beaches.

That kiss was doing things to me. Dion had not let go of my hand except to sip water, and still upward we climbed. But now the mountain edged up at steeper inclines, past the juniper and Caleb and Calabrian pine, and we let go of each other, sometimes getting on all fours and relying on scrub oak and cypress to hold on to. The trees up here were shorter, their meager branches sweeping to one side from the wind. Below our feet, purple wild mountain thyme mingled with yellow sage. Dust-covered rocky surfaces made climbing much further nearly impossible with our sandals, but we hiked up until the summit was within our sight. We stopped at a plateau.

Dion said, "This is it for now."

We made our way closer to the eastern beach, and Dion said, "The reason we had to leave is because when we were in the sea this morning, I felt something strange was happening to the ocean. Look how far the waves have come inland. It's almost as though I could feel the water rising above us earlier, but I didn't want to scare you."

We eyed the waters below, and already they had gone beyond the edges of the shoreline, and waves were impeding on the forest.

"What is happening?"

"I have never seen anything like it. In storms, the waves rise higher. And then, my father taught me that the gravitational pull of the moon can affect tides. But this, I don't know. It's something different."

If only time could stop for even one second, we could seek each other out in another kiss, but the island's rhythm seemed to be constantly agitated, leaving us little time to get comfortable in our own skins, much less with each other. In another half hour, the water reached the

treeline, and that's when the singing began. Aglatha and Peisina's voices came from the east this time. Maybe they had been looking for me?

If there was a mother of all storms, this was it. They were pissed about something.

CHAPTER 11

The winds gained such momentum that Dion and I searched the mountain's eastern face until we found a cave to hide out in. It went back no more than ten feet and had a tall window to the sea. Now the day had turned colder, and storm clouds rolled across the sky. We sat cross-legged and knee-to-knee, wrapping ourselves in blankets from Dion's pack. He produced another item from his satchel, something tubular and wooden, which he held up to his eye as he continued to watch the beach below.

"What is that?" I asked.

"My father fashioned it from sand, back in his day," Dion said. "It helps to see things up close from far away. You'll want to look at this." He handed over the scope.

I held the crude instrument up to one eye, as he had done, and could see nothing but wild waves flopping over and over. Dion touched my scope hand with his. His hand guided the scope until I saw what he had seen.

The sisters sang from the ocean itself, a couple hundred feet offshore, Aglatha playing a tube during the refrain of the song and Peisina singing her heart out. How in the heck? They faced northward, the day darkening around them. The song seemed sweet and loudly seductive, despite the ominous clouds rolling in. Peisina held out her arm as if welcoming someone to the island, and I followed the direction they faced, where—I should have guessed—a trireme sailed along quickly toward their location, too fast, of course. Out of control. What's more, I had not seen the sisters like this *in* the sea. I focused the scope even more to see that they were not bird-women at all now but mermaids, their naked flesh from above the waist morphing into sickly gray scales,

and below culminating in fish tails, which occasionally flicked above the choppy waterline.

"What in the ever-living hell." I said.

Dion grabbed the scope and looked for himself. He whistled slowly.

"Those women sure know how to ruin a good party."

We took turns with the scope, watching the trireme crash into the eastern beach, where there were no cliffs but where things turned just as deadly as the scene I had helped to rescue Dion from. Thunderous winds and blinding rain splintered the boat in half, tossing it upward before its pieces landed with audible plonks. Dion had the scope now and said, sadly, "I don't think anyone will survive that."

I took the instrument, gazing through it again. I just couldn't watch the death on the island's shores more than I had—sailors obviously dead upon their harsh landfall, the sea bloody with the dying as bodies hit pieces of ship that had been blown apart by the wind. I focused again on the sisters as their cruel song ended, and they rose above the water, their tails shrinking into talons and their arms spreading into wings as they arose from the sea, flying to the masses on the coastline, which was by now covered with water. I guessed close to two-hundred men lay dead or dying. Joined by the other mysterious siren friends I'd seen yesterday, they began to pick up the dead with their talons and carry them to the funeral in the midst of the dark thicket. I dropped the scope, shaking. Dion hugged me and said, "Shhh, shhh, we will be okay, darling. I will get you off this death island. I will."

Even Dion seemed disenchanted enough to not consider hiking further up the mountain for now. He let me curl up on his lap, where I closed my eyes, letting the scenes of the past day run through my head. As I lay there, lingering on sleep, images of bones and snakes and maggots and

talons and mermaids and dying bodies shifted through like images of the worst imaginable horror movie ever. Judy and I had liked watching scary movies once upon a time. Our favorite was *The Witch*, but she would shit her pants if she saw what I had seen lately. I wanted to drift off, and Dion smoothed out my hair away from my face that had been stung by rain mixed with the salt of the ocean. Now the day was mellowing. The sun re-emerged as if nothing had happened, and the nymphs of the forest began their soft whispers, even up here on the mountain. Their barely audible voices sounded like small breezes rushing through trees. They seemed sad but lulled me to sleep.

I awoke to Dion calling me softly. He had made a meal over a small campfire in the cave. He'd gathered mustard greens and boiled them, serving pear slices, figs, and bitter olives on the side. I ate hungrily and felt refreshed, even though I had not slept long. The sun was still out, edging toward the western horizon.

"We need a plan," he said.

"To escape finally?" I was halfway joking.

"Yes. I have to get this straight. How did you get here?"

"I told you, I came from somewhere far away. I woke up here. I went to bed the night before in a cold city far away." I looked down to the ocean below through the scope. By now, the beach was covered in several feet of water, and the inland forests were also awash with seawater. The oceans were closing in on us, I thought.

"Okay," he said.

"Thank you for believing me." I was sincere. I wouldn't believe me.

"I think you landed here due to your fate. You woke up, you *were*. The why is something I can't yet grasp. Why you would come here, to a place where the singing women commit hubris and the songs of the dead whisper in the trees, is beyond me."

"Is it really ghosts singing? Like the dead sailors?"

"Honey, Father-time has a weird way of doing things. Those tree-nymphs are ancient beings from long ago, before modern tradesmen. It takes an eternity for the dead to rise again. Well, for mortals anyway. I can't say exactly who the whisperers are. My guess is from before time as we know it. They occupied the garden before the bird-women came to call it their own."

Dion had already explained Aeaea. I reminded him now, "I heard them sing it. It reminded me of a song from my time."

"Your time?"

How to explain the concept of movies to him? "It was similar to a song I knew," I simply said.

I watched his face go somewhere in the past. His eyes began to mist up. He had told me about it before, about Aeaea, but now he went further. "Aeaea was the home of a woman I used to love. She was one of three-thousand sea goddesses. Maybe all of them are here, crying in the woods, or maybe laughing. It is hard to know."

"You were here before?"

"Not here, no. I met Circe on another island during my early sailings, but it is said that she lived here. That would explain everything." He had mentioned Circe before without hinting at their relationship.

"What do you mean, everything?"

"Oh, she was an herbalist, and I've never seen so many diverse and weird plants as on this island. She also transformed people she disliked into animals. Remember the wasps? Everything here is just off."

"And the women turning into birds and fish!"

"I never would have guessed it, but you may be right."

I reached out now to caress his face. It was my time to comfort him. He seemed gracious at first, but then turned his head away. I wondered too many things. How old was he, really? If he was around my age, having a lover once upon a time was impossible. Not to mention she was a goddess from a very long time ago. Would he have been born in Circe's time? Then I remembered that I'd seen him die once and he was reborn. I didn't want to think about it.

But if all this ridiculous stuff were true, maybe we were getting somewhere and I was in love with a very ancient time-walker. Did I say, "in love"? That was my thinking then. But it wasn't your typical modern day "in love" meaning—more like a cross with "in fond mystery" with and "in lust" with. It had taken a few days for me to allow this realization, but it seemed real to me now, though I didn't think I could ever add up to the greatness of a sea goddess when it came to love. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that maybe he was not the only time-walker.

"I'm sorry, Thelsie," he said, turning back toward me. "It's you who I can't keep my mind off of."

He kissed me again, this time softer and with more meaning and trust. It lasted until the wind picked up, blowing our hair across our mouths, and we stopped and laughed but also looked around us—our feathers ruffled in case there would be another storm or sailor song. We lay

down together, kissing more, teasing, touching, yet we couldn't let our guard down too much. We'd have to love in waves, I thought. But how long could it last?

I stretched and arose, walking back to the ocean view. The waters were even higher. Through the scope I could not see the lower tree trunks of the forest. I went further from the cave, looking to the south, then north. I'd have to do a hike to see the west, but the waters were enveloping us from every direction, and the wind moaned. Then it hit me. I went back to sit next to Dion, who was watching me with a big smile.

I had thought about something finally, and let him know. "There are other reasons than the moon and the sun for the ocean's tide to rise and fall. Or, more particularly, not the tides but the sea itself." I began talking quickly and passionately, now that my confidence in Dion was growing. "In my world, we recognize sea levels rising due to warming waters and the melting of glaciers and sea ice." I explained it all, to which he didn't seem surprised. He'd had, at least what I thought of, a scientific father, so he should understand the principles of it all. I said, "In a way, you can think of the reasons the seas are rising to the corruption the sirens want to keep out."

"My father always said that the world exists on a thin balance," he said.

Even if the water was flooding the island, we thought it might take days to get all the way up the mountain. Covering the floor of the island was one thing; filling to our spot wouldn't be too fast, even though this flood was happening in an unprecedented manner.

Finally, Dion arose, and I watched his beautiful frame. I could see us together, like all the way. I had dreamed such dreams when Judy and I

used to talk about people we were crushing on. She would absolutely not believe this.

"I have to go into hiding, my dear," he said. "You need to call Aglatha and Peisina and see if they can tell you how to get off this island. Let them know of your world. Let them know you are sorry that you couldn't finish your mission to kill me, but surely they will understand."

"What? No. Don't go. I don't want to see them anymore."

"Thelsie, now that I know more about you, I realize your fate. It might not have been to meet me. I was just an actor on the stage. But it's clear to me that you were supposed to meet them. Maybe, despite the grotesque manner in which they sing and kill here, their aims to protect the island were not in vain? What if their mission should have always been handed down, and the gods just got it wrong? Oh, the gods died out long ago, of course not literally. They are old and forgotten though, and lost control of the world at some point. I can't explain it all now, Thelsie, but you have to do this."

I stood up, tears forming in my eyes. He grabbed me strongly and said, "I won't go far. I won't let them harm you."

"But how can you save me? They can fly and swim and have powers to do all these bad things."

"And they killed me, but not long after I was back here alive."

I finally had to agree. It seemed the island would be swallowed up and I would not survive. Maybe the bird-women could fly or swim away. Maybe Dion could reform somewhere else. Maybe the sea goddesses would return to the sea to whisper in the ocean depths once their forest was gone. But me, I was only human.

CHAPTER 12

I didn't know how to call the singers. I had tried to call to Mom, and she couldn't hear me anymore.

I sat outside the cave, eyes open, under a surreal sky full of sunshine and bird song. Normal birds, I thought. Thank goodness. I didn't know what the birds were doing. Holding their territory, looking for company. It seemed suddenly the sky and forests were full of whistles and chirps and tweets and babbles and squeaks and scolds and acknowledgments and sometimes complex vocalizations that were impressive to me—and I was sure they weren't trying to communicate with me. Only, how awesome would it be if they were.

I thought about all the other singers in the world: whales, bats, frogs, toads, fish, mice, even dogs. I used to hear crickets at night when Judy and I left the urban areas to walk in parks. They sang too. I would argue that everything sang in some manner. Some with vocal cords and others by manipulating their bodies or environment to make sounds, often times to lure mates. Isn't finding love what we all want, I thought. Too bad the sisters had contaminated that idea.

Then I realized I had to sing. That's all the sisters knew, all they would understand, wasn't it? And that's how I could move them to help me. They had only thought of me as so-so until I taught them a song from my time. I wasn't in a hurry right now, though. The day was still bright and slow, with a beautiful shimmer of sea below, and I was going to revel in it until I was ready.

I thought of songs from my lifetime. Twenty years of being on this train, but really it was more than that. Because Mom had brought me her generation of music, which went back decades, and, naturally, the ones her parents grew up with, even further back, and so on. Her

family's taste in music was eclectic, ranging from bluegrass and gospel and, long before then—even as far back as their Ugandan ancestry, before they were brought to the United States on slave ships. Mom had researched that music and learned how to do the Larakaraka dance, and she was just so tall and thin it looked good on her. I could see her dancing in the kitchen again. She'd brought me rhythm and blues and the rock and roll that drew from those traditions, like the early Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. Uncle Chamin taught me all about jazz, which he'd grown up with. Oh, how I loved him and hoped he was doing well. I wanted to cry when thinking of him without me. But he could hold his own too, especially on those nights where wind would blast through our apartment from an open screen, and he'd put on his old albums and play stuff like Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing" or Ella Fitzgerald's "Summertime."

Then there were mine and Judy's songs together, ranging from childhood through current times. We didn't have mix tapes like our parents had when they were growing up. But we made playlists online and sent links to each other during giggly midnights, and I would argue it was just as meaningful as having a physical tape to pop into a cassette player. We were both the same age, born several years into the new millennium. Mom told me that newer music wasn't as good as older music, that the further you got away from the classics, the more you got away from quality music, but I laughed and said that in the future my teenage music would be classic too. Anyway, the quality of music would always be entirely subjective, and, in my and Judy's and cases, nearly every song in our "mix tapes" had to do with moments that just happened without being planned.

Like there was a time we went to the Maypole Baptist Church to tutor on a Tuesday night. Her dad knew the preacher there, and we would help out sometimes. Once we decided to go around the block for a run after we were done, while the adults mingled. It was a horribly sultry summer night but still light out. Only our run did not follow a block, exactly, because we were engrossed in a conversation about James Buckley, who was new at middle-school and hot, and we got sidetracked and ended up near a liquor store on Pulaski Avenue. We stopped, lost for a few seconds. But then we got caught up in an old man sitting on a stool on that dirty sidewalk singing "Landslide." We'd never heard that particular song before and went home to look it up and saw that Fleetwood Mac sang it first, and then it was covered by other artists, including the Smashing Pumpkins. It was the latter version I hooked on to, but Judy liked the original as well as Miley Cyrus's version. The Dixie Chicks had sung it too, though later they changed their name to just The Chicks. That summer was when old American statues that had glorified slavery and other brutality were torn down. From that evening on Pulaski to today, Judy and I would always think of "Landslide" when we thought about James Buckley. We were never sure where he went after school was over, but the song remains fresh in a sort of profound memory that will only ever make sense to the people sharing it. As I sat here tonight, I wondered if cover singers were like birds, mimicking others' sounds with their own voices.

Funny how accidental moments float together in time, even when you're far away on some island where old goddesses and birds were held together by song, too.

I thought of another one of those moments, again with Judy, when we were at my house on a Saturday night. She was sleeping over, and Mom

was out partying. Uncle Chamin had passed out in the living room, and we were listening to music on the radio, laughing and talking about everything and nothing in the universe. You know those kinds of nights. We were just kids, really, even then. I will always remember it being October 18th, because it was Judy's birthday. She'd had a bad day due to her favorite sister forgetting her birthday. We were flipping through the radio and heard a song that spoke to both of us on some primordial level; we had never heard it before. We learned it was a band called Tragically Hip, from Canada, and the singer Gord Downie had just died the previous day, at age 53, from brain cancer. Judy jumped up and found the song on her phone, and played it again. And again. Teenagers will play a song approximately 900 times before stopping. How could we have not heard this song before? It changed our lives. "And that's where the hornet stung me, and I had a feverish dream," we sang loudly. Then she said, "And I thought my day was bad!" The song, out of strange timing and a flip through stations, became our life motto. We related to the song, like millions of others. Who hasn't climbed a tree, listened to their thoughts, and thought that maybe life isn't exactly a dress rehearsal for another plan B if this one doesn't work out?

Most of the time we listened to the music of our so-far short generation. Lady Gaga. John Legend. Frank Ocean. Big Freedia. Shea Diamond. Black Eyed Peas. Ava Max. Charlie XCX. Sia. Alicia Keys. Coldplay. Too many to list, those songs we came of age to. Then more accidental music. The Great Big Sea, from our discovery of other Canadian music circa Gord Downie. Joni Mitchell, when we caught Mom listening to the songstress in one of her more languid and reflective moments. King Crimson, found when raiding Uncle's album collection.

I began to stretch now, feeling confident. Maybe being kissed had brought me back to reality, or at least the man who kissed me had made me realize that reality was a possibility again. I swayed, I jumped, I shook out the tensions from my body. I'd have to figure out the right song for now, in order to lure in the seducers. They liked to learn new songs. That's the one thing I knew for sure about the bird-mermaids. It'd have to be an ageless song, something to transcend not just generations but centuries, millennia.

It was another accidental song, which Judy and I came across when we were walking in a not so great area of Chicago some distance south from the Museum of Science and Industry, where we had ditched her parents. Though we had been fascinated by the museum as children, we had seen it all before and were given permission to walk to the beach and meet everyone back at the museum three hours later. We headed south through Jackson Park, for a while walking along Lake Michigan's snow-covered shoreline, until we ended up in a neighborhood that had a pub. Not the best neighborhood, but neither the worst. For the second time walking in Chicago, we came across a person singing on the sidewalk for change. This time it was a woman, and we did not know the song, but we looked it up after hearing it, being the always-on-the-phone people that we had become, and it turned out to be a song by many people and orchestras—many birds—across time. Starting in the 17th century as "O Waly, Waly," we learned that it had Scottish origins but was still a folk song in our century. Mama told us in her parents' day, it was, as we had heard it on the street corner, "The Water Is Wide." Along the centuries, the lyrics slightly evolved, just like myths did.

I took in a deep breath and began to sing it loudly, thinking of Dion but also of something more universal. I was just another bird, but my song was as important as anyone else's I hoped.

*The water is wide, and I can't cross over
Neither have I wings that I could fly
Build me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row my love and I.*

*There is a ship, and it sails on the sea
Loaded deep as deep can be
But not as deep as the love I'm in
I know not if I sink or swim.*

*I leaned my back up against an oak
Thinkin' it was a trusty tree
But first it bent and then it broke
Just like my own false love to me.*

*Oh love is gentle, love is kind
Gay as a jewel when first it's new
But love grows old and waxes cold
And fades away like some morning dew.*

*The water is wide, and I can't cross over
Neither have I wings to fly
Build me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row my love and I.*

Below me, the water rose across the island. The sisters must have noticed it too and wondered why they had not been able to truly protect their garden. They could play out their game. We all could. Then we could lose, watch the floods come, and try to argue about who had caused it, something that arose from anger and, later, would get lost in a rear-view mirror. *But love grows old and waxes cold, I sang. And fades away like some morning dew.* Which is exactly how I felt too many times in the weird world out there. Maybe now it would be better when I got to see Uncle Chamin and Judy again, and also, I had to admit, going back home—if this worked—I'd always fondly remember the brief interlude

I had in time, meeting Dion. He'd stay with me, much like "Landslide" had from another time.

As I sang, there were no storms, no faeries whispering, no gales pushing me sideways. Birds occasionally called, and I could only hope that they appreciated me like I had them. Soon enough, though, shadows appeared above, a flapping of wings, and they descended to the ground, one by one. Aglatha, Peisina, and the others who I'd seen that first time, when good 'old Aggie had plucked at Dion's skin and eyes.

I was a different woman than I had been upon arriving at the island just days ago. Aglatha and Peisina had seemed so beautiful and mysterious back then. Now I saw them as perhaps cursed by Circe once upon a time, or real humans underneath—strangely devout, capable of murder, but also not strangers enough to offer kindness and hospitality. They had fed and clothed me.

The other women were just as seductive, and the one who I thought might resemble my mom was not her, of course. They stared at me with the kind of look my grandmother and aunties would always give me—a kind of "I cherish you, honey, but really, can you just quit causing so much trouble?" That lipstick, pursed look that lovely women got away with.

I kept singing, though, daring them to try to make me feel small and unimportant. That's all I could do—raise my voice and hope that they would listen.

But then the song was over, and I was no longer afraid of them.

Slowly, Aglatha began to clap her hands together, and the chorus of them, with all their impossible beauty and seductiveness, gathered

around me and touched my face and ran their fingers through my hair and told me how wonderful the song was. "Can you teach us? Can we sing it with you?"

"Only if you let me get home," I said.

That silenced them. Maybe they only knew how to bring people to the island and had no idea how to send them away, except to their death. Of course, that was my fear, but I wanted to believe otherwise.

Aglatha said, "We didn't bring you here, Thelsie."

"No, honey, we did not," her sister agreed. Peisina, always the gentlest one, came to touch my cheek with her fingers. "How did you get here, sweetie?"

Aglatha stomped her foot and said, "No, Peisina. Don't start on that. This girl failed to obey us. She let that sailor live, you know."

"Oh for god's sake," I said. "He ran away from me. Even so, when he came back to help free me from the wasps, I realized I couldn't do it. Besides, you killed him. All of you."

The others I had not formally met stepped back in apparent shame, but Aglatha got up in my face. "We had to," she hissed. "You were given fair warning that he would ruin our island if we let him live."

"Oh?" I countered. "Then why is your island being flooded after you killed him?" I hinged on the hopeful fact that they didn't know yet that he had come back to life.

"Yes, sister," Peisina said. "Why is that? Maybe he wasn't really the kind of man you thought he was."

"He was sweet to me and made me these shoes," I said pointing down at my feet, realizing that I was filthy and the shoes were beginning to fall apart.

Aglatha wouldn't be persuaded. "He planted his seed of corruption, and that is exactly why the seas are swallowing our home!" She sat down on the ground and began to cry. She grabbed fistfuls of earth as if to cling to this domain, the one she had been born to protect.

The four other singers began to sing "The Water is Wide" and stepped into the background. It was like a damn Greek chorus.

I bent down to hug Aglatha. I told her, "You have to let me go home. You can swim or fly away. I cannot. I will drown here."

"But we can make you like us," she told me.

"No, Aglatha. I don't want to be like you. I want to be myself and go home to my family and my friends. I have my own island."

"She's right," Peisina spoke up. "Come, sister. Let her be."

We both tried to comfort Aglatha, obviously destroyed by the fate of her island.

"There will be another island," one of the women in the chorus said to Aglatha. "Come home with us."

Because Aglatha was falling apart, the other women soothed me in whispers and sorrow. Aglatha kept crying, until they helped her off the ground and donned their wings. Only Peisina stayed behind.

"If it weren't for you, I would be doomed here," I told her.

"Oh, Aglatha is a mean old witch, but she would never harm you. Not truly."

"How do I get back home?"

"I didn't lie, Thelsie. We didn't bring you here. We can't even really give you permission to go back. You must *want* to return with all your heart. Think back about what happened before you came here. What are some of the last things you remember?"

I'd thought so many times about the night before I woke up on the island. "I went to bed like normal. My uncle was drunk and went to sleep before I did. I made macaroni and cheese with hotdogs, and a slice of pickle on the side. Then I saw the moon through the steamed up window. I guess I thought dreamily about how nice it would be if I could, just for one day, be at a place where it was warm."

She looked at me as though I was speaking another language. "It was cold there?"

"Yes, and when I went to bed, I couldn't get warm. Then I fell asleep."

I heard a noise by the cave. There, Dion came out of his hiding place.

"You!" Peisina said. "How are you here?"

Dion looked at me, then her. "I have my ways, lady. No use killing me again, for I will come back again. Besides, looks like this island is done for." He pointed to the sea below. Water had covered all of the beaches and most of the trees far below.

I went to Dion and hugged him, already sad that I would have to tell him goodbye. "Please don't threaten him or hurt him again, Peisina. Remember the song I sang?"

She nodded, in resignation. "Well, I still have no idea how to get you home," she said.

Now I thought I would cry. I'd been so hopeful for a change, so eager to start my real adulthood back home. I'd come to certain realizations about my life, how I wanted to live and do the right things.

But Dion said, "I know how."

"But," I began. "If you knew, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because it just occurred to me," he said. "I never knew what you were thinking before opening your eyes on this island. Know what I was doing the night before the shipwreck?"

"No," I said.

"I was on the boat," he explained. "And we'd had days of the hottest weather and were running out of water. I was becoming sunburned and exhausted and dehydrated. We all were. I remember that night before falling asleep. I dreamed of somewhere cold with fresh water. We'd heard rumors of sailors from the north traversing lands of ice and snow. I wanted that just for once."

"But you did not get transported to a place like that," I pointed out.

"No, but I believe our thoughts matched somewhere in the universe, and we were brought together. Maybe if we dream of going back home tonight? Maybe whatever led us here to meet will allow us to go back?"

"Brilliant!" Peisina said.

"I don't understand how your world works. All the time-walking and magic. But it's worth a try," I said.

"Fate is not caused by sorcery," said Dion.

"I believe that, too," Peisina said. She seemed sad. "I will miss you, Thelsie, but must get back to my sisters on the cliff." She turned to Dion and said, "And I won't let them know that you somehow survived."

But both of you must get out of here. If Aglatha finds out that you were still here, she'll kill you, Dion."

He understood. "And you all better get off this island too," he warned her. "I fear the same turbulence that brought Thelsie and I together has folded time to both our realities, and her world is coming through."

"Oh?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "In my world, nobody has been able to save the islands or any places, really. The seas may swallow all the world's islands for all I know." I felt inadequate to try to tell her everything. She might begin crying if she learned that all protectors had failed everywhere.

She hugged me and said, "We must all hurry then. You do what you need to do with Dion. I will go back and tell the sisters that you have figured out your way home."

"Wait," I called after her.

She turned, sparkling and gloomy all at the same time.

"When we first met, you said my mother told you about me. How?"

Peisina smiled. "Aglatha and I heard singing from the forest that didn't sound like the usual whispers from the nymphs. There, we found your mother, a ghost. We had never heard anyone sing so perfectly, until we heard you."

"Do all people come here to die?"

"Death is funny," Peisina said, with a look of nostalgia in her eyes. "A ghost, as you call it, may go anywhere, but usually it is to sing for their lost loved ones. Your mother said she had sought the water spirits of her ancestors, and once you entered the island, she came here to tell you it would all be okay."

That night, Dion and I eyed the waters below, which slowly crept up the mountain. Sounds of night birds and trees waving in the gentle island breeze soothed us. We decided to sleep in the cave and dream of going home.

"And where is your home?" I asked him.

"I am not sure yet," he said. "I'll figure it out."

We made a bed in the cave and lay next to each other, with his blankets draped over us, for the night at this elevation became cool. Not cold like Chicago or like the wondrous snow he'd heard tales of. And yet it wasn't as hot as the island I had dreamed of either. Something in between. We held hands, kissed, and promised each other before falling asleep we would find a new dream.

CHAPTER 13

Eight years later.

I'll never forget the day I saw him again.

That afternoon I wore my comfy jeans and favorite purple turtleneck sweater as I walked among the old brick buildings of the University of Chicago—autumn trees dropping their leaves under a blue sky. When the leaves swirled in the wind, it reminded me of the energy of the ghost nymphs back on the island, as if the leaves danced of their own accord. Students studied on the lawns near large oaks and maples, in the still warm weather. I was on my way home after my last class of the day, a music theory course. Since those island days, I had really done it. Worked at the Old Soul Kitchen until I finished saving for college, where I studied music and continued to sing. Uncle Chamin had died two years prior, and I'd moved out of the cold, run-down apartment to rent a cozy room closer to campus.

It seemed the island had never existed. I had awoken a day after falling asleep with Dion and found myself back in Chicago, to see Uncle Chamin eating the macaroni I had cooked the night before. It was as though no time had passed. But deep down, I knew it had. I just couldn't prove it, so I told nobody.

I ambled across the campus, wondering what to do for dinner, I couldn't help but admire the perfect fall day, which Uncle Chamin would call a "fat lady's day." Should I get some pizza? Meet with friends for tea or a beer down at the pub? Call Judy tonight and reminisce? She had graduated already from U of I at Champaign-Urbana and was engaged to her college boyfriend. I walked happily. It was just one of those days where I felt fine. Every day since the island had been one of

renewal. You don't know what you have until a dream goes awry, that's for sure. I was walking with my head in the clouds when I bumped into him.

I almost fainted when I saw his face. Just a guy walking the other direction, whose head had not been in the clouds. It was Dion's face, but the idea was so preposterous that he would be here. Me bumping into him caused him to drop a book he was carrying.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't paying attention." I bent down to pick up the book, and he cupped my elbow.

"Thelsie?"

"It isn't really you, is it?"

"It is."

He pulled me into his arms, smiling widely. "Do you know how long I've been looking for you?"

"Four years," I imagined out loud.

"I realized that home might be where you are," he said shyly. Dion looked no different than any other student. He wore a sweater and jeans. His black hair came to his shoulders, and his face was that freckled, brown, and goofy face from the island. "When we were on the island, you told me about Chicago, where you were from. Do you know how big Chicago is?"

"And you've been looking for me this whole time?"

He nodded and laughed. He'd taken on a carefreeness about him, unlike the somewhat guarded man on the island. "Yes. Isn't it weird that we both enrolled here at the U of Chicago? I mean, what are the odds?"

"Well, maybe I also made a wish, for me to find you again someday," I said.

He grabbed my hand, and we walked together, heading into what seemed a gentle future at the time.

That was four years ago.

He'd cleared up some things for me throughout the years. *Were you really a god, I asked. Did you make love with Circe? Who was your dad?*

Yes, I was known as Dionysus. Yes, we did it a few times. Zeus is my dad.

Am I better than Circe?

Yes, you are better than anyone.

I almost fell out of my chair. Zeus? Dionysus? Of course. The wine. The shape-shifting. The weather god. But to me, he was a human, a regular guy, subject to ups and downs and moods.

Now another year was aging into its dusk, and Dion and I had eased into a house in the far suburbs where farmers grew corn nearby. It was a small place on the edge of a forest.

"It's like it wants us back...together," he said, not for the first time. We were sitting out on the back deck, on a fall evening, beneath our string of fairy lights, which subdued us in a starry atmosphere.

I looked at him softly. He seemed pained, uneasy. It was a growing shift I'd seen in him. Myself too, if I were honest.

My life wasn't what I would have imagined as I grew up in Chicago. I hadn't counted on meeting a man from another world. That night on

the deck, we continued to watch birds around our yard and surrounding forests.

We'd done things with our lives, even though they weren't our original dreams. I used to think I'd grow up to be a chef, but now I taught high school choir and ran a bird-watching club for students. Dion's dreams were changing too. He'd wanted to stay a grape-grower, but these days it took so much water to run a vineyard and fresh water was diminishing. He was no longer the son of the sky, but a man. He didn't drink much anymore, though at times we enjoyed it on mellow evenings while conversing beneath the stars. Instead, he'd studied meteorology and, though was surprised at the detail of the books explaining the science of it, he'd often say, "My father and I had the weather down pat just by looking at the sky."

He and I remembered the rising seas at Aea. It was something we didn't talk about much but could see it happening in our world more and more. It was easier to go about the daily routine of living without constantly worrying about what would change. But unease grew day by day as Dion's foothold in the modern world began to depress him.

"What's wrong, babe?" I asked that night beneath the fairy lights.

"When I was young, the world was magical and never-ending. Now it feels subdued and small. And as though it won't last as long."

"I had a tough childhood," I said. "But maybe as children we still had dreams?"

"I refuse to believe dreams die in childhood," he said. "It's something else. I'm still pissed that Aglatha plucked out my eyes and skin, but maybe she and Peisina were right."

"About men?"

"About people in general who want to come and take something that's not theirs, that's working perfectly fine as is, like the island of sirens."

I thought about that and realized, not for the first time, that I too missed Aeaëa. Could we go back? It had crossed my mind. I'd left the place and set out to do what I wanted to do: work and go to college. But things were changing. We didn't have plans to climb ladders or have children. The world had limits, and we felt like cogs on the wheel that kept forcing those limits to expand and become impossible, even if our personal lives were humble.

Dion turned to look at me from his camp chair. I could see the sincerity in his eyes, even with only the dim string of lights above. "Would you want to go back, both of us?"

"Maybe," I said. "Do you think the island is still there?" Despite the uncertainty in today's world, on so many levels, the island had also been one of paradoxes. Would the sisters still be there? Would the island be above water?

He said, "When you left, time would have folded back, without the memory of the modern world. I think the island is still there. If we go back together, we'll have to particularly wish that we go back to the place it was before us. We cannot bring our world there, only our knowledge of what's to be."

We hugged beneath the moonlight, and even then, I knew, from the energy coursing through me, that Dion's idea of trying to get back to the island would continue to bait me until we would go. It was already churning inside. It was too late to change things in our world now, I thought. Going back as prescient singers to earlier years with gods and ephemeral planes and the whispering dead, when the world was brimming new and wild, and guardians protected their gardens, seemed

better than watching the seas continue to rise around us, swallowing us
as though we never existed.

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I began writing his story in 2014, and back then had no plans with it. I had been reading some weird fiction by authors such as Jeff VanderMeer, Michael Bernanos, Caitlín R. Kiernan, and William Hope Hodgson. Rebecca Giggs has described the Ecological Uncanny in terms of the dissolution of the boundaries between the inner world of the self and the outer world engendered by climate change, suggesting that "the Ecological Uncanny is perhaps best encapsulated as the experience of ourselves as foreign bodies." And though the concept of ecological weird fiction is still emerging as authors explore climate change themes in fiction, I was trying to play with it in this novella as well as touching upon a Greek myth I'd thought about for years, that of the sirens. I want to thank these authors and scholars for their impressive, unique ideas and stories that planted a seed in me. Add to that list Rory Powers and Marian Womack, whose works I read later, before picking up my novella up again in 2019.

When I began writing the story again, it got put on hold as we moved right when the Covid-19 pandemic was announced, from Vancouver, BC, to Halifax, NS. But as soon as I got here, I began writing again since I was alone and in isolation in a cold, windy, snowy place—before my husband got here three weeks later—and I finished the novella. I must thank my editor and partner in life, Morgan. He's amazing and talented in multiple areas of study, and is the love of my life, to boot.

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BOOK STUDY GUIDE

If you enjoyed this novella, please feel free to use the following study guide in book clubs or high school classes.

What are new mythologies, and how does fiction create them?

What paradoxes haunt Thelsie on the island?

Compare the Greek mythology of the sirens to the role of the sirens in *Bird Song*.

Did you suspect that Dion was not a mortal all along, and did you have any clue about who he might have been?

Who was your favorite character in *Bird Song*, and why?

What weird fiction tropes did you notice in the book, and how do you think weird fiction works as a way to approach ecological themes?

Think of animals that "sing" and what they communicate. Discuss!

Explore different genres that might tackle climate change in fiction and how impactful you think they might be.

When looking at the way teenagers and young people around the world are a positive force for climate change mitigation, can you think of any similar literary heroes?

Have you read other fiction about climate or ecological changes, and what are your favorite books?

Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Clara Hume (pen name for Mary Woodbury) lives in Nova Scotia with her partner and cat. She and her husband enjoy their big meadow, where they recently planted gardens and over 40 trees. Mary's other hobbies are curating the website Dragonfly.eco, reading, writing, interviewing authors, and spending time on the trail. She enjoys being in the ocean, having bonfires in the summer, and planning a return to Ireland, if only in her dreams.

Her debut novel, *Back to the Garden*, first published in 2013 (Moon Willow Press), was printed as a 2nd edition in 2018 and was discussed in *Dissent Magazine*, *Ethnobiology for the Future: Linking Cultural and Ecological Diversity* (University of Arizona Press, 2016), and *Uncertainty and the Philosophy of Climate Change* (Routledge, 2014). It was recommended reading by Sierra Club, Queensland University's Earth Day recommendations, and LitHub. The second part of the duology, *The Stolen Child*, was published in 2022 (Dragonfly Publishing). Mary is a guest author at Artists and Climate Change and Climate Cultures. She has also written for Impaktr, Chciago Review of Books, Ecology Action Centre, SFFWorld.com, and Free Word Centre. She was a contributing writer to *Tales from the River: An Anthology of River Literature* (Stormbird Press, 2018). Her work has been translated into Italian for *Zest Letteratura Sostenibile* and into Chinese for *Science Magazine*.