

CHAPTER ONE

The Golden Shell

I was six years old the day I drowned.

I had been playing in the ocean with my brother George when the earth shook and I was taken by a riptide. I fought against the current—saw George get thrown back toward the shore by big bodies in scarlet swim trunks, but I was being sucked away.

My mother, restrained by lifeguards, was screaming.

“Walter!” she cried out. “Walter, get Gracie! Get Gracie!”

Tumbling, I saw the hulking blur of my stepfather appear above the stinging sea. I felt his thick, strong fingers close around my ankle—and then I felt him let go. Not lose me. *Let go.*

“Dafne, she’s—” I heard his booming voice through the heavy whooshing all around me, but whatever I was, I never learned. The tide was rolling back. The beach was sliding away fast, and I could hardly hold my breath—

This was exactly what I feared about sitting in the bathtub with the drain unplugged. Away, down, unbreathing...

The edges of my vision were quickly going dark. I needed air—there was no air—and then I breathed. A heavy, salty influx filled my chest. I flailed in the current, fighting the wild burning in my lungs before there was a sense of overwhelming calm.

It was punctuated by a sting, a real sting. This one wasn't in my lungs; it hit right along the tips of my toes. Next second, the face of the most enchantingly beautiful person I'd ever seen was floating before me; I was captivated by her dark, piercing eyes, and behind her sprawled a train of the most fabulous fins—all striped and spotted with protrusions like gigantic feathers. I smiled, delighted, then reached out to touch her face. *She was real.* And behind her quite a ways floated a gaggle of others, all bare-chested, a rainbow of skin tones, and their tails resembled all different kinds of fish.

One waved at me, smiling—a golden blonde mermaid with a tail like white pearl. Her other arm was wound around a brown-tailed mermaid who looked like a boy, but wasn't. The boyish mermaid did not smile, but looked on as though afraid—of me? She hugged the blonde mermaid closer against her.

The mermaid who had swum up to me smiled, then pressed a finger to her lips. She lifted me by my underarms, then held me up above the waves, one hand on my back the other on my chest, pressing tighter and tighter together until a cascade of saltwater burst forth from my mouth.

I stared at her.

“I am sorry, little one,” she whispered, almost singing, and I was confused as to why she suddenly looked so sad. “I am so, so sorry.” The way that she spoke sounded strange to me. It was the first time I'd heard anyone speak with an accent different from my own. The mermaid turned me around. “Do you see your mother?”

“Yes.” My little hand pointed toward Mom. Now Walter was holding her against the sand as she fought futilely. George and Gabriela stared between their parents and the sea, little bodies full of too many emotions to wear just one. The mermaid’s face had gone stony.

“Then you must go to her at once. Don’t let her worry longer, girl. I’ll watch you go and keep you safe if the water takes you again.”

“Are you a mermaid?” I blurted out. I had to know. All I received in reply was a nudge in the direction of the beach.

“Go.”

~ Ψ ~

It was something I guess I talked about a lot in my childhood. My mom and stepdad moved us into a house with a fairly epic swimming pool. I would sit at the bottom like a yogi and hold my breath. The lining was soft and smooth, and bright turquoise like some far-flung seascape. Eight feet below (I should mention I preferred to sit on the bottom of the deep end like a small, begoggled badass), I could barely hear my stepdad yelling for me to come out. I didn’t even have to think about how purple his face probably was: I was surrounded by endless blue.

The number-one perk of having a little sister was having a person who would always indulge my flights of fancy. Gabriela was always down to play mermaids. She never got tired of hearing my story about the one who had saved me. (George didn’t *not* believe me. He just had a lot of bugs to catch in the summer and snowballs to chuck in the winter, and was generally not in need of a retelling of my meeting one of *them*.)

My mom always seemed to find this *mermaid thing*, as she called it, a bit troubling. As I got older, I began to realize that she probably just felt responsible for the fact that I had almost died, and simply did not enjoy the reminders. Once, I was in a toy store with her about a year after the incident, and there was a whole display for these flashy new mermaid dolls. I pointed over at them, and Mom held back a groan. The dolls were hard plastic. They wore bras and crowns made of glittery shells, and their hair and tails were all gaudy jewel tones.

“They don’t really look like that,” I said. “Mermaids,” I added.

My mom looked down at me, blinking as though hoping that when she opened her eyes again, it would be onto a simpler life. “At least there’s that.”

And that’s how we ended up in family counseling. Our therapist was an older man with a white beard who kept sending my siblings and I out to his waiting room so he could talk to my parents alone. Gabriela, who tried to make music anywhere, discovered a weird acoustic anomaly caused by the pipes that allowed us to eavesdrop by way of the radiator. The grown-ups never figured out why our hair always smelled burnt.

Unfortunately, that was how I found out exactly why Walter had had it in for me to the extent that he did.

“—well, maybe if you hadn’t had an affair when George was in nursery school—”

“It would not have mattered to me *whose* child was drowning! I would’ve saved her! *You let her go!*”

“Can we just go back for a second to what you both seem to be saying?” Dr. Henry’s voice asked, softly. “Are you saying that Grace is not Walter’s child?”

My siblings’ eyes grew wide.

“That’s right,” my stepfather said, bitterly. “Dafne’s never outright admitted it, but that girl—”

“—her name is Grace,” my mother’s voice said firmly.

“—is not my kid,” Walter continued, as if Mom hadn’t interrupted him. “She’s weird, and she’s not as bright as the other two. Just look at her... *she isn’t mine*. And the fish thing—”

“*Mermaid!*” my mom corrected, and for once there was a fierceness in her tone, defending the mermaid thing. “She wouldn’t even have this obsession if not for you—”

“Ugh, just never been able to connect with her,” Walter’s voice went on dismissively.

“Like you connect so well with George and Gabriela!” my mom scoffed. “They are *all* afraid of you, Walter!”

“She has *never* just admitted it to me,” Walter growled, seemingly to Dr. Henry.

“You’ve never admitted yours, either,” Mom said. *His what?* I thought. My siblings seemed to be wondering along the same lines. “At least I had four less than you. But it’s different for women, isn’t it?”

“Don’t you *dare* play the woman card—”

“Fine, Walter,” Mom said. “Grace is not your daughter. But that’s not even why you hate her, is it? You hate Grace because I *loved* her father, and who in the hell would love you?”

Our parents’ conversation faded. My siblings were staring at me.

“You okay, Gracie?” Gabriela asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and it was the truth. Walter—not my dad? The possibility that maybe I had another parent out there, maybe even one who wanted me? Sign me up!

“It doesn’t change anything,” George said solemnly. “Dad’s a big, mean jerk.”

Gabriela gasped. It was a word George had just started using perhaps only a week before. Even though I knew he just liked using it, the word definitely applied to Walter.

~ Ψ ~

For whatever reason, as a child, I seemed to prefer learning through confrontation. So I kept this revelation to myself until it could come to light in the most glaring way possible: I'd wait until Walter tried exercising power over me, and then I'd let him have it.

It wasn't hard for me to get mistreated by Walter. In fact, opportunity knocked the very next day. My siblings and I were playing in the backyard with a croquet set Mom had bought from Sears when Walter called the other two to come inside.

"George, Gabby, get in the house, there's a storm coming. And you—" he jabbed a finger at me—"clean this shit up, and then I guess you come in, too."

"We were all playing croquet, Dad," George piped up. "Grace shouldn't have to clean up alone."

"You have to do what I tell you," Walter said. "It's not gonna kill your sister to do some work for once in her life, if you could even call it that."

That was it. I threw my mallet down on the lawn. It clanked against the green and yellow balls.

"You have something to say?" Walter barked at me.

"Yes!" I called back. Earlier that day, Mom had measured us against the doorframe where she always had, and I had *just* cleared four-and-a-quarter feet tall. I'm glad I didn't realize how

brave I'd had to be back then, because in retrospect, I was tiny. "I *don't* have to listen to you! You're not my dad!"

For a second, Walter's eyes were wide, and then he sneered at me. "You're right, girl. I'm not. Now clean this shit up or you're sleeping out here in the storm with the bugs and raccoons."

I crossed my little arms and stared my stepfather down for several long moments. There was a puddle next to the back stoop that was several days old, but would still cover a grown man's ankles. Mom kept asking Walter to fill in the hollow when it was dry, but he never did. Insects buzzed and glided around the puddle and a stretch of frog spawn lay congealing in it.

I stared down at it, trying not to cry, as my stepdad's eyes bored into me with oppressive satisfaction. All I could think about was how much I hated him. And then suddenly, the water rose. It twirled upward from the ground like a filthy brownish snake and enveloped my stepfather, who roared in outrage, but was swept entirely off his feet.

I let him dangle for several moments. George looked up at his dad with wide eyes, hiding Gabriela's face in his chest.

"Gracie—" he started, but then fell silent, his jaw hanging open.

Walter kicked and clutched desperately at his throat from within his translucent cocoon. *He* was drowning now. I hadn't realized that before this moment that maybe he could break. He was always so scary, but now I could be done with him forever.

But there was fear in Walter's small, cruel eyes, and his fear arrested me. With a great *splash*, I let him drop, and the water crashed all around him. He took in a long, low gasp, then flew, soaking, to his feet. He shoved his children into the house, then slammed the door. The screen swung shut as with several *clicks*, he locked all three locks and pulled down the window blind.

Thunder shook the first rain loose about a second later, but I didn't care. I thought about leaving the croquet set out to rot, but Mom had spent a hundred dollars on it and that seemed expensive, so I picked up everything and put all the balls, mallets, and wickets back into their case, and dragged it up onto the porch.

As I sat there, shivering, my orange tomcat Marmalade appeared and started curling around me in warm, affectionate circles. Finally Mom came scrambling out the back door and rushed me inside and under a thousand towels. The croquet set slid, forgotten, into the mud.

"Gracie, are you alright?" she asked, but she kept fussing so much I didn't have a lot of chance to answer. She ordered a pizza for me and my siblings, and we ate it while listening to her and Walter having a screaming match in the kitchen, several rooms away from us, until Walter stormed out and drove away.

It was the best pizza I'd ever had in my life.

~ Ψ ~

Later that night, I lay next to my mom, alone in her bed. Marmalade was lying across my legs like a fluffy orange seatbelt. There was no way that George and Gabriela didn't have their ears pressed fast against the other side of the door, but I didn't mind.

"Gracie, there's something I should have told you a long time ago..." Mom said. "I thought I could convince Walter that it wasn't true, but I was wrong, and more importantly, *you* deserve to know the truth. It's hard, though. I don't know how to say..."

"I know Walter's not my dad," I said, and then I told her about the radiator at Dr. Henry's office and the confrontation I'd had with my stepdad tonight.

“How does that make you feel?” Mom asked.

“Good,” I said.

“You can tell me the truth,” Mom said.

“I am. I feel good about it. Is my dad nicer than Walter?”

To my surprise, Mom started to laugh. “Yes. He is *so* much nicer than Walter.”

“Where is he?” I asked.

“He lives far away from here,” she sighed, and something in the way she said it made me sad.

“Why did he leave?” I wondered.

“He didn’t have a choice. I promise you’ll understand when you’re older.”

“Can’t you tell me just one thing? Even just his name.”

My mom’s eyes seemed to search me as though she thought I might not be quite human. It was a look I’d gotten before, usually from strangers, but often enough from my family. I didn’t like it. She stroked my hair and stared off at some point behind me, the same as when she talked about Santa Claus or loving Walter.

“James,” she said, softly. “Your father’s name is... James. And now I have a question for you, Gracie. I want you to tell me what you really saw in the ocean... *that day*.”

“I have told you what I saw,” I said. “Why does it make you so upset?”

“I want to understand,” she sighed.

“I know what I saw. I know who saved me. That’s all we need to understand.”

Around the time I'd met the mermaid, the New York Metropolitan Area and some parts of New England were experiencing unprecedented, violent earthquakes. I'd always assumed that an earthquake had caused me to drown in the first place. Fast forward roughly eleven years to the month of my high school graduation, and they were suddenly back again. Stranger still was a situation developing on the skin just above my collarbones: a phenomenon which left six openings in the crook of my neck, shaped exactly like parentheses. They had utterly stymied three doctors thus far, and I had been living in scarves for several weeks.

George's flight home from England was delayed about two hours because of the earthquakes. We spent the time we would've spent at my ceremony waiting in JFK Airport, which was honestly okay. I had said I didn't want a party. It was hard to maintain normal friendships when you occasionally frightened other kids with an uncontrollable hydrokinetic rampage because... *hangry*, but I did have two close friends: Rhys and Emily. They swore they were a couple, but I suspected that they were both gay. I'd kissed Emily once on a dare, and I suspected that she liked it at least as much as I had. They'd both worked really hard on me to get me to come to graduation, but I generally liked to avoid large crowds in case water got weird. And they'd be with their own families today, leaving me to celebrate with just my mom and siblings.

This was fine—good, in fact, especially since we were also celebrating George's return from his study-abroad internship in the UK. It had been months since I'd seen my brother. And now he was trudging out from Gate Four, tall and lean with the unruly brown hair I knew so well.

He hugged all of us in turn. It was the best kind of weird to see him in person again after so long.

“I can’t believe you’re not pixels!” I said.

“I’m not,” he agreed, laughing. “I’m gonna move there someday. I *belong* across the Pond...”

“Shut up. We just got you back.”

“Just the other night you said you were tired of looking at my face.”

“I said I was tired of looking at your face *on the internet*.”

When we broke apart, I adjusted my thin scarf and the neck of my shirt so that they covered The Disfigurement, which I had accidentally exposed mid-hug.

“Still got those pharyngeal gill slits, huh?” George asked knowingly. I’d shown him the lines over video chat.

“Ugh, don’t call them that.”

“Had you landed when the last earthquake hit?” Mom asked.

“Yeah. Bloke behind me said it was a four-point-seven, whatever that means.”

“It means they’re getting worse.”

~ Ψ ~

We’d been home all of an hour when George said rather pointedly that he wanted to go for a walk with me.

“You don’t want to hang out?” I asked.

“We can hang out and walk.”

“Fine.” I threw on my bag and followed him out the door. “Where do you want to walk?”

“The river.”

“Are you dropping my body there?” I said, but immediately regretted it. Four years previous, we’d scattered Walter’s ashes in the Hudson. George and Gabriela had never been close with their dad, but he was still just that: their dad, and I knew they both still struggled with it.

George glossed over this. “No, it’s shiny and you need distracting.”

“George, are Mom and Gabriela throwing a party?”

“No, they know you don’t want one. It’s just that today is a big day and you’re wearing your angst braid.”

“My what now?”

“You wear your braid on the wrong side whenever you’re in existential crisis,” he said.

“Oh, come on—”

“No, really! Gabby was like you, Doubting Thomas. She said I was crazy too. Now she owes me five dollars.”

“You *are* crazy.”

“Maybe, but at least I’m not wearing an angst braid.”

“Because they don’t exist!” But I laughed. This was exactly what I missed most about George. Maybe I could forget about suspected surprise parties (or whether my eventual college roommate kept a jar of toenails under her pillow for witchy purposes) or the fact that I was now horrifyingly close to being a grown-up.

George parked in a hamlet two or three miles from home, near an old church and firehouse. Beyond it lay the brown-blue waves of the Hudson.

We walked to the end of the quiet street where a small marina billowed against weathered docks, our path parallel with the river.

“You have some cool stuff to look forward to, you know, Grace.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve always known what you wanted to do.”

“Grace, you can speak *five languages*. You’d find work in way more countries than me before I even found the loo.”

This was probably accurate. Mom had put us in Spanish lessons when I was in kindergarten. Later, I elected to study French and Italian in high school, and taught myself Latin. Rhys had said my schedule was the stuff of nightmares, but there was a definite link between my multilingual interests and my mother’s cryptic confession that my dad lived *so far away*.

We walked on in silence for a few minutes. Then—

“Hey, personal question,” he said.

“I’m sorry, were we having an impersonal conversation up until this point?”

George ignored me, digging in his roomy pockets. “So... does it hurt?” he asked. He made a weird fluttering gesture at his own neck, apparently handicapped in verbal discussion of my condition if he couldn’t say words like *pharyngeal*. “And what do *you* call it?”

“I call it my Disfigurement,” I said. “Makes me sound like a rich widow from the 1920s.”

“That reminds me,” he said, eyeing his watch. “We should get back. Gabriela is *very* excited about the present she got you. But first—”

George casually handed me a small object: a tube of ointment in a box. “Graduation present,” he said.

“It’s... ” I read, “*ointment with pain relief*. Festive.”

It was getting dark by the time we walked back home. Our house was white with brown shutters, a 1950s Cape Cod in a sea of 1950s Cape Cods. Two other cars besides Mom's and George's had crowded into the little driveway. One was... my grandmother's?

I groaned. George laughed.

The house was oddly quiet when we stepped inside.

"Straight upstairs, kid," said George. The narrow, blue-carpeted staircase creaked. "I wonder where Mum and Gabs are. Either way, your present should be on your bed."

I opened my bedroom door, more aware of the beats of my heart than I normally was. I really didn't want a big, crazy—

It was glittering. It was a dress I had pointed out to Gabriela three months ago—in a consignment store, of all places. It was black silk and silver sequins—a flapper dress.

Laid over the dress was a string of pearls I knew belonged to our mother. Chandelier beads hung from a satin headband with three jet black feathers.

I felt afraid to touch the dress; it was dreamlike and ninety years old. But I lifted it and gently sniffed the fabric. There was no trace of must. I put on the dress with a pair of vintage art deco heels I'd had for a while. Then I made an attempt at makeup, and was just positioning the headband in place when I heard a knock at the door.

"Almost ready, doll?" said George's voice, in a ridiculous transatlantic accent.

"Yeah." I stood up.

I faced my brother. He was wearing, to my very surprise, a vintage tuxedo with his hair slicked and styled for the roaring twenties. And at some point in the past half hour, all evidence seemed to assert that he had managed to grow a very well manicured mustache. Now I knew I was getting a party.

“How?” I sputtered, gesturing his whole transformation.

“I believe the word you are looking for is *wow*,” he replied. He offered me his arm.

“It looks so real,” I marveled at the mustache as we walked downstairs.

“Well, it came in a pack of three. You’d be welcome to one.”

“Thanks, but I don’t know if mustachioed flapper is my look,” I said.

George shrugged. “Gabriela’s pulling it off.”

The downstairs windows spoke of twilight as George led me through the house and into the kitchen. Marmalade didn’t like company much, but he did like dirty dishes left unattended on the counter. He meowed as if to tell us to be cool about it as we walked out the back door.

The backyard was like a time portal into the Gatsby age with a million string lights and streamers hanging from trees.

“Congratulations, Gracie!”

I did a head count. There was Mom, wearing a more modest twenties number, and beside her, all sequins and feathers and long legs and fringe, stood Gabriela. In her left hand, she clutched the neck of her violin and bow as if she’d been playing for the company. In her right, she twirled the end of a brown handlebar mustache like it was the most natural thing in the world.

But there were others here, too.

“We’re so proud of you, Gracie!”

I turned slightly to see our Grandma Concetta, Uncle Frank and Aunt Ellen, and our little cousins.

“Wow, hi—”

“What is this?” my grandma asked, reaching out to touch the lines in the crook of my neck with wizened fingers. Immediately I felt nauseous and on edge.

“Not sure yet,” I said. “My dermatologist gave me some kind of anti-fungal—”

Thankfully, my mother walked over and wrapped me in a hug.

“Congratulations, Gracie! Don’t be mad! I know you said you didn’t want a party, but did you honestly believe we weren’t going to celebrate?”

“I’m not mad,” I said.

“I told you, Mom: it’s all in the execution,” said Gabriela, knowingly. She hugged me, too, mustache tickling my neck slightly. “Good job, Gracie! You’ll be the first one of us to actually *do* something with your education, and not just skulk around Wordsworth’s daffodils and start saying things like ‘*bollocks*’ and ‘*loo*.’”

“I *will* try,” I said facetiously. “This is a good look for you.”

Gabriela laughed. “Yeah, I feel like the mustache really brings out my cheekbones.”

“You should consider growing one, doll,” said George, resuming his transatlantic persona with a wink toward her.

“I don’t think Grandma likes it much,” Gabby muttered.

“Well, you’re very good at twirling it. Gabby, thank you for my present,” I said, indicating the dress. “You remembered it from all those months ago. Was it expensive?”

“Not for me. Mom helped.”

“Well, thank you.”

Gabriela curtsied, twirled her mustache at me, and went off chasing our cousins.

“*Did one of you urchins say my mustache looks silly?!*”

Uncle Frank was shaking my hand. “Well done, kiddo,” he said. Aunt Ellen hugged me.

We sat down to eat dinner at a long table outside. George tapped his empty glass with a fork until Mom took both away from him.

“I propose a toast,” he said, rising and claiming our grandma’s glass to replace his as our mother sighed. “To Gracie!”

“Gracie!” said Gabriela and Uncle Frank.

“Ellen and I heard a good one recently at her nephew’s wedding—Ellen, how’d it go—?”

“Oh...” Aunt Ellen snorted, then raised her glass again. “*To live above with the saints we love, that’s the purest glory. To live below with the saints we know—that’s another story!*”

The table broke out into applause as poor Aunt Ellen was consumed by a fit of laughter.

“Gabriela, thank you for playing for us,” said Grandma.

“Oh, it was nothing,” Gabriela sputtered, but beneath her weird attire, she glowed.

“Beautiful,” Aunt Ellen agreed.

“You should play again,” said George.

“Oh—” said Gabriela, flushing in the string lights. But she picked up her violin again and began to play.

“Okay, here’s your real present,” George said in a hushed tone a few moments later. He sat close beside me so as not to disrupt Gabriela’s concert, and handed me a green velvet jewelry box.

“I hope you didn’t spend a lot,” I said.

“Don’t worry. I’m not even sure if it works. Just open it.”

I did what he said, and opened the little box. Inside on a golden rope chain was a small pendant fashioned into a scallop’s shell, identical on either side.

“A locket? It’s pretty. Is there a picture of you inside?”

George laughed. “Cheesier. It’s actually a compass.”

I clicked the pendant open. We were facing northeast, apparently. “What, so I’ll never lose my way?”

“No.” He took the necklace out of the box and fastened it around my neck. The shell glistened against the black satin. “Now the gills make sense. You could be a mermaid.”

He grinned at me, and just like that—moment ruined.

“Jerk. I was six and totally oxygen-deprived. I wish I never told—”

“I’m not making fun of you, kid. I thought I saw something, too.” He snorted. “Probably a mess of seaweed and medical waste. Hey, I’m glad that when you were most scared, your brain took you somewhere magical. I’ll bet it can do it again.”

~ Ψ ~

I opened a Coke and sat with my mother on the screened-in porch long after everyone had gone, just listening to the cicadas buzzing in the yard. Marmalade moseyed between the porch plants, thrilled for the return of summer. He was hunting moths tonight. (sorry kaila)

“Coke doesn’t do a lot for stress, kiddo.”

“You’d be surprised,” I said. It was familiar, and familiarity does something for anxieties, I thought. I turned the locket over. “Hi, Mom.”

Even though I knew she was here, I still felt like I hadn’t properly seen her all day. She was a tiny woman with braided brown hair and elliptical glasses, in so many ways, just an older version of me.

“Hi, Gracie,” she said. She smiled at me, but it wasn’t a smile without meaning.

“What did I do?” I sighed.

“Gracie, you don’t have to worry this much yet. You’re seventeen. Sometimes I wonder if you worry that your adulthood will be harder than your childhood. For most people, it is. But for you, who have endured so much already, if you’re smart, and I know you are, I think the opposite may prove true.”

We sat in silence for a long time. Marmalade caught a large moth and carried it inside.

“It’s just... I’ve always had some idea of what would come next. Now when I think of the future, I see nothing. Every day, I think I wouldn’t be surprised if all I find tomorrow is oblivion.”

“You wouldn’t be surprised. You wouldn’t be anything. It’s oblivion.”

She laughed at her own joke. She was a different person entirely, post-Walter. I grinned in spite of myself. “You know what I mean, Mom.”

“We’ve got things to look forward to, and a nice summer ahead. Don’t be scared. You’ll be wonderful, my Gracie.” She kissed me goodnight and walked back inside the house.

That was the last time I saw her.

CHAPTER TWO

Ridley Island

I'd overslept, I was sure of it. But there was no one waking me up.

I'd wake up now, I decided, then face my family with the fact that I'd slept till noon or something. I tried, but it was like I couldn't find my eyes, couldn't find my way out of my bed...

But just as my heart started to beat a little harder, I was calm. I drifted in and out of a half-aware haze. I sailed between sun and darkness and sun again, watching a parade of strange things swirl around me through the blur of my eyelashes: a circle of wood, then great fins of blue, then a gigantic clownfish—just a mass of orange and white and black bands...

Then, and I don't know how much later consciousness came, I was lying on my stomach in something hot, arid, and granular. My skin was screaming. My head was pounding. I was dry now—too dry—as I opened my eyes.

A field of pink sand stretched out, endless. Palm trees towered above clear turquoise water. No sun had ever burned hotter. This was the strangest thing I'd ever woken up to before. Was it—a beach...?

Or was it still a dream? Vaguely, images of giant fish tails and of floating forever came back to me. I might be dreaming. I couldn't rule it out. But this dream hurt.

“Help!” I yelled, but my voice snagged in my parched, leathery throat.

There was no reply. I pushed myself upright. Paradise swayed around me.

A glimmer on my abdomen caught my eye. My flapper dress was shredded to the point of disrepair, the shell compass bouncing on my partially exposed chest as I moved. With a pang, I thought of George and Mom and Gabriela. How long had it been since I’d seen them?

Between a cluster of palm trunks was an overgrowth of rough, grassy weeds. I all but collapsed between the trees and lay in the shaded grass.

Mom had told us that some people had heart attacks if they hit the ground in falling dreams. What happened to dreamers who died of exposure?

Don’t think about it. I lay on my side and closed my eyes. *Help will come.* The sea roared for a million miles behind me, but it would not help my thirst. I drew dry, rough breaths and tried not to die, taking attendance of me. *Searing skin, parched tongue, giddy brain.* When I opened my eyes again, a face was floating before me.

The face was only a photograph, but that took a few moments to hit me. She was in black and white, around my age, the edges of her portrait singed unevenly, as though it had blown off a pyre. She was fair-skinned with wavy hair, probably an ashy blonde, and a face perfectly shaped like a heart. Her white dress, so like mine had been before I’d ruined it, cut off short over long. Round ink numerals that read *1927* lay fading in the bottom right corner.

At some point, the photograph had been folded in fours, as though perhaps it had been stowed in the pocket of a sailor. But more than anything else about this girl, even in my addled state, I noticed three lines in either crook of her neck. That and how she looked to be laughing.

“Can I help you, miss?” came a low, lilting voice. I stuffed the photograph inside my bra, the most intact thing I was wearing.

I looked upward and found a pair of pale gray eyes. They belonged to a very masculine-looking woman. She wore men's trousers and suspenders, and her face had a definitely squarish quality, but there was also something soft in and around those eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked. Everything ached.

"M' name's Derdriu." She extended a hand to me, but instead of offering a handshake, offered a clay cup of water. I drained it. Immediately, the pressure on my head seemed to loosen. Derdriu smiled at me, and it was like no smile I'd ever seen before in its warmth. "I didn't mean to frighten you. How do you feel, love?"

She adjusted herself, and it was then that I noticed, under her loose tailored shirt—just above her collarbone—three lines like mine.

"You're... Irish?" I said, because this did not look like Ireland.

"Oh, aye," said Derdriu. "What of it?"

"What is this place?"

"Can you stand?" asked Derdriu. "We've got someone who can sort that sunburn."

She offered me a hand up. Shoulder-length auburn hair framed her slightly tan face. She struck me as someone who spent a lot of time outdoors. Part of me wanted to take her hand, but part of me had to hesitate.

"We're just women here, love. I know sometimes me clothes can confuse people. But, ehm, nobody here'll hurt you."

"It's not that. You still haven't told me where I am," I said.

"Oh, that," said Derdriu, and carried her clay cup to the water's edge to fill it up with water from the surf. Seawater soaked the hems of her trousers, but she didn't complain. She walked slowly back toward me.

I inched away from her.

“I won’t hurt you, love. But you wanted to know, so...”

She slowly crept forward on her knees, pushed aside my hair and tattered clothes to reveal the three slits above my right collarbone, and poured water over them.

The moment the water touched me, several things happened very fast. Involuntarily, I pushed the water back out the same way it had come in. My legs felt at once like they had been turned to rubber. There was a loud *zipping* noise and a *flop* as the force of—*whatever* had just happened—released. My feet touched sand again—only I had no feet. Instead, I had a large, bright blue tail fin, where feet had been only seconds ago. My legs had fused—what was left felt somehow more muscular but also less substantial than before, covered in soft scales: a mermaid’s tail.

Now that I knew this was a prank, I started feeling annoyed at how elaborate it was.

“Tell George he got his money’s worth,” I said. “I’d like to go home now, and I’m taking this ridiculous thing off!”

I yanked at a scale near my hip. It was attached almost convincingly, but with a little effort and a surprising amount of pain, it came free. Blood filled the space it left at once.

“I don’t like this,” I said.

“Please don’t rip any more of them out,” said Derdriu evenly. She dried the slits in my neck with an embroidered handkerchief from her pocket. A few seconds later, with another *zipping* noise, my legs had reappeared, but there was still blood beating out of the place where I’d gouged the scale.

“Good bleeder, that,” she said, and she pressed her handkerchief against the wound.

“Get your hands off me!” I swatted her away, and for good measure, chucked a handful of pink sand at her, a last defense. “I think you’ve done enough.”

Derdriu slid backward. “Forgive me,” she said. “Mind you keep pressure on that for a while.”

I looked up at her. There was sand in her hair and clothes, but she was still here. She was not angry.

“This isn’t a prank from my brother,” I half admitted, half implored, looking up into her face. “Is it?”

Derdriu grimaced. “Afraid not.” She wiped a little bit of sand out of her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and meant it.

“I quite understand,” said Derdriu, but she looked reluctant to volunteer any other information now.

We sat in silence as I kept pressure on the hole in my skin.

“Why are you here?” I asked at length. Derdriu brushed some more sand off her front.

“Why, I’m here for you, love,” she said, with an almost grandmotherly note in her voice. “So you’re not alone.”

“Where are we?” I asked again, and Derdriu’s gray eyes seemed to cast about for an answer. When they met mine again, I tried to wordlessly impress that I would remain calm.

“Hard to explain, that,” she answered. “I don’t completely understand it m’self.” She eyed me cautiously, scanning for another outburst, then went on. “This is not a place on any map you’ve ever seen, love. We call this place the Undine Isles. Specifically, this is Blushing Beach, Ridley Island, Roselands, Undine Isles.”

“Can I call my mom?” I asked.

“Call her?” Derdriu repeated, looking confused.

“Like on the telephone,” came another voice. “Derdriu, we’ve talked about this.”

The new speaker was Australian. She rounded the palm trunks and stood over us, short and stocky with stringy, waist-length dark hair. Her soft brown skin was covered in hundreds of faint freckles.

“Alexander Graham Bell, 1876—remember?” She looked at me. “Think she still has the newspaper clipping, bless. I’m Alex. What’s your name?”

“Grace,” I answered. “Grace Gallo.”

A shadow seemed to flit momentarily across Derdriu’s face, but the look had passed in an instant. I decided to try a new angle.

“You were about to tell me where I’d find a—”

“There’s no telephone here, love,” said Derdriu. “But come, we’ll get you a glass of water.”

I stood. Derdriu was a few inches taller than I was, Alex a full head shorter. “Where’s the nearest phone?”

Derdriu looked lost for words. Her eyes raked over Alex.

“We don’t know, Grace,” Alex said, her voice small and her eyebrows knitting together.

“How can there be no phone?” I sputtered. “Computer? Anything? I’m not picky. I just want to tell her where I am so I can get home.”

Derdriu’s hands were gentle on my shoulders, but I knew I was being held there. “No one is coming for you. I’m sure your mum would if she could—so would mine—love, you just saw the truth—what you are, what *we* are.”

She she sat on the ground and wetted her gills. A moment later, half a metallic, silvery gargoyle seemed to blossom where her bottom half had been, bursting through trousers that had been held together with little magnets.

“You, too?” My eyes roved back and forth between Alex’s face and her gills. If I could persuade both of them to transform, I could run away unfettered.

“Nice try,” Alex said as Derdriu dried her neck.

“Fine. You’re not kidnappers, are you?”

“Yes,” Alex deadpanned at once.

“She doesn’t know you’re having a laugh, Al,” Derdriu chastised. Then she looked at me. “We did not bring you here. We ourselves were brought here once, same as you.”

“Where is it that you’re trying to take me?” I asked.

“Home,” answered Derdriu. “And I swear no harm shall come to you, Grace Gallo.”

I walked between them, past great flowering plants whose blossoms trembled for the golden hummingbirds that darted in and out of them. Then a voice from behind us startled me.

“Oh, Derdriu! You found her!”

My companions and I turned. The speaker was very short with platinum blonde hair, porcelain-white skin, and pale lavender eyes that seemed slightly unfocused in the sunlight. She wore a gray sleeveless dress with a periwinkle shawl around her shoulders, and a wide-brimmed straw hat.

“You shouldn’t be out here, *Mamá!* you’ll burn up,” said Derdriu. “I can’t remember a day as bright as this in the past fortnight. Go back inside, please.”

“And I will happily do so, now that the child is found,” said the blonde mermaid, waspishly. “I am Nona, *niputenza*,” she added far more gently, grabbing me by the shoulders before kissing each cheek. “*Benvenuta, benvenuta. Bella*,” she added, touching my face.

“This is Grace Gallo, ¹*Mamaí*,” said Derdriu. The pair of them shared a look.

Before I could confront them about it, we turned a corner, the pink sand gave way to a narrow pebble path, and we were standing in the shadow of an ancient Roman villa flanked by palm trees. Great sections of plaster façade had sloughed off from large khaki-colored bricks, and rickety shutters with peeling white paint beat against the walls. A shallow roof of terra-cotta tiles capped the structure, which was overgrown on one side with green vines.

Derdriu loped ahead of us and opened the arched front door. My companions looked at me expectantly. Something had happened, had changed in me in the past half minute. My very breaths had seemed to fall into pace with theirs. Slowly, I walked past Derdriu, who bowed graciously as I entered her home, and she felt more familiar to me in that moment than my brother George. Alex and Nona followed right behind.

Inside was dim, illuminated only by large windows in the back of the house and the small ones in the front. Beneath my bare feet I could feel cool tiles, each about the size of a coin. Then something in the shadows moved and I started. A woman emerged in a gown that must be at least a century out of style.

“*Salve*,” she said, embracing me quite as Nona had done, but almost entirely lacking the warmth of my finders. “*Quid est teum nōmen?*”

“Grace Gallo,” I said in a small voice. Perhaps I could not make out her expression in the dark, but my name seemed to have no effect on this woman.

¹ *Mamaí* (Irish): “Mom”

Without missing a beat, she stepped into the light, her Edwardian gown sweeping over tiles I now realized formed a mosaic of a black tree with silver leaves. Her pale hand forced my face into a slanting beam of sunlight near my shoulder. “I am Locusta Cassius. I am so happy to have you here.”

“I want a telephone,” I tried again, and this time I didn’t bother to sound polite. Locusta Cassius merely simpered at me.

“I imagine that you would be grateful for a chance to rest and... and freshen up, yes? Derdriu, I believe that you prepared for this eventuality? And Nona, won’t you treat that burn?”

“I’ll go with—” Alex started, but eyeing Locusta, she fell silent.

“I had hoped you could help me with something in my study, Alexandra,” Locusta said, and they shuffled out of sight.

Derdriu nudged me in the arm. “I’ll catch up to you,” she said. “Nona, could you take her upstairs?”

“Come, *niputenza*,” said Nona, and she took my other arm and led me up a stone staircase. She crossed the upstairs floor to a wooden door in the corner, white feet creaking on the ancient wood. The door opened with a *squeak* at Nona’s touch. “Come,” she said again. “This is your room.”

The room was deeper than I’d expected, and furnished eclectically. It was lighter here than it had been in the foyer, as there were several large windows. Jazz music emanated softly from a wood record player in the far corner. Three beds lay against the caramel-colored floor. The first two clung against the left and right walls, almost opposite each other. To the left was a bit of a mess of tousled papers and laundry of uncertain cleanliness, mingled in the unmade bed.

To the right were a bed, small desk, and armoire, clean and uncluttered by possessions. This must be for me.

The third bed lay at the far end of the room: huge, fluffy, and white under the open window, whose lace curtains blew away from the beach.

“Alex,” Nona said, pointing at the messy bed without looking, “and Derdriu.” She pointed to the big bed by the window. “Your roommates.”

One of Derdriu’s walls was occupied by two arched alcoves that teemed with books. There were a few old chairs and a large stringed instrument, its pearly inlays covered in dust. Suspended between the bookshelves were an old sword and scabbard. There was also a lizard in a glass tank, bathing in the warm light of the opened window.

“Let me have a look at you,” Nona said. She reached for the worst patch of sunburn, on my shoulder. I recoiled.

“Wait,” she said. Holding my arm still, she touched the blistered area. The burn faded to a painless tan. “Better?” Her pale eyes sparkled.

“How did you—?” I sputtered.

“Would you like me to continue, dear?”

“What are you?” I gaped, touching the mended skin. “What do you want?”

“Nothing. Well—I’d like some new *parfum*, and a new house, and perhaps to see my Derdriu in a dress for a change. But nothing from you, dear.”

I let her keep healing my shoulders, arms, and face.

“What have we missed?” asked a voice from behind. My roommates had caught up.

“Nothing at all, my love,” Nona quipped. She turned to me. “You need clothes, *niputenza*,” she said, and she left.

“Sorry about the mess,” said Alex.

“Got an apology for me too, have you?” asked Derdriu. Alex laughed.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing at the lizard.

“Oh, that’s just Angharad. She was... *left*... to me... by a Welsh noblewoman... with too many middle names.”

There was suddenly something sad about Derdriu, but she quickly acted cheerful enough again. “Apologies, love. We’d hoped to shield you from Locusta for another hour, at least.”

“Yeah, what’s her deal?”

“She owns this island,” said Derdriu. “Right pain in the—”

“Did you get in trouble because of me?” I asked.

“Of course not,” said Alex, unconvincingly.

At that moment, Nona swept back over the creaking floorboards, one arm laden with clothes.

“I bring clothes,” she said. “So if you just pop into the bath there...”

I did as I was told, then shut the door on them. I pressed my ear against the door to keep listening as the bathtub filled up.

“Derdriu, you have *got* to tell me what’s up now,” Alex pressed. “I know there’s something I don’t know—”

“There’s something none of us know,” Nona said. “Derdriu—” her voice ducked out of my hearing—“I’ve always suspected that she left something out...”

“And it’s no good trying to get it out of her,” Derdriu said sternly, and then all was quiet.

Finally, it seemed unreasonable to burden the tub’s decrepit claws with any more water, so I got in. I still strained to listen from the bathtub, but it was no use.

I looked at the water. Little clouds of dirt were puffing off my thighs. My arms and legs were covered in scrapes Nona hadn't seen. My hand snaked toward my collarbone. I felt the slits.

I'd made up my mind to do it before I could talk myself out of it. With a *whoosh*, I swept my head under the surface.

I sucked in water through my mouth—and pushed it out through the gill slits. They were real. I was breathing underwater. My tail flapped against the rim of the bathtub, displacing a finful of brownish water onto the tile floor.

There was just nothing for it. And before I knew it, I was laughing under the water at my fabulous predicament. George would be proud, and Gabs probably jealous. What would Mom say?

With that in mind, I sat up, unplugged the drain, and dried off. My legs returned to me a few minutes later.

“So...” I started as I opened the door. Alex, Nona, and Derdriu were sitting close together on Derdriu's bed, and they all looked up at me with wide eyes. “Where's the nearest post office, then?”

Something on the floor that was invisible to me suddenly became incredibly interesting to Alex and Nona, but Derdriu rose with a heavy sigh and walked toward me.

“Grace,” she said, “you can't go home. I'm sorry, love. You can never see your family again.”