

# SIREN'S STORM

Lisa Papademetriou

Knopf





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Alfred A. Knopf  
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# Chapter One

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## *From the Walfang Gazette* *Walfang Braces for Storm*

Tropical Storm Bonita—packing winds up to 50 miles per hour and waves of up to 20 feet—is scheduled to reach Walfang by 3:00 Wednesday afternoon. Residents in some areas have been urged to evacuate, but many refuse to leave. “We’re Long Islanders,” said Harry Russell, owner of Russell Feed and Hardware. “You can’t expect a little rain to frighten us.”

But Bonita will likely be much worse than a little rain. “Although Bonita has not been classified a hurricane, it will definitely cause damage on the island. Just because it isn’t as bad as the 1938 hurricane doesn’t mean it isn’t serious,” declared Dr. Phyllis Ovid. The 1938 storm, the “Long Island Express,” left 700 dead and 63,000 homeless, and is commonly considered one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history. Although Bonita will not pack an equal punch, Dr. Ovid said, “people should be prepared for power loss, perhaps lasting several days.”

Indeed, residents do seem to be hunkering down. “Our shelves are empty,” claimed Sheila Danbury, owner of the Pick and Drive on King Road. “I think we’ve got five cans of soup left.”

Federal safety experts recommend that residents reinforce windows, fill the bathtub with water, and ...

Will nosed the truck forward, picking his way along the slick street. Fat raindrops thrummed like heavy fingers against the faded orange hood, while water swirled around the tires rushing toward drains already clogged with debris. The windshield wipers beat their *squeak, thunk, squeak, thunk* against the rippled water that sluiced down the glass. Will squinted to see the black ribbon that stretched out before him. It was ten o’clock in the morning, and the rain was steadily getting worse. He turned the knob on the radio, but all he got was static. *I’m lucky the wheels work*, Will thought. His uncle’s truck was an old tank. Solid as a boulder and just as high-tech. The boat hitch rattled over the road, dragging behind the truck like a lame leg.

The streets were empty, but Will stopped at the red light anyway. He was a careful driver, which had always amused his older brother, Tim. “Nobody cares if you go over the speed limit by five miles per hour,” Tim had always said. “Come on, put the pedal to the metal, bro!” But Tim wasn’t with him this morning, so Will could be as careful as he liked. He didn’t want to get into an accident on the way to pick up the boat.

The light changed, and Will moved forward, but a moment later he slammed on the brakes. A sheet of corrugated metal—an escaped piece of roofing from someone’s shed—thwacked against the side of the truck, momentarily blocking the driver’s-side window.

“Jesus,” Will whispered, his heart hammering. Then the wind shifted and the metal flipped up, flew over the hood of the truck, and sailed down the street. Will watched as it tumbled and finally fell, sliding under the front steps of City Hall.

With a sigh, Will gently pressed the accelerator.

“Shit!” he shouted as a figure darted in front of the truck. Will’s right leg cramped as he ground his foot against the brake pedal. A thud sent a wave of nausea through him, and it took a moment for him to realize that he hadn’t hit the figure—it had hit *him*. Bright green eyes stared up at him through the windshield. The girl’s palms were flat against the hood of the truck, almost as if she were holding it in place.

Sudden music blasted from the radio, and Will startled so badly that he nearly hit his head against the roof. He felt sick. Green cat eyes, long black hair—that was all he was aware of. That and the thought, *She’s alive. She’s okay. She’s alive. You didn’t.* Still, his hands were shaking. A flood of fear surged through him, and then, right on its heels, rage.

*I could have killed her!* He was furious about it—about the idea that she might have made him responsible for something like that.

“Are you okay?” Will shouted, although he knew his voice must have been muffled through the glass.

The girl looked at him a moment longer, then turned and darted off. She disappeared between two nearby buildings. *Almost like the sheet of metal slipping beneath the steps, Will thought. Like a knife disappearing into wood.*

Will took a deep breath, then another. His head was light. Finally he became aware that he was sitting in the middle of an intersection. He didn’t want to move, but he didn’t have much of a choice. Tentatively he pressed the accelerator. The truck inched forward.

Will tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, trying to keep his mind on the road. But he couldn’t stop thinking about that girl and her strange green eyes. Her skin was pale and smooth, like the inside of a shell. Will felt a flash of confusion. She seemed to be about his age—seventeen—and looked familiar. Then again, this was a pretty small town. Everyone looked familiar. *Do I know her?* Will wondered.

But this girl was beautiful. Beautiful in a way he wouldn’t have forgotten—not even with his questionable memory. Besides, it was summer. Walfang was a tourist town, and the population surged during the months of June, July, and August. *Maybe she’s a summer person.*

...  
After three blocks, Will could see the ocean. The dock where he kept the Bermuda-rigged sailing dinghy was close to the end of town, at the rocky spit that jutted into the sea. Most of the Hamptons were white sand over rolling dunes, but Walfang was at the far tip of Long Island and had dark granite parts that felt almost New Englandy. The dock housed several small craft and was partially protected by a cove. But with a storm like this headed straight for Walfang, the cove would offer as much protection as an umbrella in a cyclone.

Even now, waves beat the beach, exploding against the rocks that lined the coast. Foam spewed into the air, meeting the rain as it fell. *Water on water,* Will thought as he parked at the edge of the docks.

“If you’d drive more than five miles per hour, I wouldn’t have to wait for you.” The bear of a man grinned as Will stepped onto the pitching sailboat.

“Sorry, Uncle Carl.”

But Carl wrapped one arm around Will and gave him a playful slap on the back. "I've been here a full ten minutes!" He let out a full laugh that threatened to blow back the hurricane winds. "Nothing but a little rain so far," Carl said. "But the weathermen say it's likely to make landfall near Walfang, so we might as well get the *Vagabond* secured. I'll tie up the main lines."

The wind lashed at Will's face as he made for the sails. Nearby, boats rocked on the swelling waves. Will's father had thought the *Vagabond* could ride out the storm if Will took down the sails. But Will didn't want to risk it, not with his brother's boat. Luckily, his uncle Carl had understood completely.

The sky met the sea in shades of deep gray, and white-tipped waves roared toward the shore. They hurled themselves against the beach in growing fury before hissing backward in retreat. The fat white gulls that usually wheeled over the docks in greedy anticipation had taken shelter under the eaves of the nearby snack bar. They watched the sky warily as rain pelted the wooden shack. Their silence was almost eerie. There was no sound but the ocean and the uneven creak and knock of the bobbing boats.

Will scanned the empty beach. Everything was a shade darker than usual. Thick clouds blotted out the sun, and the rain had turned the rocks black and the sand to a shade of caramel. It was as if darkness had already fallen. He noticed that his uncle had stopped moving. Carl was staring out to sea, a strange look on his face. "Everything okay?" Will asked.

Carl turned to him. "Do you hear that?"

Will shook his head and indicated his right ear. He'd lost his hearing on that side the summer before. "What is it?"

Carl shrugged. "I don't know. I thought I heard—" He shrugged. "Sounded like music."

"Good for dancing?" Will teased, and Carl laughed.

"Good for sleeping, more like," his uncle said. "Eh, it's gone now."

"Probably just a creaky boat," Will said.

"Yeah," Carl agreed, although he didn't look convinced.

Will turned back to his work. He touched the mainmast with a light finger. The sail had gone up in flames last summer, leaving a dark scar on the boat. It was lucky that the whole *Vagabond* hadn't burned—it had tipped, dousing the fire and saving itself.

Will secured the sail and pulled a cover over it, snapping it securely into place. Taking a deep breath, he looked up at the rocks on the shore.

Will grasped the handrail as if the boat had lurched beneath him. A sudden nausea rose in his throat.

One of the black rocks had *moved*.

The rock was still for a moment, then moved again, and with heart-stopping clarity Will realized that a human figure was picking its way—headfirst—down the steep escarpment. The figure had long, delicate limbs that moved with surprising speed across the rocks, almost like a spider. Will hurried to the canvas storage bag and sorted through his brother's collection of junk to pull out a pair of binoculars. He trained them on the figure. Just as he'd thought—was the girl from this morning. He was almost sure of it. She had the same long black hair and the same dark olive wind-breaker.

*What's she doing?* Will wondered as he watched her pause briefly at the bottom. She faced

the sea, then began to walk toward it.

Salt stung Will's face as the frigid water reached her ankles.

"Wait!" Will shouted. "Wait!"

But she didn't pause or even glance toward him as she waded into the water. Will hopped over the rail and raced down the dock, but the water was already up to her waist.

"Stop!"

She turned and looked at him. Her face was awash with confusion, and he thought she would turn back. But she didn't move. The wind tore the scream from his throat as a wave crashed over her, swallowing her whole. "No!"

Her head did not bob back to the surface as Will raced to the water's edge. "Wait!" Ice claws tore at his shins as he waded into the water. "No!"

For a moment he thought he saw the thick ropes of her hair. He reached out, but his hand drew back only seaweed. Her head didn't reappear above the surface.

A wave loomed before him like sheer wall. Will tried to dive into the calmer base of the wave, but it blasted against him like dynamite, knocking him down. For a sickening moment his feet couldn't find purchase. In the tumble, he'd lost his sense of how to become upright. Churning sand filled his eyes—he couldn't see. But his fear was lost in his need to find the girl. His arms reached out for her, but she wasn't there. He couldn't breathe...

Suddenly he felt a strong hand on his arm, and a moment later his head broke through the rainy surface. "Will!" Uncle Carl was there, pulling him toward shore. "Will—are you okay?"

Will tried to speak but sucked in salt water. He coughed violently.

The waves took no pity, continuing their relentless assault. Will's mind was muddled, but his body held a deep survival instinct. Without thinking, he allowed his uncle to haul him toward shore. They ducked and let the waves pass over them until they were at the breaker. Carl did not let go of him, not even when the waves slithered only to their ankles and they collapsed to their knees on the sandy beach.

"What were you thinking?" Carl shouted as coughs racked Will's chest. "What the hell were you doing?"

Will shook his head. "I couldn't—" Another fit of coughing overtook him. The seawater that lined his mouth made him want to gag. But he had to say something. He had to let his uncle know that it wasn't his fault. "I couldn't reach her."

Something flickered in Carl's eyes—something that Will couldn't read. "Who?"

Rain lashed at Will's face; water streamed into his eyes. "The girl with black hair."

Carl shook his head. "What girl?"

"She was walking into the water. I tried to stop her." Will gestured to the crashing surf. "She was right there—five yards ahead of me."

Carl shook his head, but he didn't say anything else. Will felt his silence like a slap. "You better get on home," Carl said. His voice was calm, quiet. He stood up and yanked Will by the hand, pulling him to his feet. "I'll finish up on the boat."

"I came out to help you," Will protested. His voice felt feeble as it rose from his throat and was made even thinner in the wild air.

"You get on home," Carl repeated. "Take my car; I'll take the truck." He patted Will on the back with a hand like an anchor. "I'll be there soon." He looked deeply into Will's eyes for

moment, then turned and started across the sand.

Will felt sick as he stared out at the coal-gray water that roared at him. *What happened?* A large wave crashed at the break point, then smoothed and reached toward him like an arm unfolding. It grabbed at his feet, then retreated and sank wearily into the sand. There was no sign of life beyond the breakers. The water held no trace of his struggle to save the girl, no record that she had ever been there at all.

## Chapter Two

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*From “The Sailor’s Song” (Traditional)*

*The waves doth rage  
And the wind doth blow  
But a brave young man was he,  
For he’d heard a voice  
Singing on the storm  
So he went down to the sea ...*

There was water all around her. She couldn’t see the horizon, and somehow she knew the shore was a long way off. She wasn’t sure how she’d gotten here.

The moon shone down on the calm black water. The stars were out—more stars than she had ever seen before, like a blanket of diamonds. And the constellations were strange. She wondered where she was.

*Farther in*, her mind whispered. *Farther in*.

She swam forward, then stopped, treading water. Something brushed her arm, and she drew it away quickly. The movement caused a splash that sounded deafening in the silence of the dark sea.

She became aware that the edge of the horizon had shifted slightly. A black shape had blotted out part of the stars—a mountain. She swam toward it, wondering how she could have missed noticing it before.

She concentrated on swimming, but her arms were tired. She looked up, expecting to feel despair at the mountain’s distance. But, surprisingly, it seemed much closer now. She was making progress.

She redoubled her efforts, moving with great effort through the sea. The next time she looked up, she realized that the mountain was almost on top of her.

But it was no mountain.

She struggled against the water in a desperate attempt to swim backward, but it was useless. The wave slammed against her. She was caught in the giant wall of water. Claws scraped at her face, her legs. The tsunami had churned up so much debris that driftwood and pieces of shell scratched and bit at her like living things.

Her lungs strained.

*I have to swim toward the surface*, she thought. But there was another voice in her mind. *Down*, it whispered, *down*.

And then she saw the eyes. They gleamed through the dark water like silver coins at the

bottom of a pool. Then—teeth. They revealed themselves slowly in a dangerous, razor-like grin. “Gretchen,” the thing said.

Gretchen tried to cry out, but her mouth filled with water.

An arm reached toward her, grabbing her shoulder in a grip that burned like a brand. “Gretchen,” the thing repeated. “Gretchen!”

“Gretchen!”

The voice changed, deepened.

“Gretchen!”

And suddenly a man stood before her. Wild hair, dark eyes, black goatee, a strange dark mark like a flower near his temple. Water streamed down his face like tears. “Gretchen!” he cried.

She pressed her palms against his chest. “Dad?” Gretchen looked around. She wasn’t in the water. There were boards beneath her bare feet. She looked down at her dark blue T-shirt and plaid pajama bottoms. Her clothes were sticking to her limply. “I’m all wet.”

“It’s still raining,” Johnny said as water lashed the porch. “The storm hasn’t passed yet. Are you okay?” Creases appeared at the corners of his dark eyes. It was an expression Gretchen’s father wore often lately—he looked worried.

“I’m fine.” Gretchen glanced out over the front yard. It looked like the storm had already taken out one of the smaller weeping willows on the edge of the creek that ran through the property. Even in the darkness, Gretchen could see limbs littered across her front lawn. “Where am I on the porch?” she asked. “What time is it?”

“Midnight,” Johnny said. Naturally, Gretchen’s father was still wearing his jeans and faded concert T-shirt. He didn’t go to bed before three in the morning most nights.

“I thought you were asleep,” he said. Then, hesitating, “I mean—I guess you were.”

“It’s been five weeks,” Gretchen said. Since the last sleepwalking incident, she meant. That was nearly a record.

“Why are we still standing out here?” Johnny took her elbow and guided her through the front door. “Do you want some cocoa, or something? It’s chilly.” He grabbed a cashmere throw from the faded couch and swept it over her shoulders. He touched her chin gently, then led the way toward the kitchen. Gretchen’s cat, Bananas, took one look at her and skittered under the couch.

“Thanks for the support,” Gretchen told the cat.

The house was warm and comfortable, but Gretchen kept the blanket around her shoulder. Her father liked to cluck and fuss over her, and she knew it made him happy to think that he was keeping her warm, even though Gretchen hardly ever felt cold. All winter long she would wander the streets of Manhattan with only a light jacket and no hat. It drove her father crazy. Even here, in the summer house, he kept jackets in the hallway and blankets on the couches. “Just in case,” he said. Unlike her, Johnny was cold-blooded.

Gretchen sat down at the wooden table in the breakfast nook as her father walked to the cupboard. She looked around the cozy kitchen. *I could live here all year.* The thought was comforting ... especially since it was starting to look like she’d have to.

Johnny stood staring at the cupboards. He looked baffled.

“Cold,” Gretchen said.

“What? You’re cold?”

“No—you are,” Gretchen told him.

Johnny looked at her quizzically as he touched the lotus tattoo on his temple.

“Wrong cupboard,” Gretchen explained. “Ice cold.”

Johnny scooted to the right.

“Warmer,” Gretchen told him.

He moved farther to the right.

“Warmer. Warmer. Getting hot.”

Johnny opened the cupboard and rummaged around on the middle shelf until he found the cocoa. He leaned against the counter, studying the label. “But this is for baking,” he said.

Gretchen sighed. “Let me do it.”

“I can make cocoa,” Johnny protested.

“Right.” Gretchen rolled her eyes and shook the blanket from her shoulders. “Just like you can cook chicken.”

“The fire department guy said they handled fires like that all the time,” her father protested as she took the cocoa from his hand.

Johnny was pretty famous for his incompetence in the kitchen. The gourmet meals they enjoyed when Yvonne—Gretchen’s mother—was behind the apron had devolved to boxes of mac and cheese and Chinese takeout in the years since she had moved out. But Gretchen didn’t care. She had always hated fancy food.

“He was clearly a Johnny Ellis fan,” Gretchen countered as she yanked open the fridge. “He was just being kind.”

“Nobody’s a Johnny Ellis fan,” her dad corrected. “Studio musicians don’t have fans.”

“Oh, please.” The milk hissed softly at the rim as the pan heated up. “Everyone knows who you’ve recorded with. They’re all hoping that we’ll have a pool party one day and invite a few of their favorite rock stars.”

“Well ...” Johnny stroked his goatee, pretending to think it over. “We’d have to get a pool ... and I’d have to make some friends.”

Gretchen let the sugar fall into the milk in a steady stream. Steam started to rise from the cocoa, and she poured it carefully into two mugs.

“What’s that?” Johnny asked as she passed him a mug. His favorite—the one that said World’s Best Dad.

Gretchen cocked her head. “Cocoa.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Yeah—I got it,” he said as he blew across the top of the steaming liquid. “I’m not a total idiot. I *meant*, what’s that song you’re humming?”

Gretchen sat still. She hadn’t even realized she’d been humming. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Hum it again.”

Gretchen tried, but the tune was like sand that slipped through her fingers. “I can’t.”

Johnny shrugged. “Too bad. Could’ve made me a million.”

“Next time,” Gretchen told him. But she wasn’t even sure what she meant. *What next time?*

Will looked out his window as the raindrops splattered the glass. It was past midnight, but he couldn’t fall asleep. His mind was whirling with thoughts and images. That girl—he couldn’t get her green eyes out of his mind. When he closed his eyes, he saw them clearly—luminous with hypnotic intensity.

Guernsey let out a soft snore from her place at the foot of Will's bed. Will stroked her graying flecked black coat softly, so as not to wake her. *Let the old girl sleep*, he thought as the Labrador shifted slightly, dreaming.

Will's room was directly over the kitchen, and his father's and uncle's bass voices floated up to him. When he was a child, Will had always found their talk soothing. Tim had been interested in the parental gossip, but Will tried to listen not to the words but just to the calming drone of the voices, like the crash of the sea. It was hard now, though, since the words were about him.

"You should have seen him." Carl's voice was a sigh, and Will could picture his uncle sitting at the ancient wood table, swigging a bottle of non-alcoholic beer. Will's father always kept the fridge stocked with them in case Carl came over.

Carl had waited until Will's mother went to sleep to mention anything about the incident on the beach.

*Carl is a wise man*, Will thought. *Mom would've had to be strapped to something.*

"He looked ... well, to be honest with you, Bert, he looked crazy."

Will's father let out a soft hissing sound. "It's the timing."

"Next week. I know." There was a gentle clink as Carl set his bottle on the table.

*Next week.* The God's honest truth was that Will hadn't realized that it had been almost a year. But of course it had. *It's the end of June, isn't it?*

It was frightening how little he thought about the night his brother died. He used to think about it all the time, trying to remember what had happened. He would talk to anyone who would listen in an attempt to puzzle out the events of that night. Will knew that he and Tim had gone sailing at sunset. There was nothing unique about that. Except Tim hadn't come back. And Will had. The police had found him on the beach, unconscious. He'd been wet, his face covered in blood. Nobody knew how he'd gotten there. And nobody knew what had happened to Tim.

Eventually people stopped listening to Will. They would sit with him while he talked, sure, but their eyes would lose focus or drift to the clock on the wall. Will could tell that some of them didn't believe that his memory was like an empty shell. He had to remember something, they'd say. *Something.* But Will *didn't* remember.

*Why did they find me when they never found Tim?*

It was a question with no answer.

The wind howled mournfully through the trees. It was dark, but Will could see the branches bending with the gusts. He wondered how many trunks would be torn from the earth before the night was over.

"Don't say anything to Evelyn." His father again.

"Of course not. I just don't know—maybe there *was* a girl, Bert. But—"

"In this storm?" Will's father sounded doubtful.

"I didn't see anything."

"There was nothing to see." Silence. And then, "He'll be better in a couple of weeks. The anniversary is taking a toll."

"I know it is."

Will lay on his back, still feeling the motion of the waves with his body. He could still see that girl. He could see the water as it closed over her, gobbled her up. She had seemed so

real.

He stood up and went to the bathroom. The fluorescent light flickered on, revealing his greenish face in the mirror. *Maybe I am crazy*, he thought, staring into his own eyes. No matter how often he saw it, he couldn't get used to the purplish scar that ran diagonally across his forehead and sliced down the top of his cheekbone. His sandy hair covered it most of the time. But sometimes the wind would push it back, and a passing stranger would stare. It made Will feel like Frankenstein—like someone stitched back together. Especially in a place like Walfang, where all of the summer people were surgically perfected.

*It wouldn't be so bad if I could just remember*, Will thought as he pulled open the medicine cabinet. *If I just knew what happened.*

Will pulled out an orange bottle and unscrewed the white plastic top. His doctor had prescribed sleeping pills, but Will hated taking them. They made him groggy and lethargic the next day.

Then again, so did staying awake all night.

He shook two pills into his palm and popped them into his mouth. Then he scooped cold water from the faucet to wash them down. He put the bottle back and closed the medicine chest, then clicked off the light.

Will settled back under the ancient quilt his great-aunt had stitched and listened to the wind's complaints. He tucked his feet under Guernsey's warm body. *There's a hurricane happening on the other side of this wall*, Will thought.

The wind picked up. The sturdy oak near the farm stand stood tall, refusing to bend, but the wind simply redoubled in rage. A crack like a gunshot, then several pops and a groan as the wind delivered its vengeance. The oak leaned, then toppled with an explosion and a strange silver tinkle.

"Greenhouse," Will's father said.

Footsteps, and the sound of the kitchen door opening and slamming shut. The house was suddenly silent. Will lay perfectly still in the darkness.

A year ago, Will's father would have shouted up at both of his sons to get their asses downstairs and help. But not now.

Will curled onto his side, like a question mark. He knew he'd fall asleep eventually. He just had to wait.

## Chapter Three

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### *From the Walfang Gazette City Cleanup Scheduled Today*

Walfang's mayor, Claire Hutchinson, has asked all city employees to assist with the cleanup of city beaches today. Tropical Storm Bonita didn't cause as much damage as forecasted or feared, but it still packed high winds and waves that have left the beaches riddled with detritus.

"Our economy depends on the tourist trade," Mayor Hutchinson read from a prepared statement last night at a press conference. "When tourists come to Walfang, they expect to see the pristine white sand beaches we're famous for." A spokesman for the Department of Public Works ...

"Good morning, sunshine!" Gretchen chirped as Will shuffled groggily into the kitchen the next morning. She slid two fried eggs onto a plate and headed to rescue the toast from the toaster. Will's dad had been meaning to fix the pop-up feature for the past eight years, but Gretchen knew its quirks.

"What are you doing here?" Will asked, blinking at her with heavy lids. "Why does it smell like bacon?"

"Because I made you breakfast," Gretchen replied as she set the plate before him. "I figured bacon would probably be the only thing that could wake you up."

Will glanced at the clock: eleven-thirty. And here he was, in his own kitchen, while the giant from next door was cooking away like Snow White bent on feeding an army of miniature dwarves. That was so Gretchen. She only spent summers in Walfang, but whenever she and her father appeared, they just picked up as if they had never left. "Where is everybody?"

"I think your dad's at the hardware store. Your mom is—"

"Well, look who finally rolled out of bed," Evelyn Archer said as she walked in from the living room. Her dark eyes scowled at Will. "Your father could use your help, you know Humberto can't come in today."

Will scooped up a forkful of egg. Arguing with his mother never got him anywhere.

"Bert isn't here right now," Gretchen told her.

Mrs. Archer removed her laser glance from Will's face and turned to Gretchen. "I didn't know you were in town."

"Here I am!" Gretchen singsonged. She paced over to the coffeepot and poured the dark, rich liquid into Will's mother's favorite cup. "He told me he had to get the tractor fixed in town—said he'd be back in a couple of hours." She held out the mug, and Mrs. Archer accepted it gratefully.

"Ah," she said as she pulled a long whiff of the coffee. "It never tastes this good when you make it." She sat down heavily in the wooden chair. The caning sighed under her weight.

Will's mother still had the high cheekbones and fine features that had made her a famous local beauty in her youth. But she had turned matronly, especially in the past year. She no longer bothered to highlight her hair, which was now cut short in a utilitarian style. And she wore mostly shorts and baggy shirts in neutral colors. It was as if she were trying to turn herself invisible.

Gretchen wiggled her eyebrows at Will, who was silently chewing the last of his bacon.

"What did you do to your face?" Mrs. Archer asked.

"My face?" Gretchen's fingers flew to her cheeks.

"She means your nose ring," Will translated.

"You haven't seen this yet?" Gretchen tossed her long blond hair and angled her face so that Will's mother could get a better view of the tiny sapphire that glittered at the impression on her right nostril. "I got it while we were in India in January. It's very traditional there." Gretchen grinned playfully and poked Mrs. Archer in the arm. "You should get one, Evelyn. Or maybe an eyebrow ring—they're very in right now."

Mrs. Archer snorted a laugh and rolled her eyes.

"You'd be the talk of the town," Gretchen teased.

"I'm already the talk of the town," Mrs. Archer snapped, and took another long slug of her coffee.

An awkward silence pulsed through the room.

"Well," Will said as he wiped up the last of the egg with a crust of toast, "this has been great, but I think I should—"

"Will's heading into town with me," Gretchen announced as she slapped the back of her chair with a kitchen towel. "I need to pick up a few things. Okay, Evelyn?"

Will's mother just shrugged a reply. "Ask your father why we never see him anymore."

"He sends his regards," Gretchen called. She was already pulling Will out the door.

"You drove here?" Will asked when he saw her car in the driveway.

"I knew we were going out, and I'm not riding on the back of your bike, thanks."

"You knew we were going out?"

"I want ice cream, and you're coming with me."

"Why didn't you just eat breakfast?"

"I *did* eat breakfast. At eight, like a normal person. Now it's time for ice cream." Gretchen yanked him toward the battered orange Gremlin she bombed around in. The thing looked like an antique, and handled like one. She referred to it as her "pothole detector," since it always managed to find every single one on the road.

"You're lucky my mother likes you," Will said dryly as Gretchen sent gravel flying.

"I'm the kooky daughter she never wanted," Gretchen said.

Will laughed. "Yeah, and I'm the non-kooky son she never liked."

Gretchen winced. "That's not true."

Will shrugged. He looked out the window. "So I can be kooky sometimes."

Gretchen punched him playfully. "Shut up." She drove slowly, picking her way around fallen branches. "Dad says Route 27 is clear."

"Won't have a problem merging onto it today."

"Let's hope." Gretchen turned at the fork, and suddenly the main road came into view. The two-lane highway was usually clogged to a crawl with summer people, but not this morning.

*guess everyone's busy yelling at their gardeners to get the fallen branches out of the hedges, Will* thought as Gretchen turned onto the road. In a moment they were flying. Gretchen's car didn't have air-conditioning, not that you ever really needed it in Walfang. The ocean air was always cool, and it smelled sweet—like cut grass. The summer people had planted immaculate gardens between the acres still used by horse breeders and potato farmers.

"When did you get back?" Will asked.

"Thursday."

"Today is Thursday."

"Last Thursday."

Will turned his face away from hers. He stared out the window in silence. He wasn't surprised, of course. He'd noticed the lights were on at night. He'd seen Johnny's car in the driveway.

Last year Gretchen hadn't even stopped at her own house before coming over to the Archers'. Johnny's vintage silver Mercedes pulled into the Archer driveway and Gretchen spilled out, shouting and whooping at the top of her lungs. Tim was working at the stand, and Gretchen tackled him first, wrapping him in a huge hug. Then she'd found Will in the tomato house and insisted that they go to the beach—even though she never swam in the ocean. Gretchen loved the sand—at four o'clock sharp. So they had. But that had been last year.

Gretchen pulled off the highway onto a shady lane lined with houses that were large, but tastefully so.

"So, after ten months, you just decided to come over and make me some breakfast?"

Gretchen was silent. Will looked out the window, letting the breeze blow through his hair. His father liked to tease him. "Get a haircut," he'd say. But Will liked the long hair. He let it hang, curtain-like, over his scar.

Tim had always buzzed his hair off at the beginning of the summer. By summer's end, he looked scruffy again. Will had preferred the scruffy version of his brother—half-grown beard, shorts two sizes too big. With his chiseled jaw and long, aquiline nose, Tim's good looks could be intimidating. At the beginning of the summer, Tim always looked like someone who could pull you over and give you a speeding ticket or slap cuffs on you. By the end of the summer, with his hair grown out again, he looked like a vacationing movie star.

Will glanced over at Gretchen. One hand was on the steering wheel, the other hanging out the window. Her posture was carefree, but her face was serious—lost in thought. Will noticed how pale she was. She had dark circles under her eyes.

"How are you sleeping?" Will asked.

"Eh—I got out last night."

"That could be dangerous, you know," Will told her.

She sighed, and the sparkle in her voice seemed to drain away. "I know."

Will wondered how she had the energy to even pretend to be happy. He certainly didn't. It was all he could do to get out of bed, work at the stand, and exchange a few words with other human beings. Even brushing his teeth felt like a superhuman effort.

As they turned into the center of town, Will became aware that he was scanning the sidewalks for signs of the girl he'd seen yesterday. But the streets were mostly empty. He fought the urge to ask Gretchen if she'd ever seen anyone matching the girl's description. He didn't feel like explaining what had happened the day before. *Let it go*, he told himself.

Finally they pulled up in front of Sixteen Flavors. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you hum before,” Will said as the car rattled to a stop.

Gretchen paused, her hand partway to the door handle. “I was humming?”

“Yeah.”

She cocked her head. “How did it go?”

Will gave her a look. “You know that line of questioning will get you nowhere,” he said. Will was completely tone-deaf.

The bell over the door jingled as Will and Gretchen stepped into the cool air of the ice cream shop. Sixteen Flavors served lunch, too, and the place was already filling up with locals and summer people looking for a bite in one of the few places in town that were open. Will said a little prayer of thanks that the girl smiling at them behind the counter was Rachel Finnegan. She was sweet and didn’t talk much. She was also just a freshman, which meant she wasn’t likely to dare to chat with them.

“Two scoops of peppermint stick on a sugar cone,” Will said as he perched on the red stool.

“And can I get you anything?” Rachel asked Gretchen.

“No, that’s for her,” Will explained. “She always gets the same thing. I’ll have a Coke.”

Rachel turned to Gretchen with lifted eyebrows, and Gretchen nodded. Then Rachel looked at Will again, and her cheeks blushed pink. She looked down at the counter when she handed Will his Coke.

“Thanks, Rachel,” he said, and she flushed even harder before she scurried to scoop out the ice cream.

Rachel handed Gretchen the ice cream cone, and Will waved off Gretchen’s attempt to pay. “You buy the next one,” he said.

Will held the door as Gretchen stepped into the sunshine. She nodded her thanks—she was busy licking an escaping drip from her ice cream.

Three guys with sleek, tanned chests and low-slung shorts were fixing a broken awning in front of a new restaurant, Paz. *Yay. Another pretentious restaurant.* When he was a kid, the streets had been lined with cute little stores that were run by people from Walfang. There had been Penny’s Candy, Toys and More, Fitzgerald’s—which everyone had always called the dime store—and the “nice” restaurant, Delia Mater’s. All of those were gone now, except for Delia’s, which had been renovated beyond recognition by a couple of New York City investors. Now, boutique after boutique lined the streets. Most of them offered impossible-to-wear fashions at the kind of prices usually reserved for major appliances.

A scrawny kid with lank black hair watched the workers from a stoop. When he saw Gretchen, he turned his huge dark eyes to her face and stared. He was gawking, really, with a gaze that didn’t waver or blink. Will could tell the look made Gretchen uncomfortable because she stiffened beside him. Will knew the kid. He wanted to tell Gretchen not to worry, that he was just a harmless dude who was a little crazy, but before Will could speak she turned and asked, “Does that happen to you a lot?” She elbowed him in the ribs. “People just staring at you?”

Will gave her a wry smile. “What can I say? It ain’t easy being this sexy. Seriously, that’s just a sophomore kid—Kirk Worstler.”

Gretchen chuckled, her limbs loosening a little, and she let Will steer her across the street away from the skinny kid’s piercing gaze. She seemed happy again, intent on her ice cream.

Will was just starting to relax when Gretchen stopped suddenly and stood staring at a telephone pole. A vibrant green flyer blared that a local band—Minutia’s Cousin—would be playing at the Old Barn on Saturday night. Gretchen reached out and touched the paper as if it were an old relic or a fragment from a dream.

Will read the flyer over Gretchen’s shoulder. “Life goes on, I guess,” he said.

Gretchen’s eyes glowed, like paper that had caught fire. “I can’t believe they’d just—” She shook her head.

Will placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. He’d seen the flyers before, so it wasn’t such a shock that Tim’s band had somehow managed to go on without him. But Gretchen tensed, her fingers knotted into a tight fist. “Tim started that band,” she said. “That was *Tim’s* band.”

Will shrugged. He could practically hear Alan and Rob and Ginny saying, “Tim would have wanted it this way.” He was sure the band had gotten together and decided that keeping the name would be a tribute to their friend and the fulfillment of his wishes. Will thought it was interesting that everyone seemed to know what Tim would have wanted. He, personally, had no idea.

Will remembered the last time he and Gretchen had gone to hear Tim play. It had been an open-air concert on the lush green lawn in front of First Church. Minutia’s Cousin played a strange fusion of classical and rock. Tim played classical guitar, Alan played flute and piccolo, Rob played percussion, and Ginny played the electric guitar and sang. Tim had arranged most of their music, stealing phrases and snippets from classical and updating the melodies. They were just starting to become well known locally—even now, their Facebook fans were a strange mix of teens and grayhairs. Gretchen had *loved* their music. She insisted that Will accompany her to every single concert, and she sometimes even sat in on rehearsals. Will had liked Minutia’s Cousin, too—but mostly because it was Tim’s band. Personally, Will preferred hip-hop, and he liked it loud. Minutia’s Cousin sometimes sounded like glorified elevator music to him, but then again, he didn’t know much about music.

Gretchen stood for a moment with her head bowed like the curve of a candlewick. Finally she seemed to pull herself together. She straightened up and frowned at the gaudy flyer. “They’ll suck without him,” she said lightly. She let Will’s hand drop from her shoulder as she stepped away and tossed her ice cream cone into a garbage can.

Will could tell from the way she said it that he’d never see her at another Minutia’s Cousin concert again. She’d always been friendly with Alan and Ginny—not Rob so much, because he hardly ever spoke—but if she saw them in the street now, she probably wouldn’t even wave. That’s how she was.

Gretchen liked to pretend that nothing bothered her. But Will knew better. Almost *everything* bothered her. More than once, she had confronted Will about something insensitive he’d said weeks earlier, words that had created tiny wounds that refused to heal. Even worse was when Gretchen would obsess over some slight she feared that she had caused Will. She would return days, sometimes weeks later with an overwrought apology for something that Will couldn’t even recall. He didn’t understand the way her mind worked. Things that meant nothing to him meant everything to her. But that was also why she fell into raptures at the sight of a flower or burst into tears while reading a poster for a stray dog. She was like something flammable, and everything was fuel for her fire.

Gretchen flipped her blond hair and slipped her arm through Will’s. He put a warm hand on

her bicep, but he didn't look at her. They fell into step down the quiet street. Most of the stores weren't open, but a few—like the hardware store—were humming with activity.

"That was a really good breakfast, by the way," Will said at last. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

They walked a little farther. The town had recently refurbished the business district, and the pavement was set with red bricks. A few branches were down here and there, but it looked as if the city had cleaned everything up early in the morning.

Will stopped suddenly, his arm dropping from Gretchen's shoulder. Something in the window of an antiques store had caught his eye.

"What's up?" Gretchen asked.

He was looking at what seemed to be an ancient flute. A very familiar-looking flute. But he didn't want to have to try to explain it to Gretchen. Especially since he didn't know what he was explaining. Instead he just shook his head. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Nothing, like—nothing? Or nothing, like—dramatic pause—*nothing* that's really fraught with something?"

Will blinked at her. "Nothing, as in that's a cool flute. But the store isn't open, anyway, so forget it."

"Okay, keep your secrets." She pointed to the Help Wanted sign in the window of the vintage silver diner next door. "Destiny has led me here," she announced dramatically.

Will looked dubious. "You're going to work at Bella's? You'd get better tips at the Villa. Or that new Paz place."

Gretchen studied the caboose-style diner. The windows were filled with hand-lettered signs advertising specials—\$2.99 for eggs, toast, bacon, coffee. Free ice cream with kids' meal. Breakfast served all day. It was located at the scruffy end of a nice street, next to a run-down liquor store. This corner was the only blot on the pristine block. And Bella's was the only place where the locals could still afford a meal. Most of the summer people never set foot there.

"Rich people are crappy tippers," Gretchen replied. "How do I look?" She straightened the pale blue halter she was wearing with a pair of white denim shorts. "Do you think I should go home and change?"

"You look great," Will said. "You don't need to wear a business suit to get a waitressing job."

"Said like someone who works on a farm." Gretchen raked her fingers through her thick wild blond hair and smeared on some lip balm. She peeked at herself in the reflection of the glass and took a deep breath. "Wish me luck," she said to Will.

Will studied her a moment. "Why are you even doing this? You've got plenty of money."

Gretchen looked pensive, as if she was about to say something heavy. Then she seemed to change her mind, and flashed him a smile. "What else am I supposed to do all day?" she asked. "Sit around on the beach and work on my tan?"

Will shrugged. "That's what most girls do."

Gretchen put a hand on her hip. "I'm not most girls," she told him.

Will gave her a brotherly arm punch. "Yeah," he said. "I noticed."

The chain saw screamed as Mr. Archer sliced into the fallen tree's thick trunk. As he

approached his house from the rear—cutting across Gretchen’s yard to get to his own—Will got a good look at the greenhouse wreckage. It wasn’t as bad as he’d feared. The oak had glanced off the sloped roof, popping some windows and crushing a few tender seedlings. Two feet over, and the greenhouse would have been totaled. The tree lay like a fallen giant on the side near the house. The roots were still attached at the base, and it had left a huge hole in the earth.

Will strode toward his father, who was cutting the trunk into eighteen-inch lengths. Just big enough to fit into their woodstove, which was how they heated the house most of the winter. Still, Will was surprised to see his father doing the cutting himself. Usually he had Humberto do the physically challenging work on the farm. Then Will remembered—Humberto was busy this morning.

“Want me to start hauling this toward the shed?” Will shouted over the chain saw’s roar.

Mr. Archer looked up at Will through thick plastic safety goggles. Frowning, he turned down the chain saw to a rumble. “What?”

Will gestured toward the shed. “Want me to start piling up the wood?”

“Carl’s going to do it,” Will’s father said. “He’s coming over later.”

“I’ll take care of the glass,” Will offered.

“Carl and I will see to it,” Mr. Archer said. He looked at Will warily. “You just take it easy.”

Will sighed impatiently. “I’m okay.”

“Just make sure the animals are fed tonight, and see if you can figure out what’s wrong with the gate. You can help me tomorrow. I’m keeping the stand closed for the day, but we have to be open for the weekend. Summer people need their gourmet vegetables.”

Will fought the annoyance that grasped at him like a monkey’s paw. He appreciated that his father was trying to do him a favor. But it was in his dad’s own particular way. Even when his father was being kind to Will, he never lost sight of who came first—the customer. Everything Mr. Archer did was calculated according to a mental profit-and-loss statement.

Will stood and watched his father for a moment. He actually would have preferred to have some work to do, but he didn’t want to have to explain why. As it was, the little chores his father had assigned him could be done later, in about an hour. Will started for the house, but when he saw that his mother’s car was in the driveway, he took a detour toward the garage. *Can’t deal with her right now.*

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness in the musty garage. As usual, the first thing he saw was the light wood paddle over his father’s rarely used workbench. Skipper Award, it read. Tim had won it from the local sailing club when he was twelve, and Will had always envied it. Tim had been an outstanding sailor ... and look where it had gotten him.

Will remembered the gentle rocking of the boat as he had stepped into the *Vagabond* beside his brother the night Tim disappeared. The sunlight had glinted off the water. When Will had looked out across the bay, he’d caught sight of a dark shape against the shimmering gold. Before he’d had a chance to call out to Tim, the shape had disappeared. It had looked like a swimmer. But it had been very far out in the bay. *I must have imagined it*, Will had thought then.

And that was what he was starting to think about the girl the day before.

Will tried to shake off the thought, wondering when he would get used to the little lar-

mines planted throughout his life. Everything in Will's life was laced with Tim. His absence was a silent presence that lurked in unexpected corners. Now thoughts of the girl surprised him the same way.

Will hauled out his heavy black Honda motorcycle and pointed it toward the road. He was heading toward the beach.

Maybe there would be something there. Some sign. Some clue.

Something that would say, *She was here*.

Will strapped on his helmet and kicked the bike to life. He buzzed out the driveway and down the limb-lined road. An orange public works truck was parked on the side, guys in hard hats shoving branches into a portable chipper. Will gave them a wave as he passed and punched the accelerator.

He sped past his family's own field of sunflowers—a customer favorite, surprisingly undamaged in the storm—and two hothouses of organically grown tomatoes and basil. The Archer family had owned farmland in Walfang for over three hundred years. They'd been here when there was nothing but farmers, fishermen, and preachers. Local streets were named for their ancestors—Archer Road, Old Archer Lane. Over the years, parcels of land had been sold off, developed to make enormous mansions with ancient-looking turrets and shingles on the outside, and spacious rooms, cathedral ceilings, and up-to-the-minute appliances on the inside. Many of these houses boasted “green” and “eco-friendly” features which always made Will laugh because, of course, the best way to go green was to not have a nine-thousand-square-foot house that gets used just two months out of the year. As he sped down the quiet side street, Will peered past the high boxwood hedges to catch glimpses of vast emerald-green lawns landscaped with ubiquitous hydrangeas and climbing roses, and he thought about the fertilizer that was spread with abandon, the water needed to keep everything green and lush even in August, the pesticides and sprays. These people's idea of going green was to drive a hybrid car to the local farm stand and buy a few vegetables, then drive home again to eat beside the chlorine-laced pool instead of the beach that was two blocks away.

And the farm stand that they drove to? That was his father's.

Despite the family history, Will's father was no farmer. Of course there were farmers out here. A neighbor down the road—from another family legacy—had gone to Cornell Agricultural School. But Bertrand Archer had no interest in real farming. He owned land, sure, and hired people to plant and harvest the flowers and vegetables. But Bert had figured out that real farming wasn't where the money was. The money was in retail, or in (as Will liked to think of it) his boutique vegetables. People in the Hamptons didn't care how much Bert charged for a pint of tomatoes. If they saw fresh kettle fries being made at a roadside stand, they'd buy them no matter what the cost. If they were looking for a housewarming gift, they'd buy handmade lavender soap or a bouquet of flowers without thinking.

They didn't count the change from their hundred-dollar bills. They signed the AmEx receipt without looking at it. And if Bertrand Archer's farm stand was the most expensive around, well, that must be because it was the best.

And so that was the kind of farming Will's father did—he had enough greenhouses to stock the stand with heirloom varieties, and he grew enough corn to pile on a table near the road. He hired a good-looking local girl to make sweet-potato fries in the late afternoons, so the

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