

A woman with long, dark hair is shown from the waist up, floating in clear blue water. She is wearing a white, sleeveless, lace-trimmed dress with a full, flowing skirt. Her hair is blowing around her head, and she has a serene expression. The lighting is soft, creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

*a novel*

THE  
MERMAID'S  
DAUGHTER  
ANN CLAYCOMB

KATHLEEN

## Aria for Soprano

Kathleen,” she says, “you are going to go mad.”

I have only just finished singing and I feel like I have surfaced from deep water, gasping like a fish desperate to be submerged again, to still be breathing the song. For a moment, hearing her words, I am terrified to have it confirmed. I am going to go mad: she knows it just looking at me, just hearing me. *How does she know?*

There are only a hundred people in the audience, but they are all clapping, many of them on their feet. I can feel my voice recede from my throat like a tide dropping. I take shallow sips of air, keep my eyes on the woman who is holding my hands. She is smiling at me, shaking her head. Her voice, trained to fill much larger spaces than this one, cuts easily through the applause, silences it. Her hands are warm around mine.

RUZENA IS A great soprano, an international diva, brought in to do a master class with three young singers handpicked

by the faculty to show off the caliber of the school. Ruzena's job was to listen to each of us sing, correct us on breathing, stance, tonal quality, pronunciation, gestures. Then she would pronounce judgment.

Carianne has a light, sparkling voice, a true soubrette. The diva promised her Mozart roles and worked with her on balancing out the weightlessness of her voice with better breath control, especially when she sings longer phrases. Hyung is a mezzo with a break in her voice that she has learned to sing around. She masks her weakness with a huskiness that untrained audiences hear as sexiness. Ruzena saw right through it, took Hyung to task for not stretching her range, for not doing more vocal exercises to increase her flexibility.

She had no corrections for me. When I finished singing she moved gracefully from where she had been standing behind the piano, put her hands on my shoulders, and turned me toward the audience. Then she took a step back and made a grand gesture of her own, of presentation. It's the gesture the conductor usually makes when he presents the star: the falsely modest step back, the satisfied smile, the sweep of the arm inviting applause. She did nothing in this class but make this familiar gesture, award me her unqualified approbation, but it was enough—my God, more than enough—and she knew it. People stood for an ovation, some of my friends even whistled. In the front row, Harriet Evans, the mezzo who should have been picked for this class instead of Hyung, was one of the first to stand. There was nothing forced about her smile, like there would have been about mine if I'd been consigned to the audience. No, Harry just beamed, her cheeks flushed with love and pride. When she

caught my eye, she stopped clapping long enough to blow me a kiss. Then Ruzena turned me back around to face her, took my hands in hers.

“YOU ARE GOING to kill yourself,” she says. She puts her fingertips on my throat, her touch light and reverent. She is performing. She does not know anything real, is not predicting anything about me. She is talking about the roles I will play: Lucia, Mimi, Butterfly, Violetta, Norma, Manon. She is offering the highest possible praise.

“You will stab yourself,” she says, “throw yourself into the sea.”

Too close to home. I was only a baby when my mother filled her pockets with rocks and walked into the sea to die. I have no actual memories of my mother at all, but I tried to follow her when I was six, swam out until I couldn't stand and let myself go under. The water was warm against my face and colder down below, where the sun had not touched it. The dark ribbon of cold seeped into my feet until they barely hurt at all, and my feet always hurt.

They hurt now, as I stand with my fingers still loosely clasped in another woman's hands. I can feel the rings she wears against my skin. If she squeezed my hands tight, the press of her rings would hurt, but of course it would: that kind of pain makes sense. My feet don't make sense. They don't ache or throb with the ordinary discomfort of walking too far or wearing bad shoes. When it's really bad it feels like I've stepped on a broken bottle and not only have I cut my feet, I'm still walking on the shards. I wear ballet slippers all the time and pick through dirty Boston snowdrifts in them rather than resort to heavy boots. There's

no shoe in the world that can cushion my feet from jagged glass that isn't there. In my little ballet shoes, though, I can step lightly enough to almost tiptoe, almost prance, without anyone noticing I'm doing it.

I am supposed to smile at the litany of terrible fates in store for me, to show that I am in on the joke. I avoid even glancing over at Harry, who will have registered both the prediction and my reaction. I hate moments like this, when we are both recalled to my general—what?—*precariousness*? I like that word better than other possibilities.

"I was thinking of throwing myself into the sea tomorrow." I smile back, performing too. "It's spring break and we're going to drive to the beach."

"Well!" She squeezes my hands, releases them. "Enjoy it. Enjoy your vacation. But when you come back, you must promise to keep singing. Some day we will be cheering you on a much larger stage than this one."

"Once I'm resurrected from my tragic death?"

"My dear," Ruzena says, and now she turns a little to include the audience, "you will die a thousand tragic deaths onstage. It's the curse of the soprano. The tenor makes a fool of himself for love, the baritone must perfect an expression of evil glee, but we are the ones who die, my dear, every time."

I do glance at Harry now. For a moment I think I catch a glimpse of the fear that she generally hides so well, or masks with impatience and insistent caretaking. But then she rolls her eyes and grins at me, mouths a single word: *sopranos!*

OH YES, WE are drama queens, every one of us. Harry is not. She's a mezzo, for one thing—the loyal friend, the

cousin, the lady-in-waiting. And she's far too sensible to rush headlong toward a tragic, early end. In the crush of the reception after the class, she skirts the crowd around Ruzena to find me sitting in a chair by the windows with my shoes off and my feet tucked up under my dress.

"Good," she says, "you're sitting down."

Harry and I will have been together a year in April, long enough to have started squabbling about the little things: my inability to put anything in our apartment away, her insistence on spending grocery money on healthy foods that neither one of us ever wants to eat. But we joke about those things; we don't fight about them. We fight about this: my unexplained illness that's never going to go away and her hovering over me about it like—and I did call her this once when I was really angry—a puffed-up mama hen. "Peck," I said. "Peck, peck, peck." Harry drew in a breath through her nose and for a minute I thought she'd snap back. But instead she pressed her lips together and left the room. I sprang after her and she shut the door in my face. I was so stunned that I stopped short. My feet hurt and my mouth hurt that day, badly. My skin burned as if with a rash, though in the mirror I saw only what I expected to see: my white skin stained red with temper along my cheeks and at my temples, my hair fairly crackling around my shoulders, my eyes black and dilated from the pain and the pills I'd taken. OxyContin, I think, that day, more than I'd been prescribed, and from a prescription I wasn't supposed to have anymore.

That was a bad fight.

Now I try not to bristle, but I'm raw from the strangeness of the diva's words, the sensation I had onstage that

her predictions were settling over me like a net so finely woven as to be inescapable.

"I only sang a master class, not a whole performance," I say. "I'm not tired."

"But your feet were bothering you," she says. She sits down beside me and touches my hair. Even in the midst of her anxiety, she can't stop her face going soft when she touches me. We've been together nearly a year, but *that* hasn't faded, thank God. I still want to touch her as soon as she touches me, wind a finger in one of her blond curls, push her back or down against something, and let my long hair fall like red curtains around our faces.

I turn my face to kiss her palm, but then she ruins it.

"Are you all right? I mean, I know what she was doing with the things she said, but still. I could have killed her. She could have found another way to tell you how wonderful you were."

"She couldn't have known. Come on, Harry. It's not a big deal."

"It is if you take what she said serious—"

"Is there champagne?" I ask. "I thought I saw champagne going around, in real glasses, no less, not the usual plastic cups they use at these things. Can you get me some?"

She lets her hand fall from my hair. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Champagne, like the pills and the pot and the other things that I've tried, doesn't work on the pain. Harry thinks that if I'm going to self-medicate, at least it should help. I grant her that. But still, would it kill her just *once* to let it go? I unfold myself to get up, shrug my shoulder so my hair falls

between us. "It's just a glass of champagne," I say. "I'll get it myself."

"Kath"—her hand is on my arm then—"don't. Stay here and rest your feet. I'll get us both a glass."

When she's gone, I slip out into the art gallery adjoining the room where the reception is being held. I don't want to get caught alone by a board member; they tend to fawn over me, which is flattering but tiring. The gallery is small and pretty, lots of blond wood and stark white walls. I walk from one painting to the next not really seeing them, because Harry was right, of course: my feet are throbbing so badly it's hard to focus on anything else.

There's only one thing, besides singing, besides the taste of Harry's mouth, that really distracts me from the pain and suddenly here it is, in front of me.

The sea.

It's not a big painting, not big enough to get really lost in or to evoke the smell of the water, the chilly, damp feel of the air above the waves. But it's enough to stop me, enough to make me feel again the pang of longing I felt when the diva said I would throw myself into the sea. I thought then of Moira, my mother, and also felt the shock of desire I always feel at the thought of immersion.

Paintings of the sea make me long for it and realize all over again that I can't ever have it. Why, when people paint the sea, do they always include sunlight on the water and a cliff or rock for the waves to hurl white foam against? That creates a remove, an emphasis on the way that the sea is different from the land, from the air, and conveys such a flatness to the surface that it's hard to imagine the depths



I know are there. Paintings of the sea, even photographs or movies that venture underwater, are nothing like my dreams of it.

I dreamed of the sea before I ever saw it, lovely dreams of a blue-lit world where everything undulated softly all around. Swimming through murky castles and fields of black sea grass, I was happy. As soon as I started reading picture books, my favorite ones were all about the sea and fish and underwater creatures. And when I could put words to the pictures, I interrupted my father during bed-time reading with endless questions about the sea: *How many fish are there? In the whole ocean, how many fish? Can any of them talk? Can people live in the ocean? Why not? Why can't we ride seahorses? Are you sure there aren't any bigger seahorses? Why are they called that if they're fish and not horses? Where is the sea, Daddy? How big is it? Could we go there? When? When?*

Robin, my father, didn't figure out until it was too late that what I wanted was not the seashore or the beach, but the sea itself, underwater. I was five when he took me to see the ocean off the coast of Nantucket. We drove straight to the beach, took off our shoes in the car. I remember running toward the water, abandoning him in my eagerness. And then I stopped. I wish I didn't remember this too, the shock of disappointment that knocked me off my feet, the tears that wouldn't stop. I cried as though my heart would break, cried until I could barely breathe, and my poor father, having caught up, knelt beside me and stroked my hair, utterly perplexed.

It was nothing at all like the beautiful underwater world I had dreamed. From above, from even a little distance, the ocean smelled sad to me, like dead things and things left behind. I had imagined its depths and its tides of shifting

color, but it was nothing but a ragged gray blanket. Robin tried to calm me down, and when that failed, he said gently that we could leave now, it was all right, he was sorry, we could just go home.

But I couldn't leave without touching the water. I got up, still hysterical—*No, Daddy! No, no! I don't want to leave! I don't want to!*—and stumbled into the surf. My wet pants dragged around my ankles and my feet felt funny, tingly and buoyed up. I sat down in the sand and a wave rushed up and soaked me to my shoulders. My father's shadow fell over me and I heard him asking anxiously if I was all right. The salt water, my first taste of the sea, filled my mouth. I waited for each new wave to drape itself over me, and whenever and wherever my skin was actually in the water—even under the layers of clothes—I felt wrapped in comfort.

“THERE YOU ARE.” Harry comes up beside me, stops when she sees the painting. Knowing Harry, she's seeing a great deal more: my hands clenched at my sides, feet shifting up and down as I try to take my weight off them, my throat working against the nausea that rises when I recall the taste of the sea in my mouth and then feel its absence.

For a moment, though I know she sees everything, she says nothing. Maybe she has decided she doesn't want to fight either.

“Is your mouth bothering you too?” she asks finally. That's the other phantom pain, the sudden blinding agony that started when I was a teenager and only flares up occasionally, thank God, or I *would* be crazy. As it is, the pain in my mouth makes me scream, makes me throw up, sends me to the hospital for Demerol and yet another psych workup.

I'm a singer, after all, and I've let more than a dozen doctors examine my mouth. There's nothing wrong. No reason why I should sweat and gag against my own tongue, the pain the same with every attack, as if it were happening anew each time.

I shiver, thinking about it. Swallow.

"No, my mouth's okay."

"You want me to leave you alone a little while longer?"

She doesn't say that she already took as long as she could, probably stopped and talked to people, soaked up the praise of my singing for me. She's got two glasses in her hands but she's not even offering me one yet. She's trying to help me come back to her, to the room, the party next door.

I shake my head, feel tears brimming because my feet hurt and the sea in the painting in front of me is small and far away and Harry, beside me, is gazing at me with love and worry in her gray eyes. She doesn't approve of how I handle the pain or the need for the sea, but she believes me. She doesn't think I'm crazy. I take a deep breath, then another, and try to come back.

"I'm okay."

"Champagne? As requested?"

I take the glass she offers, and she tips her face up to kiss me. I curl my free hand around the back of her neck, kiss her more insistently than I know she planned in public, touch her tongue with mine.

"Stop that, you," she whispers as she pulls away.

I take a drink of champagne and bat my eyes at her over the glass. "I'll never do it again."

As soon as we walk back into the reception, Carianne

comes over to congratulate me, fizzing with her own excitement and post-singing high. Behind her, Tom, the tenor who considers it his personal mission to make sure none of us take ourselves too seriously, sighs loudly and declares that now I'm probably going to be even more insufferable than I already was.

"Listen," he says, "the only thing that's saving you from a terminal case of 'soprano-itis' is the way you walk, that bouncy thing you do on the balls of your feet."

Another moment not to look at Harry. "How is that saving me?"

"Because it's not compatible with wilting, darling. I mean, you haven't got the bosom to sail around like a Wagner soprano, thank God, but if you didn't have that funny little-girl-in-high-heels walk you've got, you'd be in sad danger of permanently drooping, all flower-needs-water, you know?"

I sigh, shake my head sadly. "I do. I often feel just the urge to wilt and I have to stop myself. But you know what the worst of it is?"

"What?" Carianne asks.

I lean in and they all crane forward to hear my stage whisper.

"Sometimes, when I'm not paying attention, I catch myself wringing my hands."

Even Tom laughs at that, then lifts his glass to me before taking another sip.

"Have you noticed how good this champagne is? Far above the usual swill they serve at these things."

"It's Veuve Clicquot, Tom," Harry says, amused. "I saw them pouring a tray behind that screen." She gestures with

her glass and we all turn to the staging area from which the waiters have been emerging with trays of champagne flutes and passed hors d'oeuvres.

"It's not surprising, really, is it?" Carianne says. "I mean, they couldn't exactly serve *her*"—she nods to Ruzena, who's talking to our program director and two board members—"boxed wine and expect her to pick up cheese and crackers off a big tray, could they?"

"No," Tom says thoughtfully. He's assessing the screens, his eyes narrowed.

"Tom," Harry says, "absolutely not. Don't even think about it."

But he just grins at her, tosses back the rest of his champagne, and starts making his way through the crowd.

"What's he doing?" Carianne asks.

Harry shakes her head and I laugh, both of us watching him duck back behind the screen.

"He's going to steal some champagne," I say. "I hope he gets a couple bottles. This stuff is amazing."

Tom has a liquid tenor voice and the body of a barely pubescent boy. When we get going, the two of us are insatiable instigators—of parties, excursions into downtown Boston, spontaneous performances of operatic death scenes on the sidewalk. Anything to distract us when we're not actively singing. Tom is the only friend I have who *needs* to sing the way I do. When he's singing he's not short or slight, his penis isn't too small to get the boys he wants, his father hasn't disowned him for being a faggot.

Tom and I come off the stage like we're coming down from a drug trip. We need champagne to drink and sprays of roses to clutch, the stems dripping on our clothes, the

thorns poking our forearms, the fragrance of the wet petals at once fresh and sharp and deliciously artificial, the smell of a lover who wears too much perfume.

I watch Tom appear from behind the screen again, this time carrying a case of empty champagne bottles, with several collapsed boxes tucked under his arm and a trash bag in his hand. He's "helping" the catering staff, who are always panicky and stretched too thin, but I'm guessing that the bottles in the box aren't all empty. He winks at me as he heads for the back hallway to dispose of the "trash."

"Kathleen," Harry says, "remember you have to call your father."

"I will. I'll call him when we get home."

"Well, if we're going to try to drive out to the Vineyard, we still have to pack, there are at least three loads of laundry to do, and the place is a disaster." She sets her glass down on the windowsill and I take my cue.

"Let's go then. Anyone you need to say goodbye to, or can we just slip out?"

"Why don't you go out the back like Tom did?" Carianne suggests. "Maybe if they see all the students leaving that way, it'll throw them off his trail."

MY FATHER WAS a pianist when he first came to Boston from Ireland, twenty years old with a baby and a scholarship to study an instrument he'd never owned. He'd only ever played the piano at school or at church and he'd never even seen a grand piano. For the first few years we were here, he left me with a sitter while he was in class or playing in various nightclubs or Irish pubs to pick up cash. Then when I was four or five, he started taking me with him to

work, making a nest for me behind the piano using our coats and scarves, feeding me bar food for dinner. I tease him that it's his fault I can't catch even a whiff of chicken wings without gagging.

When I tell people at the conservatory that my father is Robin Conarn, their eyes widen. He switched from straight performance study to composing when he applied to graduate school, and now he's one of the most admired composers of contemporary classical music in the country. My first year of college, he was interviewed in the Arts section of the *Boston Globe*. A composition major down the hall thought he was so cute that she cut out his picture and pinned it to her door, so I got to pass by my father every day as I rushed to class. His smile in that picture is shy, almost apologetic, his blond hair cut long over his forehead and falling close to his eyes. It was the same smile he used to give me when he would notice me watching him play at a bar, as if he was embarrassed to be caught doing what he was good at. Then he'd wink at me, or make a silly face, and be my daddy again.

I call him while Harry picks up the laundry scattered around the room and sorts it by color. He says hello so distractedly that I can see him perfectly. He can't be actually composing; he doesn't answer the phone at all when he's at the piano. But he's clearly working through something. I picture him standing at the kitchen counter with a knife in his hand that's dripping mustard onto the piece of bread he's supposed to be slathering. When I was living at home, I'd find him like that all the time: frozen midaction, frowning slightly, listening to music unfurling in his head.

"Oh, Daddy," I wail, "it was just awful! She was mean to

me, said I was the worst singer she'd ever heard, made me stop singing after only a few bars and put her hands over her ears."

Busy piling clothes in a laundry basket, Harry snorts with laughter. At the other end of the phone there is a moment of silence; then Robin says dryly, "That's terrible, Kathleen. Surely she could have let you down a bit more gently."

"No," I say regretfully. "She just told me I had to stop singing right away. She told me I was going to go crazy if I didn't, or kill myself."

Dammit. I wasn't going to tell him that.

Harry's head snaps up and there's another silence from Robin, this one not amused.

"Daddy. It was a joke. She was talking about all the roles I was going to play."

My father has a musician's internal ear for rhythm, for pitch and tone, that he usually reserves for music he's listening to or creating himself. But when he gets frightened for me, he tunes that ear to my voice, my movements, even my breath. Even when I was a little girl, I couldn't fool him. I'd lie awake in bed with my feet out from under the covers because even the drape of the sheet made them hurt, convinced that if I turned on the light and checked I'd see blood. I couldn't even hope to sleep. I would concentrate on just lying still and breathing deep the way Robin had taught me—a singer's breathing—and willing myself not to cry. And all he had to do was pass by my doorway and he would know. He'd come in, pick me up, take me to the bathroom, and run water in the sink, then hold me there, in the dark, with water running over my feet until the pain



eased enough that I fell asleep and he carried me back to bed, my feet still wet.

I told Harry about this before she met Robin. After she met him, she said, "I wonder how long he stood there at the sink those nights, after you fell asleep."

I don't know. I don't remember. But I know what she was telling me, and she was right: he would have stood there all night.

"I did hope we were still in the joke," he says now, and I talk too fast, talking over him to fix it.

"It was her joke, actually. She was very grand, very conscious of herself onstage, you know. And she was praising me, that was her way, by talking about all the roles I'll play where I die or go crazy . . ."

I trail off, hoping the explanation has done its work. He sounds thoughtful when he answers, but still tense with that humming silence of his that means he's listening to me with all his senses.

"All your roles, hmm? So she wasn't *totally* negative about your future as a singer?"

"Well . . ." I smile, knowing he can hear that in my voice too. "Not *totally*."

"I'm not a fan of Lucia," he says, "though of course it's a natural part for you because of the red hair, the Scottish setting. It's about as close to Ireland as you're likely to get in an opera. There's that one short piece about Deirdre, but that's not a full production piece. It's a good piece, though."

"You'll have to write me a part, then, Daddy," I say. "Deirdre's good. How about Emer and Cuchulain? I could do a good Emer, don't you think?"

"I'll get right on that," he says. "You know, in my spare

time. Maybe I could just do an Irish story for this latest commission. Do you think they'd notice?"

Robin's writing an opera based on *The Scarlet Letter*, which means he had to read the book this winter. Harry was delighted; she's a fiend for books and kept calling out to me while I was on the phone with Robin to find out what chapter he was on so she could know what he thought.

"How's that going, by the way?" I ask.

He doesn't answer right away. I can hear the muffled sound of another voice in the room, his girlfriend, Tae, then Robin answering, holding the phone away from his mouth. "It's Kathleen. She did the master class today." I hear him laugh, say, "I'll tell her," then he is talking to me again.

"Tae got an e-mail from her friend in the Boston Symphony today who was there. What's this about a standing ovation?"

"Oh, well." I flush with pride and mortification now, though I didn't during the master class. When the audience rose to their feet this afternoon, I convinced myself that it was an ovation for the diva, acclaim for her mere presence. Plus, she was telling me that I was going to go mad.

"'Oh, well'?" Robin says. "That's all you have to say for yourself? The last master class I gave, half the audience fell asleep. One fellow in the front row was reading the paper. And you got a *standing ovation*? How many people were there?"

I don't want to talk about it, don't want to remember those moments onstage, Ruzena's hands imprisoning mine.

"You know," I say, "I don't bug you about the whole 'renowned composer' thing."

Robin laughs. "I tried to get a vanity plate with that on it, but I couldn't condense the words enough."

I hear Tae in the background again, Robin answering her.

“What?” I ask. “Does Tae have a solution?”

“No,” he says. “She thinks we both suffer from a shortage of artistic ego. But she knows plenty of conductors who have extra.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes,” Robin says. “So are you and Harry still planning to try to catch a few days at the Vineyard this week?”

“Well, if you count throwing things in a duffel bag and driving out there without even a ferry reservation, much less a hotel room, as ‘planning’—then yes.” The impulsive trip was my idea, of course, and Harry is racked with nerves over the possibility—okay, probability—that we’ll end up stranded in a crummy hotel on the mainland or have to just turn around and come home. She’s not big on uncertainties. I know we should just stay in town, but I need to see the ocean. Call it a fix, which is how I put it to Harry when I suggested the trip. Just joking, of course.

“Can I offer an alternative?” Robin asks.

“Sure.”

“One of my board members has a timeshare—”

“One of *your* board members?” I find this hilarious. Harry has disappeared with the laundry and I am lying on the bed with my feet up in the air, flexing my toes like a dancer, as if that will help, which it doesn’t. It just doesn’t make it worse.

“Stop it, Kathleen,” Robin says. “You sound—”

“Happy? Silly? Manic?” I let my legs fall back to the bed. He’s onto me, as usual.

“You sound like you need a break,” he says. “It’s a long winter up there—”

This is also hilarious. “Up here? In the frozen north that is Boston? Is it warmer down there in tropical Philadelphia?”

“—and one of my board members has a timeshare at a resort on Sanibel Island. He’s been trying to get Tae and me down there. He called last night and tried to persuade us to go this coming week. He and his family were going to but something came up with his kids and they can’t. So the place is going to be empty.”

“Sanibel Island?”

“Gulf coast of Florida. A lot warmer than Martha’s Vineyard this time of year. You’d actually be able to go in the water.”

I sit up. “Seriously? Really? We could go? When?”

Now he knows he has me. “How about tomorrow? I’ll call and confirm, then make plane reservations. I’ve got enough frequent flyer miles to take several people to Tokyo and back, or so Tae tells me.”

“I have to ask Harry. Hang on.”

I leave the phone on the bed with the line engaged, go out to the kitchen to find her. I *am* manic now, thinking about the Florida sea: warm enough to swim in, clear and blue enough to see through to the bottom where it’s not too deep. My feet burn and the pain inside my mouth flares up. I swallow it back, hold on to the counter and resist the urge to put up a hand to feel for my tongue.

Harry comes in the front door carrying the empty laundry basket, sees me, and stops. She puts the basket down, goes to the sink, and fills a glass with water.

“Drink.”

“I—”

“Don’t try to talk. You know you can’t; it just makes it worse. Drink.”

I drink a few sips, then the rest of the glass in gulps. It helps, not like seawater would—*will*—but some.

“Robin’s still on the phone,” I say. I can talk if I think carefully about how to shape each word. “He wants to know if we want a free trip to Florida.”

Harry raises her eyebrows. “And did you tell him yes?”

I shake my head, still carefully. “I wanted to check with you first. We’d have to leave tomorrow.” My hand hurts, clenched around the glass, a silly, ordinary pain from holding on too tight. Harry leans over the counter and tucks my hair behind my ear.

“I am frequently surprised that you’re not more of a brat,” she says, “considering how incredibly spoiled you are.”

She lets her fingertips linger on my cheek. I can’t even register her touch, I’m too focused on hearing her say it’s okay, we can go. Of course she’s going to say it, of course she will, this isn’t a self-destructive impulse, this is a *vacation* . . .

“I guess I have to rethink my packing strategy then,” she says, and I grab her hand and kiss her palm, fly back to the phone on feet so light they barely hurt at all, and tell Robin yes, *yes*, we want to go. I say thank you and tell him to tell “his” board member thank you, feel my tongue working again, though I trip over it every other word.

I have to pack. Bathing suit, three kinds of suntan lotion for my Irish skin, sandals, sundresses, and ponytail holders for my hair. One more day before I am in the sea again, for the first time in nearly a year. I sink down onto the bed, shaking, holding a folded pair of shorts in my hands. Just a night in this bed and a ride in a cab, then a plane, another cab . . . one more day.



*Here Below they speak of us—when they dare to speak of us—with scorn like a shell encasing their fear. They call us scavengers, bottom dwellers, scuttling crabs. They deny the value of the things we collect, in jars and nets and sharp-edged bowls of coral, until they need something. A salve for a wound that won't heal, a glimpse of things that have not happened yet, a swift-acting poison. Then they sidle through our gates, crab-like themselves in their clenched longings, their furtive needs.*

*We have always preferred it so. We desire many things, but have never wished to be at the heart of a story. Magic collects at the edges of stories, eddies before them and surges in their wakes. We are content—more than content—to lurk, to hover, to come behind and pick up the pieces.*

*Nor did we mean to wrap ourselves into this story, though we still recall the beginning clearly enough to know that we could not have avoided our part. We sold a potion to a love-struck mermaid, took payment from her, sent her on her way. Yet since then, seven daughters of seven women—beginning with that foolish, beautiful girl—have been bound to us and we to them. We have felt their pain when they have eased it in seawater, for pain travels swiftly on the coldest currents. Kathleen's,*

*which must travel a long, long way to us, tastes of the sweet petals and bitter hearts of black anemones, which should be impossible. The flowers grow only in caves on the ocean floor and were once steeped in blood and water by warriors Below for courage in battle.*

*We would gladly be free of this story. Instead we must keep telling it—we, who have always kept to the edges, must tell the tale to those who are living it. For years now we have been trying to tell it to Kathleen, but an ocean separates us and there are limits to our power. We have sent dreams and we have snatched at her whenever she has swum in the sea, but it has not been enough. She must know the whole story she is living, so she can see how to end it. And we must give her the knife we made so long ago, the knife we have given them all, the knife that has returned to us seven times now, once for each useless death.*

*She must come home.*

*She is, for better or for worse, very strong. As strong as Fand was, though the time has not yet come to speak of Fand. Strong enough to will herself into frigid water when she knows that it is water she needs. Strong enough to resist the pull of immersion because immersion means death. Trapped, then, by her own strength, between the water and the land.*

*All the others gave in long before. Kathleen is older already than her mother, Moira, was when she left her husband and her baby daughter sleeping and walked into the sea. She drowned standing up, only a few yards from the shore.*

*We heard her coming, and we watched, for we could*

do no more: the small, slender woman clambering bare-foot over a rocky stretch of shoreline to reach the sea. She staggered, off balance because of the stones in her pockets, catching herself on one rock as she moved to grip the next with her toes. She had red hair like a cloud or a puff of seaweed. It floated around her all the way to her waist. Tears ran down her cheeks but she made no sound until she reached the water, and then she let her breath out in a whimper. Her feet hurt so much. The cold, lapping touch of the water eased the pain. She walked out into the sea and the stones in her pockets helped her to keep walking until the water was over her head. Everything around her was cloudy, her hair floating into her face and the light from above yellow-green. She walked forward into darker water and waited, immersed.

We cast a gleaming green net for her and brought her down to the bottom. Her eyes were still open, her lips parted to let the water in. We took her fine, soft hair that curled and rippled in the deep currents. We wove her youth into it, and her clear, high voice that was like the sound of a flute, and also her despair. Then we let her go. Black silt rose up and settled, and the sea lettuce enclosed her.

Moira would have said that the sea called to her, but the sea calls no one. At its depths where it is blackest and coldest and truest in its nature, the water is neither hungry nor needy for life or warmth or quick-moving creatures like ourselves. The water just is, like the implacable old mountains Above, against which people fling themselves and up which they crawl, as though the mountain itself must tremble under their fumbling feet. The mountain



*does not care. Nor does the sea. What Moira felt was her own need, the same need that has driven them all, first Fand, who knew what she had done, and then those who followed her, who were not so fortunate: Victoria, Muirin, Ceara, Caolinn, Deirdre, Moira.*

*And now Kathleen.*

*We have a chance to reach her now such as we have not had in a long time. She will be swimming in clear water, amidst shells leached so utterly of life and color that a finely honed spell of summoning might run through them like a current. We shall not overreach our power. We shall not try to do too much. All she need do is listen, and hear us.*

*Come home, Kathleen. You do not know your own story, nor that you have a choice in it. Come home so we can give you the knife, still as sharp as when we forged it, sharp as the choices it offers. Come home.*