

## — *Sooner or Later Everything Falls into the Sea* —

*The rock star washed ashore at high tide.* Earlier in the day, Bay had seen something bobbing far out in the water. Remnant of a rowboat, perhaps, or something better. She waited until the tide ebbed, checked her traps and tidal pools among the rocks before walking toward the inlet where debris usually beached.

All kinds of things washed up if Bay waited long enough: not just glass and plastic, but personal trainers and croupiers, entertainment directors and dance teachers. This was the first time Bay recognized the face of the new arrival. She always checked the face first if there was one, just in case, hoping it wasn't Deb.

The rock star had an entire lifeboat to herself, complete with motor, though she'd used up the gas. She'd made it in better shape than many; certainly in better shape than those with flotation vests but no boats. They arrived in tatters of uniform. Armless, legless, sometimes headless; ragged shark refuse.

"What was that one?" Deb would have asked, if she were there. She'd never paid attention to physical details, wouldn't have recognized a dancer's legs, a chef's scarred hands and arms.

"Nothing anymore," Bay would say of a bad one, putting it on her sled.

The rock star still had all her limbs. She had stayed in the boat. She'd found the stashed water and nutrition bars, easy to tell by the wrappers and bottles strewn around her. From her bloated belly and

cracked lips, Bay guessed she had run out a day or two before, maybe tried drinking ocean water. Sunburn glowed through her dark skin. She was still alive.

Deb wasn't there; she couldn't ask questions. If she had been, Bay would have shown her the calloused fingers of the woman's left hand and the thumb of her right.

"How do you know she came off the ships?" Deb would have asked. She'd been skeptical that the ships even existed, couldn't believe that so many people would just pack up and leave their lives. The only proof Bay could have given was these derelict bodies.

*Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.*

*Gabby Robbins: A scavenger woman dragged me from the ocean, pumped water from my lungs, spoke air into me. The old films they show on the ships would call that moment romantic, but it wasn't. I gagged. Only barely managed to roll over to retch in the sand.*

*She didn't know what a rock star was. It was only when I washed in half-dead, choking seawater, that she learned there were such things in the world. Our first attempts at conversation didn't go well. We had no language in common. But I warmed my hands by her fire, and when I saw an instrument hanging on its peg, I tuned it and began to play. That was the first language we spoke between us.*

A truth: I don't remember anything between falling off the ship and washing up in this place.

There's a lie embedded in that truth.

Maybe a couple of them.

Another lie I've already told: We did have language in common, the scavenger woman and me.

She did put me on her sled, did take me back to her stone-walled cottage on the cliff above the beach. I warmed myself by her wood-stove. She didn't offer me a blanket or anything to replace the thin

stage clothes I still wore, so I wrapped my own arms around me and drew my knees in tight and sat close enough to the stove's open belly that sparks hit me when the logs collapsed inward.

She heated a small pot of soup on the stovetop and poured it into a single bowl without laying a second one out for me. My stomach growled. I didn't remember the last time I'd eaten. I eyed her, eyed the bowl, eyed the pot.

"If you're thinking about whether you could knock me out with the pot and take my food, it's a bad idea. You're taller than me, but you're weaker than you think, and I'm stronger than I look."

"I wouldn't! I was just wondering if maybe you'd let me scrape whatever's left from the pot. Please."

She nodded after a moment. I stood over the stove and ate the few mouthfuls she had left me from the wooden stirring spoon. I tasted potatoes and seaweed, salt and land and ocean. It burned my throat going down; heated from the inside, I felt almost warm.

I looked around the room for the first time. An oar with "Home Sweet Home" burnt into it adorned the wall behind the stove. Some chipped dishes on an upturned plastic milk crate, a wall stacked high with home-canned food, clothing on pegs. A slightly warped-looking classical guitar hung on another peg by a leather strap; if I'd had any strength I'd have gone to investigate it. A double bed piled with blankets. Beside the bed, a nightstand with a framed photo of two women on a hiking trail, and a tall stack of paperback books. I had an urge to walk over and read the titles; my father used to say you could judge a person by the books on their shelves. A stronger urge to dive under the covers on the bed, but I resisted and settled back onto the ground near the stove. My energy went into shivering.

I kept my eyes on the stove, as if I could direct more heat to me with enough concentration. The woman pattered around her cabin. She might have been any age between forty and sixty; her movement was easy, but her skin was weathered and lined, her black hair streaked with gray. After a while, she climbed into bed and turned her back to



me. Another moment passed before I realized she intended to leave me there for the night.

"Please, before you go to sleep. Don't let it go out," I said. "The fire."

She didn't turn. "Can't keep it going forever. Fuel has to last all winter."

"It's winter?" I'd lost track of seasons on the ship. The scavenger woman wore two layers, a ragged jeans jacket over a hooded sweatshirt.

"Will be soon enough."

"I'll freeze to death without a fire. Can I pay you to keep it going?"

"What do you have to pay me with?"

"I have an account on the Hollywood Line. A big one." As I said that, I realized I shouldn't have. On multiple levels. Didn't matter if it sounded like a brag or desperation. I was at her mercy, and it wasn't in my interest to come across as if I thought I was any better than her.

She rolled over. "Your money doesn't count for anything off your ships and islands. Nor credit. If you've got paper money, I'm happy to throw it in to keep the fire going a little longer."

I didn't. "I can work it off."

"There's nothing you can work off. Fuel is in finite supply. I use it now, I don't get more, I freeze two months down the line."

"Why did you save me if you're going to let me die?"

"Pulling you from the water made sense. It's your business now whether you live or not."

"Can I borrow something warmer to wear at least? Or a blanket?" I sounded whiny even to my own ears.

She sighed, climbed out of bed, rummaged in a corner, and pulled out a down vest. It had a tear in the back where some stuff had spilled out, and smelled like brine. I put it on, trying not to scream when the fabric touched my sunburned arms.

"Thank you. I'm truly grateful."

She grunted a response and retreated to her bed again. I tucked my elbows into the vest, my hands into my armpits. It helped a little, though I still shivered. I waited a few minutes, then spoke again. She didn't seem to want to talk, but it kept me warm. Reassured me that I was still here. Awake, alive.

"If I didn't say so already, thank you for pulling me out of the water. My name is Gabby."

"Fitting."

"Are you going to ask me how I ended up in the water?"

"None of my business."

Just as well. Anything I told her would've been made up.

"Do you have a name?" I asked.

"I do, but I don't see much point in sharing it with you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to kill you if you don't shut up and let me sleep."

I shut up.

*Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.*

*Gabby Robbins: I remember getting drunk during a set on the Elizabeth Taylor. Making out with a bartender in the lifeboat, since neither of us had private bunks. I must have passed out there. I don't know how it ended up adrift.*

I survived the night on the floor but woke with a cough building deep in my chest. At least I didn't have to sing. I followed the scavenger as she went about her morning, like a dog hoping for scraps. Outside, a large picked-over garden spread around two sides of the cottage. The few green plants grew low and ragged. Root vegetables, maybe.

"If you have to piss, there's an outhouse over there," she said, motioning toward a stand of twisted trees.



We made our way down the footpath from her cottage to the beach, a series of switchbacks trod into the cliffside. I was amazed she had managed to tow me up such an incline. Then again, if I'd rolled off the sled and fallen to my death, she probably would've scraped me out of my clothes and left my body to be picked clean by gulls.

"Where are we?" I had managed not to say anything since waking up, not a word since her threat the night before, so I hoped the statute of limitations had expired.

"Forty kilometers from the nearest city, last I checked." Better than nothing. "When was that?"

"When I walked here."

"And that was?"

"A while ago."

It must have been, given the lived-in look of her cabin and garden. "What city?"

"Portage."

"Portage what?"

"Portage. Population I don't know. Just because you haven't heard of it doesn't make it any less a city." She glanced back at me like I was stupid.

"I mean, what state? Or what country? I don't even know what country this is."

She snorted. "How long were you on that ship?"

"A long time. I didn't really pay attention."

"Too rich to care."

"No! It's not what you think." I didn't know why it mattered what she thought of me, but it did. "I wasn't on the ship because I'm rich. I'm an entertainer. I share a staff bunk with five other people."

"You told me last night you were rich."

I paused to hack and spit over the cliff's edge. "I have money, it's true. But not enough to matter. I'll never be rich enough to be a passenger instead of entertainment. I'll never even afford a private stateroom. So I spend a little and let the rest build up in my account."

Talking made me cough more. I was thirsty, too, but waited to be offered something to drink.

"What's your name?" I knew I should shut up, but the more uncomfortable I am, the more I talk.

She didn't answer for a minute, so by the time she did, I wasn't even sure if it was the answer to my question at all.

"Bay."

"That's your name? It's lovely. Unusual."

"How would you know? You don't even know what country this is. Who are you to say what's unusual here?"

"Good point. Sorry."

"You're lucky we even speak the same language."

"Very."

She pointed at a trickle of water that cut a small path down the cliff wall. "Cup your hands there. It's potable."

"A spring?"

She gave me a look.

"Sorry. Thank you." I did as she said. The water was cold and clear. If there was some bacterium in it that was going to kill me, at least I wouldn't die thirsty.

I showed my gratitude through silence and concentrated on the descent. The path was narrow, just wide enough for the sled she pulled, and the edge crumbled away to nothing. I put my feet where she put hers, squared my shoulders as she did. She drew her sweat-shirt hood over her head, another discouragement to conversation.

We made it all the way down to the beach without another question busting through my chapped lips. She left the sled at the foot of the cliff and picked up a blue plastic cooler from behind a rock, the kind with cup holders built into the top. She looked in and frowned, then dumped the whole thing on the rocks. A cascade of water, two small dead fish. I realized those had probably been meant to be her dinner the day before; she had chosen to haul me up the cliff instead.



This section of beach was all broken rock, dotted everywhere with barnacles and snails and seashells. The rocks were wet and slick, the footing treacherous. I fell to my hands several times, slicing them on the tiny snails. Could you catch anything from a snail cut? At least the ship could still get us antibiotics.

"What are we doing?" I asked. "Surely the most interesting things wash out closer to the actual water."

She kept walking, watching where she stepped. She didn't fall. The rusted hull of an old ship jutted from the rocks down into the ocean; I imagined anything inside had long since been picked over. We clambered around it. I fell farther behind her, trying to be more careful with my bleeding palms. All that rust, no more tetanus shots.

She slowed, squatted. Peered and poked at something by her feet. As I neared her, I understood. Tidal pools. She dipped the cooler into one, smiled to herself. I was selfishly glad to see the smile. Perhaps she'd be friendlier now.

Instead of following, I took a different path from hers. Peered into other pools. Some tiny fish in the first two, not worth catching, nothing in the third. In the fourth, I found a large crab.

"Bay," I called.

She turned around, annoyance plain on her face. I waved the crab and her expression softened. "Good for you. You get to eat tonight too, with a nice find like that."

She waited for me to catch up with her and put the crab in her cooler with the one decent-sized fish she had found.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A fish. What does it matter what kind?"

"I used to cook. I'm pretty good with fish, but I don't recognize that one. Different fish taste better with different preparations."

"You're welcome to do the cooking if you'd like, but if you need lemon butter and capers, you may want to check the pools closer to the end of the rainbow." She pointed down the beach, then laughed at her own joke.

"I'm only trying to be helpful. You don't need to mock me."

"No, I suppose I don't. You found a crab, so you're not entirely useless."

That was the closest thing to a compliment I supposed I'd get. At least she was speaking to me like a person, not debris that had shown an unfortunate tendency toward speech.

That evening, I pan-fried our catch on the stovetop with a little bit of sea salt. The fish was oily and tasteless, but the crab was good. My hands smelled like fish and ocean, and I wished for running water to wash them off. Tried to replace that smell with wood smoke.

After dinner, I looked over at her wall.

"May I?" I asked, pointing at the guitar.

She shrugged. "Dinner and entertainment—I fished the right person out of the sea. Be my guest."

It was an old classical guitar, parlor sized, nylon stringed. That was the first blessing, since steel strings would surely have corroded in this air. I had no pure pitch to tune to, so had to settle on tuning the strings relative to each other, all relative to the third string because its tuning peg was cracked and useless. Sent up a silent prayer that none of the strings broke, since I was fairly sure Bay would blame me for anything that went wrong in my presence. The result sounded sour, but passable.

"What music do you like?" I asked her.

"Now or then?"

"What's the difference?"

"Then: anything political. Hip-hop, mostly."

I looked down at the little guitar, wondered how to coax hip-hop out of it. "What about now?"

"Now? Anything you play will be the first music I've heard other than my own awful singing in half a dozen years. Play away."

I nodded and looked at the guitar, waiting for it to tell me what it wanted. Fought back my strange sudden shyness. Funny how playing for thousands of people didn't bother me, but I could find



myself self-conscious in front of one. "Guitar isn't my instrument, by the way."

"Close enough. You're a bassist."

I looked up, surprised. "How do you know?"

"I'm not stupid. I know who you are."

"Why did you ask my name, then?"

"I didn't. You told it to me."

"Oh, yeah." I was glad I hadn't lied about that particular detail.

"Let's have the concert, then."

I played her a few songs, stuff I never played on the ship.

"Where'd the guitar come from?" I asked when I was done.

An unreadable expression crossed her face. "Where else? It washed up."

I let my fingers keep exploring the neck of the guitar, but turned to her. "So is this what you do full time? Pull stuff from the beach?"

"Pretty much."

"Can you survive on that?"

"The bonuses for finding some stuff can be pretty substantial."

"What stuff?"

"Foil. Plastic. People."

"People?"

"People who've lost their ships."

"You're talking about me?"

"You, others. The ships don't like to lose people, and the people don't like to be separated from their ships. It's a nice change to be able to return someone living for once. I'm sure you'll be happy to get back to where you belong."

"Yes, thank you. How do you alert them?"

"I've got call buttons for the three big shiplines. They send 'copters."

I knew those copters. Sleek, repurposed military machines.

I played for a while longer, so stopping wouldn't seem abrupt, then hung the guitar back on its peg. It kept falling out of tune anyway.

I waited until Bay was asleep before I left, though it took all my willpower not to take off running the second she mentioned the helicopters. I had nothing to pack, so I curled up by the cooling stove and waited for her breathing to slow. I would never have taken her food or clothing—other than the vest—but I grabbed the guitar from its peg on my way out the door. She wouldn't miss it. The door squealed on its hinges, and I held my breath as I slipped through and closed it behind me.

The clifftop was bright with stars. I scanned the sky for helicopters. Nothing but stars and stars and stars. The ship's lights made it so we barely saw stars at all, a reassurance for all of us from the cities.

I walked with my back to the cliff. The moon gave enough light to reassure me I wasn't about to step off into nothingness if the coastline cut in, but I figured the farther I got from the ocean, the more likely I was to run into trees. Or maybe an abandoned house, if I got lucky. Someplace they wouldn't spot me if they swept overland.

Any hope I had for stealth, I abandoned as I trudged onward. I found an old tar road and decided it had to lead toward something. I walked. The cough that had been building in my chest through the day racked me now.

The farther I went, the more I began to doubt Bay's story. Would the ships bother to send anyone? I was popular enough, but was I worth the fuel it took to come get me? If they thought I had fallen, maybe. If they knew I had lowered the lifeboat deliberately, that I might do it again? Doubtful. Unless they wanted to punish me, or charge me for the boat, though if they docked my account now, I'd never know. And how would Bay have contacted them? She'd said they were in contact, but unless she had a solar charger—well, that seemed possible, actually.

Still, she obviously wanted me gone or she wouldn't have said it. Or was she testing my reaction? Waiting to see if I cheered the news of my rescue?



I wondered what else she had lied about. I hoped I was walking toward the city she had mentioned. I was a fool to think I'd make it to safety anywhere. I had no water, no food, no money. Those words formed a marching song for my feet, syncopated by my cough. No water. No food. No money. No luck.

Bay set out at first light, the moment she realized the guitar had left with the stupid rock star. It wasn't hard to figure out which way she had gone. She was feverish, stupid with the stupidity of someone still used to having things appear when she wanted them. If she really expected to survive, she should have taken more from Bay. Food. A canteen. A hat. Something to trade when she got to the city. It said something good about her character, Bay supposed, down below the blind privilege of her position. If she hadn't taken Debra's guitar, Bay's opinion might have been even more favorable.

*Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.*

Gabby Robbins: My last night on the ship was just like three thousand nights before, up until it wasn't. We played two sets, mostly my stuff, with requests mixed in. Some cokehead in a Hawaiian shirt offered us a thousand credits each to play "My Heart Will Go On" for his lady.

"I'll give you ten thousand credits myself if you don't make us do this," Sheila said when we all leaned in over her kit to consult on whether we could fake our way through it. "That's the one song I promised myself I would never play here."

"What about all the Jimmy Buffet we've had to play?" our guitarist, Kel, asked her. "We've prostituted ourselves already. What difference does it make at this point?"

Sheila ignored Kel. "Dignity, Gab. Please."

I was tired and more than a little drunk. "What does it matter? Let's just play the song. You can mess with the tempo if you want. Swing it, maybe? Ironic cheesy lounge style? In C, since I can't hit those diva notes?"

Sheila looked like she was going to weep as she counted off.

I ran into Hawaiian Shirt and his lady again after the set, when I stepped out on the Oprah deck for air. They were over near the gun turrets, doing the "King of the World" thing, a move that should have been outlawed before anyone got on the ship.

"You know who that is, right?" I looked over to see JP, this bartender I liked: sexy retro-Afro, sexy swimmer's build. It had been a while since we'd booked up. JP held out a joint.

I took it and said he looked familiar.

"He used to have one of those talk radio shows. He was the first one to suggest the ships, only his idea was religious folks, not just general rich folks. Leave the sinners behind, he said. Founded the Ark line, where all those fundamentalists spend their savings waiting for the sinners to be washed away so they can take the land back. He spent the first two years with them, then announced he was going to go on a pilgrimage to find out what was happening everywhere else. Only, instead of traveling the land like a proper pilgrim, he came on board this ship. He's been here ever since. First time I've seen him at one of your shows, though. I guess he's throwing himself into his new lifestyle."

"Ugh. I remember him now. He boycotted my second album. At least they look happy?"

"Yeah, except that isn't his wife. His wife and kids are still on the Ark waiting for him. Some pilgrim."

The King of the World and his not-wife sauntered off. When the joint was finished, JP melted away as well, leaving me alone with my thoughts until some drunk kids wandered over with a magnum of champagne. I climbed over the railing into the lifeboat to get a moment alone. I could almost pretend the voices were gulls. Listened to the engine's thrum through the hull, the waves lapping far below.

Everyone who wasn't a paying guest—entertainers and staff—had been trained on how to release the lifeboats, and I found myself playing with the controls. How hard would it be to drop it into the water? We couldn't be that far from some shore somewhere. The lifeboats were all equipped with stores of food and water, enough for a handful of people for a few days.

Whatever had been in my last drink must have been some form of liquid stupid. The boat was lowered now, whacking against the side of the enormous ship, and I had to smash the last tie just to keep from being wrecked against it. And then the ship



*was pulling away, ridiculous and huge, a foolish attempt to save something that had never been worth saving.*

*I wished I had kissed JP one more time, seeing as how I was probably going to die.*

Gabby hadn't gotten far at all. By luck, she had found the road in the dark, and by luck had walked in the right direction, but she was lying in the dirt like roadkill now. Bay checked that Deb's guitar hadn't been hurt, then watched for a moment to see if the woman was breathing, which she was, ragged but steady, her forehead hot enough to melt butter, some combination of sunburn and fever.

The woman stirred. "Are you real?" she asked.

"More real than you are," Bay told her.

"I should have kissed JP."

"Seems likely." Bay offered a glass jar of water. "Drink this."

Gabby drank half. "Thank you."

Bay waved it away when the other woman tried to hand it back. "I'm not putting my lips to that again while you're coughing your lungs out. It's yours."

"Thank you again." Gabby held out the guitar. "You probably came for this?"

"You carried it this far, you can keep carrying it. Me, I would have brought the case."

"It had a case?"

"Under the bed. I keep clothes in it."

"I guess at least now you know I didn't go through your things?"

Bay snorted. "Obviously. You're a pretty terrible thief."

"In my defense, I'm not a thief."

"My guitar says otherwise."

Gabby put the guitar on the ground. She struggled to her feet and stood for a wobbly moment before leaning down to pick it up. She looked one way, then the other, as if she couldn't remember

where she had come from or where she was going. Bay refrained from gesturing in the right direction. She picked the right way. Bay followed.

"Are you going to ask me why I left?" Even this sick, with all her effort going into putting one foot in front of the other, the rock star couldn't stop talking.

"Wasn't planning on it."

"Why not?"

"Because I've met you before."

"For real? Before the ships?" Gabby looked surprised.

Bay shook her head. "No. Your type. You think you're the first one to wash ashore? To step away from that approximation of life? You're just the first one who made it alive."

"If you don't like the ships, why did you call them to come get me?" Gabby paused. "Or you didn't. You just wanted me to leave. Why?"

"I can barely feed myself. And you aren't the type to be satisfied with that life anyhow. Might as well leave now as later."

"Except I'm probably going to die of this fever because I walked all night in the cold, you psychopath."

Bay shrugged. "That was your choice."

They walked in silence for a while. The rock star was either contemplating her choices or too sick to talk.

"Why?" Bay asked, taking pity.

Gabby whipped her head around. "Why what?"

"Why did you sign up for the ship?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Sounds like an epitaph fitting for half the people in this world."

Gabby gave a half smile, then continued. "New York was a mess, and the Gulf states had just tried to secede. The bookers for the Hollywood Line made a persuasive argument for a glamorous life at sea. Everything was so well planned, too. They bought entire island nations to provide food and fuel."



"I'm sure the island nations appreciated that," said Bay.

The other woman gave a wry smile. "I know, right? Fucked up. But they offered good money, and it was obvious no bands would be touring the country for a while.

"At first it was just like any other tour. We played our own stuff. There were women to sleep with, drugs if we wanted them, restaurants and clubs and gyms. All the good parts of touring without the actual travel part. Sleeping in the same bed every night, even if it was still a bunk with my band, like on the bus. But then it didn't stop, and then they started making us take requests, and it started closing in, you know? If there was somebody you wanted to avoid, you couldn't. It was hard to find anyplace to be alone to write or think.

"Then the internet went off completely. We didn't get news from land at all, even when we docked on the islands. They stopped letting us off when we docked. Management said things had gotten real bad here, that there was for real nothing to come back to anymore. The passengers all walked around like they didn't care, like a closed system, and the world was so fucking far away. How was I supposed to write anything when the world was so far away? The entire world might've drowned, and we'd just float around oblivious until we ran out of something that wasn't even important to begin with. Somebody would freak out because there was no more mascara or ecstasy or rosemary, and then all those beautiful people would turn on each other."

"So that's why you jumped?"

Gabby rubbed her head. "Sort of. I guess that also seemed like a good idea at the time."

"What about now?"

"I could've done with a massage when I woke up today, but I'm still alive."

Bay snorted. "You wouldn't have lasted two seconds in a massage with that sunburn."

Gabby looked down at her forearms and winced.

They walked. Gabby was sweating, her eyes bright. Bay slowed her own pace, in an effort to slow the other woman down.

"Where are you hurrying to, now that I've told you there's nobody coming after you?"

"You said there was a city out here somewhere. I want to get there before I have to sleep another night on this road. And before I starve."

Bay reached into a jacket pocket. She pulled out a protein bar and offered it to Gabby.

"Where'd you get that? It looks like the ones I ate in the lifeboat."

"It is."

Gabby groaned. "I didn't have to starve those last two days? I could've sworn I looked every place."

"You missed a stash inside the radio console."

"Huh."

They kept walking, footsteps punctuated by Gabby's ragged breath.

"We used to drive out here to picnic on the cliff when my wife and I first got married," Bay said. "There were always turtles trying to cross. We would stop and help them, because there were teenagers around who thought driving over them was a sport. Now if I saw a turtle I'd probably have to think about eating it."

"I've never eaten a turtle."

"Me neither. Haven't seen one in years."

Gabby stopped. "You know, I have no clue when I last saw a turtle. At a zoo? No clue at all. I wonder if they're gone. Funny how you don't realize the last time you see something is going to be the last time."

Bay didn't say anything.

The rock star held Deb's guitar up to her chest, started picking out a repetitive tune as she walked. Same lick over and over, like it was keeping her going, driving her feet. "So when you said you traded things like aluminum foil and people, you were lying to me, right? You don't trade anything."



Bay shook her head. "Nobody to trade with."

"So you've been here all alone? You said something about your wife."

Bay kicked a stone down the road in front of her, kicked it again when she caught up with it.

The rock star handed her the guitar and dropped to the ground. She took off her left shoe, then peeled the sock off. A huge blister was rising on her big toe. "Fuck."

Bay sighed. "You can use some of the stuffing from your vest to build some space around it."

Gabby bent to pick a seam.

"No need. There's a tear in the back. Anyhow, maybe it's time to stop for the night."

"Sorry. I saw the tear when you first gave me the vest, but I forgot about it. How far have we traveled?"

"Hard to say. We're still on the park road."

"Park road?"

"This is a protected wilderness area. Or it was. Once we hit asphalt, we're halfway there. Then a little farther to a junction. Left at the T used to be vacation homes, but a hurricane took them twenty years ago. Right takes you to the city."

Gabby groaned. She squinted at the setting sun. "Not even halfway."

"But you're still alive, and you're complaining about a blister, not the cough or the sunburn."

"I didn't complain."

"I don't see you walking any farther, either." Bay dropped her knapsack and untied a sleeping bag from the bottom.

"I don't suppose you have two?"

Bay gave Gabby her most withering look. What kind of fool set out on this walk sick and unprepared? Then again, she had been the one who had driven the woman out, too afraid to interact with an actual person instead of the ghosts in her head.

"We'll both fit," she said. "Body heat'll keep us warm, too."

It was warmer than if they hadn't shared, lying back to back squeezed into the sleeping bag. Not as warm as home, if she hadn't set out to follow. The cold still seeped into her. Bay felt every inch of her left side, as if the bones themselves were in contact with the ground. Aware, too, of her back against the other woman, of the fact that she couldn't remember the last time she had come in physical contact with a living person. The heat of Gabby's fever burned through the layers of clothing, but she still shivered.

"Why are you living out there all alone?" Gabby asked.

Bay considered pretending she was asleep, but then she wanted to answer. "I said already we used to picnic out here, my wife and I. We always said this was where we'd spend our old age. I'd get a job as a ranger, we'd live out our days in the ranger's cabin. I pictured having electricity, mind."

She paused. She felt the tension in the other woman's back as she suppressed a cough. "Debra was in California on a business trip when everything started going bad at a faster rate than it'd been going bad before. We never even found out what it was that messed up the electronics. Things just stopped working. We'd been living in a high-rise. I couldn't stay in our building with no heat or water, but we couldn't contact each other, and I wanted to be someplace Debra would find me. So when I didn't hear from her for three months, I packed what I thought I might need into some kid's wagon I found in the lobby and started walking. I knew she'd know to find me out here if she could."

"How bad was it? The cities? We were already on the ship."

"I can only speak for the one I was living in, but it wasn't like those scare movies where everyone turns on one another. People helped each other. We got some electricity up and running again in a couple weeks' time, on a much smaller scale. If anything, I'd say we had more community than we'd ever had. But it didn't feel right for me. I didn't want other people; I wanted Deb."



"They told us people were rioting and looting. Breaking into mansions, moving dozens of people in."

"Would you blame them? Your passengers redirected all the gas to their ships and abandoned perfectly good houses. But again, I can only speak to what I saw, which was folks figuring out the new order and making it work as best they could."

Gabby stayed silent for a while, and Bay started to drift. Then one more question. "Did Debra ever find you? I mean I'm guessing no, but . . ."

"No. Now let me sleep."

*Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.*

*Gabby Robbins: You know what happened. There is no you anymore. No reality television, no celebrity gossip, no music industry. Only an echo playing itself out on the ships and in the heads of those of us who can't quite let it go.*

Bay was already out of the sleeping bag when I woke. She sat on a rock playing a simple fingerpicking pattern on her guitar.

"I thought you didn't play," I called to her.

"Never said that. Said I'm a lousy singer, but didn't say anything about playing the guitar. We should get moving. I'd rather get to the city earlier than late."

I stood up and stretched, letting the sleeping bag pool around my feet. The sun had only just risen, low and red. I could hear water lapping on both sides now, beyond a thick growth of brush. I coughed so deep it bent me in two.

"Why are you in a hurry?" I asked when I could speak.

She gave me a look that probably could have killed me at closer range. "Because I didn't bring enough food to feed both of us for much longer, and you didn't bring any. Because I haven't been there in years, and I don't know if they shoot strangers who ride in at night."

"Oh." There wasn't much to say to that, but I tried anyway. "So basically you're putting yourself in danger because I put myself in danger because you made me think I was in danger."

"You put yourself in danger in the first place by jumping off your damn boat."

True. I sat back down on the sleeping bag and inspected my foot. The blister looked awful. I nearly wept as I packed vest-stuffing around it.

I stood again to indicate my readiness, and she walked back over. She handed me the guitar, then shook out the sleeping bag, rolled it, and tied it to her pack. She produced two vaguely edible-looking sticks from somewhere on her person. I took the one offered to me.

I sniffed it. "Fish jerky?"

She nodded.

"I really would've starved out here on my own."

"You're welcome."

"Thank you. I mean it. I'd never have guessed I'd have to walk so long without finding anything to eat."

"There's plenty to eat, but you don't know where to look. You could fish if you had gear. You might find another crab. And there are bugs. Berries and plants, too, in better seasons, if you knew what to look for."

As we walked she meandered off the road to show me what was edible. Cattail roots, watercress. Neither tasted fantastic raw, but chewing took time and gave an excuse to walk slower.

"I'm guessing you were a city kid?" she asked.

"Yeah. Grew up in Detroit. Ran away when I was sixteen to Pittsburgh because everyone else ran away to New York. Put together a decent band, got noticed. When you're a good bass player, people take you out. I'd release an album with my band, tour that, then tour with Gaga or Trillium or some flavor of the month."

I realized that was more than she had asked for, but she hadn't told me to shut up yet, so I kept going. "The funny thing about being



on a ship with all those celebrities and debutantes is how much attention they need. They throw parties or they stage big collapses and recoveries. They produce documentaries about themselves, upload to the ship entertainment systems. They act as audience for each other, taking turns with their dramas.

"I thought they'd treat me as a peer, but then I realized I was just a hired gun and they all thought they were bigger deals than me. There were a few other entertainers who realized the same thing and dropped down to the working decks to teach rich kids to dance or sing or whatever. I hung on to the idea longer than most that my music still meant something. I still kinda hope so."

A coughing spell turned me inside out.

"That's why you took my guitar?" Bay asked when I stopped gagging.

"Yeah. They must still need music out here, right?"

"I'd like to think so."

I had something else to say, but a change in the landscape up ahead distracted me. Two white towers jutted into the sky, one vertical, the other at a deep curve. "That's a weird-looking bridge."

Bay picked up her pace. I limped after her. As we got closer, I saw the bridge wasn't purposefully skewed. The tower on the near end still stood, but the road between the two had crumbled into the water. Heavy cables trailed from the far tower like hair. We walked to the edge, looked down at the concrete bergs below us, then out at the long gap to the other side. Bay sat down, her feet dangling over the edge.

I tried to keep things light. "I didn't realize we were on an island."

"Your grasp of geography hasn't proven to be outstanding."

"How long do you think it's been out?"

"How the hell should I know?" she snapped.

I left her to herself and went exploring. When I returned, the tears that smudged her face looked dry.

"It must've been one of the hurricanes. I haven't been out here in years." Her tone was dry and impersonal again. "Just goes to show, sooner or later everything falls into the sea."

"She didn't give up on you," I said.

"You don't know that."

"No."

I was quiet a minute. Tried to see it all from her eyes. "Anyway, I walked around. You can climb down the embankment. It doesn't look like there's much current. Maybe a mile's swim?"

She looked up at me. "A mile's swim, in clothes, in winter, with a guitar. Then we still have to walk the rest of the way, dripping wet. You're joking."

"I'm not joking. I'm only trying to help."

"There's no way. Not now. Maybe when the water and the air are both warmer."

She was probably right. She'd been right about everything else. I sat down next to her and looked at the twisted tower. I tried to imagine what Detroit or Pittsburgh was like now, if they were all twisted towers and broken bridges, or if newer, better communities had grown, like the one Bay had left.

"I've got a boat," I said. "There's no fuel, but you have an oar on your wall. We can line it full of snacks when the weather is better, and come around the coast instead of over land."

"If I don't kill you before then. You talk an awful lot."

"But I can play decent guitar," I said. "And I found a crab once, so I'm not entirely useless."

"Not entirely," she said.

*Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.*

*Gabby Robbins: I was nearly lost, out on the ocean, but somebody rescued me. It's a different life, a smaller life. I'm writing again. People seem to like my new stuff.*





Bay took a while getting to her feet. She slung her bag over her shoulder, and waited while Gabby picked up Deb's guitar. She played as they walked back toward Bay's cottage, some little riff Bay didn't recognize. Bay made up her own words to it in her head, about how sooner or later everything falls into the sea, but some things crawl back out again and turn into something new.

## — *The Low Hum of Her* —

*Father built me a new grandmother* when the real one died. "She's not a replacement," he said, as if anything could be. This one was made of clay and metal all run through with wires to conduct electricity, which Father said made her a lot like us. At her center, where we have hearts and guts, she had a brass birdcage. I don't know how he made her face look right. He put my real Bubbe's clothing on her, and wrapped one of my real Bubbe's headscarves around her iron-gray hair, and put Bubbe's identification papers into her skirt pocket, and told me to call her Bubbe.

"Does it cook?" I asked him. "Does it bake, or sing?"

"She can," said Father. "Those are exactly the things she can do. You just have to teach her. She can look after you and keep you company when I'm working."

"I won't call it Bubbe."

"Call her what you like. Maybe you can say 'the new Bubbe' and 'she' when you're around me, though. I worked hard to make her for you."

He had spent months at his workbench. Long evenings after days spent teaching, and then long days after he was no longer allowed to work at the university. I had heard him cry sometimes, when he thought I was asleep. "She," I repeated, eyeing the machine.

That night, it offered help as I prepared beets for soup.

"Just stand in the corner and watch," I said. "You don't know how."