

## THE MELODY OF SALT

The first thing she woke up to was the taste of salt water in her throat, gagging her. Her boyfriend slept in the bed beside her, blissfully unaware.

The nightmares had been keeping her awake. The feeling of the car flying through the air, the nose dipping towards the dark water below. The headlights had been on, illuminating the waves and the rocks. As time slowed down, she remembered wondering how long she should wait to start holding her breath.

How fast would a car fill up with water?

Accidents were not uncommon along their coastal roads. Sudden curves, strong winds, and drenching rain created the perfect conditions for all sorts of unfortunate events. Most people no longer saw the crosses decorating the roads, not unless they knew who a specific cross belonged to. Although less common, it was not unheard of for cars to end up in the unforgiving waves of their coastal town. What was unheard of was survivors from such accidents.

Survivor. That's what they kept calling her.

She'd told reporters she had managed to get her boyfriend out of the car window before they were too far underwater, and pulled him to the shore before passing out. For days now they had been the miracle couple, the couple who shouldn't have survived. They called her a hero.

The lie made her want to throw up.

Her boyfriend gave a quiet snore. She tried not to be jealous; he didn't remember anything about the incident. He didn't remember driving too fast, or what they'd been arguing about before missing the turn. He'd been so angry, she counted it as a blessing that he had no memory of it.

But he also didn't remember what else had been in the water with them.

She looked at the sleeping form next to her. They'd been high school sweethearts, and here they were still. The night of the accident had given him a concussion, but miraculously nothing worse. He seemed to enjoy the attention from the crowd. Somehow when he was interviewed, the story spun towards how his lifeguard skills managed to rub off on her. She didn't mind so much; she preferred for him to be in the spotlight, his attention elsewhere.

She didn't want to talk about what she had seen in the darkness.

She told herself she had mistaken the thing for a person, that anybody in her position would have done the same thing. But even as the ocean had bubbled up around her face, she knew the thing outside of the car wasn't human. She had known she wouldn't be able to make it out, especially if she tried to pull another body along. So she had done something desperate.

Now her dreams were filled with water, the taste of salt always between her teeth.

She tried to forget what had happened. Within days their fame lessened, and the world moved on. The lack of media attention only fostered the return of her boyfriend's temper. His dotting compliments that he gave her in the presence of interviewers quickly turned into angry whispers when no one was looking. This was nothing new, although she now found herself distracted by the sound of the ocean. They were far enough away from the shore that she knew

## THE MELODY OF SALT

she shouldn't have been hearing anything, but she felt as though the tides pulled at the center of her stomach, a strange sense of gravity accompanying the sound of waves. Her appetite lessened; food turned to a flavorless paste in her mouth. She craved something, but couldn't quite figure out what would satiate her.

One night in the shower, she examined the marks across her chest. The doctor told her she must have cut herself on broken glass from the car, or maybe bumped against rocks on her swim towards shore. Seeing that she had survived a crash into the water, the doctor was surprised she hadn't suffered from anything more than cuts. But she hadn't corrected her doctor; these hadn't been from the car or rocks. Examining the deep red lines, she almost didn't hear the quiet clicking from somewhere below, like little knives tapping on metal.

She stepped back to watch something dark and shiny poke its way out of the drain. The cover had been lost so long ago, there was nothing to block whatever had decided to make its way up. Something told her she should be screaming, but an odd part of her brain had been awakened, watching expectantly. She crouched and watched the tiny crab force its way out of the pipe, scuttling towards her. Another claw poked its way out of the drain, following the first. Then another. Time slowed as she picked up one of the crustaceans, its legs waving wildly. Without thinking she bit into the shell, crunching the sharp bits between her teeth. She closed her eyes, savoring the juicy flavor.

The claw marks on her chest itched, but she didn't care. Even as she picked up another crab, she was still so hungry.

On one of the few nights where sleep was possible, she was awakened by yelling. Her boyfriend was in the bathroom straight across the hallway from their bedroom, but was quickly exiting by scrambling backwards. The air smelled ripe, and as she got out of bed she saw the floor around him was moving. A horrible sucking noise came from the toilet as something long and slimy flopped itself over the lip. Amidst a torrent of curses her boyfriend tried to stand, but slipped on the coating of slime that had come with the creatures. He screamed in a panic as one of them tried to latch onto his leg. He managed to kick it away, but not before it twisted off a small chunk of skin from his foot.

She should have been screaming, but all she could think about was how hungry she was as the smell of blood filled her nose.

The police couldn't explain how the hagfish had made their way up through the pipes. They were even more confused as to why the hagfish had acted so aggressively; they were scavengers that feasted off of dead animals at the bottom of the ocean floor. There was no reason for them to leave their home. It was chalked up as a freak accident that would be looked into by the city. In the meantime, they were advised to keep the lid of their toilet shut.

Her boyfriend took the advice to heart. And although he had no knowledge of her visitors in the bathtub, he purchased a cover for that drain as well. The way he tiptoed around any sort of plumbing would have made her laugh at one point, but now all she could think about was how

## THE MELODY OF SALT

painfully her stomach squeezed its empty contents. She couldn't keep regular food down, and even tap water had become bitter in her mouth. She craved salt, but licking it from the shaker only made her thirstier.

She was caught in the middle of dumping salt into her glass of water, enraging her boyfriend to the point where he stormed out of the house. He couldn't understand why she was acting so strangely; she didn't quite fully understand it herself. However, she was relieved to be able to drink her glass of water in peace.

The rush of the ocean in her ears was now accompanied by a melody only she could seem to hear. She started to lose bits of time. One moment she was standing in the kitchen, the next she was outside in the rain. More and more often, she found herself being yelled at by her boyfriend. At one point she might have cared. She remembered how upset and guilty she would feel about their fights, how she never felt like she was enough.

Now instead of trying to navigate what exactly she was doing wrong, she found herself more and more distracted by the way his heartbeat would quicken as he screamed. She shouldn't have been able to hear something like that, but the past few weeks seemed to have desensitized her to the fact that she now heard lots of noises she shouldn't hear. The distant waves, the melody of the fish in the sea. The rush of wild blood pumping through veins.

It was during one of these fights that she suddenly lost a chunk of time. She was watching the spittle fly from his mouth, and then she was on the ground. Her mouth filled with something salty sweet. He was still screaming at her, but now he held a hand to something that resembled a bite mark on his shoulder, where blood lazily oozed out. She touched her mouth, and looked with fascination at the sticky redness on her fingertips. Time moved slowly as she brought them back into her mouth, even as her boyfriend brought one of his legs back to kick her where she sat. The melody that sang in her ears suddenly bubbled up into her throat, wafting out over her salt-slicked tongue.

Time jumped again, and they were now at the beach.

They probably would have looked like any other couple at the beach; she gently held one of his hands as she led him towards the water. Blood still oozed down his shoulder, the scent mixing deliciously with the sea salt air. The melody of the ocean hummed all around, and she could see how vacant his eyes had become.

He could finally hear it too.

She barely registered the bubbles of water boiling up from the sand. Clams dug themselves up from their holes, their muscular tongues pulling themselves closer to them. Crabs walked out of the water, their claws clacking as they escorted the couple to the waves.

The song that came from her throat was joined by other voices from the ocean. The ones who had rescued her were now rescuing her again.

That's all they had ever wanted to do.

## THE MELODY OF SALT

She thought back to her promise. That night in the car, she had reached out and asked for help from the thing in the dark.

She had promised to come back.

It had been a desperate price for what she thought would save them; she had thought some time would be better than no time at all. Ultimately she had wanted to save him; even when he had driven them straight off a cliff when she suggested they break up, she had loved him.

They'd had their time, and she realized what a gift she'd been given.

God she was so hungry.