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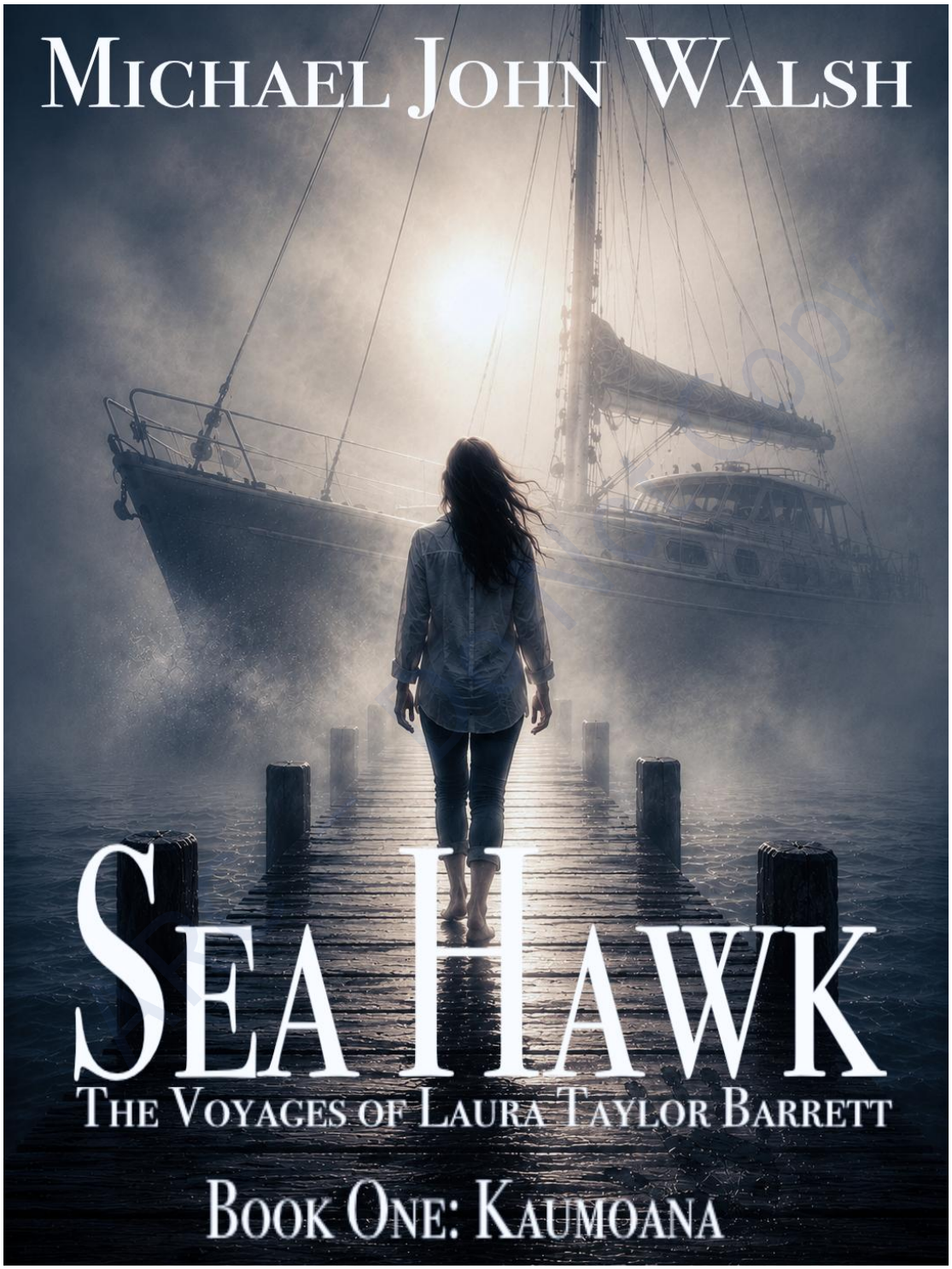
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SEA HAWK

By

Michael John Walsh

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"Kaumoana," the making of a mariner…

BOOK 1: Kaumoana

CONTENTS:

Prologue: The End of the World

Prologue: Life Is But A Dream

1. The Weight of Earth
2. Ghostly Artifacts
3. Learning to Fly
4. The Gentle Breeze of Consequence
5. The Serpent of Gatun

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Prologue I — The End of the World

"The soul is conscious of a profound emptiness in itself – a cruel diminution of the goods which are ordained for its comfort. It finds itself in the midst of opposing evils, of miserable imperfection, dryness, and emptiness of being – leaving the spirit abandoned in darkness."

– St. John of the Cross, OCD, 1579

La Noche Oscura

Embrace the purgation of pain…

Through that unmaking, *transformation* begins –

when the spirit is *stripped bare* and only its *truest essence remains*.

In the soul's *darkest hour*, it is not death we fear – but the *undoing of the self*.

So begins the end of the world.

The dream returning…

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Prologue II: Life Is but a Dream

Darkness hums softly – like the sound of gentle breathing.

Slow – steady – peaceful.

Slow – steady – peaceful.

A child's rhyme drifting through the void – singsong – echoing.

Carried on the wind and waves.

Across an ocean of time.

"Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream…"

Voices layer – following in a fugue.

"Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream!"

Words fold into themselves.

Each verse chasing the last.

No beginning – no end.

Voices become harmony.

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One tone bright and young, another older, then another older still.

Whispering in rhythm with the flow of unseen tides.

In the darkness – pulsing.

A heartbeat beneath the surface of the waters.

Something stirs – needing, loving, hopeful… female.

Water presses against her skin – warm, buoyant, familiar.

She opens her eyes to a shimmering void.

No shore, no sky, only the soft gleam of phosphorescence rising and fading.

Her reflection blurs beneath her – a vision she recognizes but cannot name.

The child's song lingers in her ears.

Looping endlessly until melody becomes motion.

"Row, row, row your boat…"

The sound ebbs into stillness – and from that stillness, something material takes form.

The weight of blankets, the creak of timber, the faint smell of smoke and linen against the backdrop of the sea…

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1. The Weight of Earth

Laura sits clinging to the edge of the Queen Ann four-poster bed.

Her breath is shallow.

The echo of a song still flutters in the dark recesses of her mind as she peers through a gap in the curtains. A child's lyric, simple and recurring, brushing against her memory.

Why? On such a dreary day… The worst day…

The sky is swollen and saturated – brooding.

Heavy gray clouds weep over the landscape, soaking everything in melancholy.

The Cape Fear River, normally rustic and peaceful, presents a dull, unsettled backdrop. Today, its languid current is choppy, confused. The land that rises from the banks is damp and hushed.

No birds are lilting from the treetops.

The air is choked with a malodor of death that pervades every acre of the estate. As if Mother Nature commiserates with Laura's grief, acting out in thunderous reprise.

My love is dead…

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No one notices the murmuration of blackbirds coming to roost on the dormers.

Dark sentries keeping vigil.

Thoughtful, perceptive, vocal.

They shadow the illusory figure at the upstairs window: a frail, stricken silhouette distorted through the glass – vaguely womanlike – watching the doleful guests arrive.

Shattered and inconsolable.

She has not left her room in days.

Laura's mother – a grizzled, stoic woman in a black designer dress – stands alone on the porch. Her mood is edgy. Her hands tremble as she fights with a lighter, desperate for the small mercy of a cigarette.

The vague murmuring and stifled sobs inside have driven her out here in a fit of anxiety. The scraping of flint, and the staged whispers, mingle in a maddening cacophony.

Lillian finally coaxes a flame to life amid a shower of sparks and muffled expletives, filling her lungs, then exhaling gratefully as the nicotine steadies her tremors.

She checks the dwindling pack.

"Jesus, we're not even halfway through the day…"

She glances skyward at the darkening clouds – in the thickening air.

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A long gravel driveway snakes toward the house on its knoll overlooking the property. Out front, a solemn line of limousines assembles for the funeral motorcade, led by an elegant black Stratford hearse whose chrome, rims, and Landau bars glisten in the drizzle.

A steady flow of friends, colleagues, and family arrive behind it.

Each vehicle bearing its private burdens of sorrow.

Further down the driveway, the cars continue lining up behind the limousines.

Lillian counts them all out of habit. Attendance is currency in her world.

A modest turnout… disappointing…

One last drag.

She crushes the butt beneath a black patent leather pump, straightens her wrap, teases her coif, and turns on her heel to go back inside.

God help us… This is going to be a grueling performance…

Lillian botches her entry, struggling to heave open the massive portico door. Everything feels heavier today beneath the added burden of Martin's death. The ornate portiere, with its engraved floral design, was carved from a single plank of dark Scandinavian ash. The monolithic slab was said to be over four hundred years old – refashioned from an ancient monastic enclosure.

To Laura, and her husband Martin, it had always been a point of pride, a warm preview of the harmony within.

To Lillian, it is a portcullis – meant to repel barbarians, carpetbaggers, and the

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occasional wide-eyed missionary.

Did she hate it because it stood rigid and unyielding?

A mirror of her own uncompromising nature?

Who could say?

Once inside, Lillian shoots a glance around the living room to ensure no one has witnessed her clumsily take the stage. Then she scans the funeral gathering for Laura.

She hasn't come down…

She slinks toward the staircase, preparing to ascend when she is intercepted by a distinguished gentleman in a sharply tailored black Italian suit. Custom cut. Very expensive.

Charles carries himself with the practical ease of a man accustomed to obedience. He is the managing partner of Coleman-Barrett and Associates, where Martin built his formidable career. He is also the firm's ad hoc patriarch. Making him a consummate meddler in the personal affairs of his staff.

When he spots Lillian trying to slip past the gathering, Charles pounces.

"Lillian, my dear – how are you holding up?" His tone drips with pretense.

She freezes in her tracks, hackles raised.

She is caught off guard, and Charles savors it with quiet exuberance. He *lives* for moments like this – getting her on unsteady footing. He takes pleasure in finding the cracks in Lillian's armor and *exploiting* them without mercy.

Her hands flex, claws come out, then curl into fists. She meets his advance with

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tired skepticism.

"Christ, Charles! You're hovering!"

He dodges her jab and counters. "Come now, Lil.' Don't you think we're getting a little long in the tooth for these games?"

She answers him with an icy glare.

"Besides," he adds, "someone's got to look after you girls – now that Martin is gone." His gaze drifts up the staircase, surveying it like territory he intends to acquire.

Lillian bristles.

"Really? And who would that be, Charles? You? Alan? Any one, of a number of potential surrogates?"

Her jab lands hard. A one-two punch.

"How many of your turgid proteges have you already recruited from the firm? On Laura's behalf… *of course!*"

He covers quickly.

"That's not fair, Lil.' You know I cared very deeply for Martin. I loved him like a son. And when he married Laura, I came to love her too."

Counter punch.

"Even if she is a chip off your *old block!*"

This was surgical. Aimed straight at her most sensitive spot. Her age.

But, she is not down for the count. She expected a cheap shot and fires back.

"Yeah? Well, this *old pugilist* is going upstairs to see if my grieving daughter is in any shape to do this rope-a-dope right now." She gestures at the roomful of

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sycophants.

"She hasn't come downstairs all morning."

Charles sees the shift to seriousness and pivots into his favorite sparring mode. Gentle gaslighting.

"Is there anything I can do… my dear? Do you want me to come up?" his eyes calculating, not grieving.

There it is – her opening!

She checks over her shoulder to ensure nobody hears her poke this bear. Then, she drives the dagger home – where it hurts.

In a low, cunning whisper, "Don't worry, *Cubby*. When I want you to *come*, I'll let you know!"

His jaw goes slack. Beads of sweat gather at his upper lip.

"Jesus, Lil'! Keep your voice down!" he rasps.

He casts a panicked glance toward his wife, who is otherwise engaged with tittle-tattle.

"My wife might hear your sordid assumptions!" He shakes his head in mock indignation. "I can only imagine what she'd say…"

"Probably what she *always* says, Charles!"

The corners of his mouth twitch upward.

There she is…

Lillian is a wily adversary who never disappoints; if anything, she sharpens him. And the part he savors most – what truly feeds him – are the tiny micro-flinches she

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tries to hide. He catches every one.

"Why, my dear, if I could *service myself,* there would be little left for you to do!" He lets that line breathe – just long enough for its vulgar assertion to settle. "Then again, you're a clever *old girl.* I'm sure you'd think of something!"

his oily tone assumes triumph.

Lillian reveals an ironic smile.

Victory is hers.

"Yes, I do like to *play my part*, darling." Her gaze drops to his crotch. "Even if it is a *small one*!"

He's left scrambling for a retort, but her touché has knocked the wind out of him. He leans on the banister, fishing for a handkerchief – sweating, flustered, and sporting a faint, unmistakable bulge of tension.

Across the room, Charles' wife, Judith, observes with pointed disdain.

"It looks like his ego isn't the only thing getting inflated."

She sighs to her circle of gin-soaked cronies.

"I truly don't understand his infatuation with that woman – or her progeny." Judith takes a slow, steady sip of her gimlet, eyes never leaving Charles.

"He can't help himself. He always circles the wounded ones."

Lillian bolts up the stairs but halts at the landing.

The air is thick with a miasma of grief.

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At the far end, Laura's door sits ajar, a warm light spilling across the floorboards. Beyond it, her daughter is coming undone. This will require a level of honesty Lillian has never handled well.

For a moment, she considers retreating. Sparring with Charles is far easier. She can't imagine anything more difficult than what waits inside. She dreads facing this.

But, Laura needs her.

She steels herself, pausing at the hallway mirror. The face reflected back looks played out. She smooths her hair, lifts her chin… Showtime.

"Time to play mother," she murmurs.

She's carried too much, for too long. Instinctively, she clutches at the pearls around her neck. *They're not mere adornment. They are the chevrons on a uniform earned from years of service to an ideal. A life spent believing that strength means never letting anyone see you come apart. No matter the cost.*

Now, she must remember that love is not a mask. It's endurance. It's giving of oneself. *The question is whether there is anything left to give.*

She raises an elegantly withered, diamond-encrusted hand and taps softly on the door. Listens. Nothing.

Laura does not answer.

Inside, Laura sits at her vanity dressed in black taffeta, teasing a black gauze veil. Absently clasping a pearl earring, she catches her reflection in the mirror.

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Her face is composed, but her eyes betray exhaustion.

She tears off the veil in frustration.

She examines the lines on her face – the crow's feet, laugh lines, and dark circles carved beneath sunken eyes. She tugs lightly at her cheeks in a mock display, frowning at the mirror; a long exhale betrays her disenchantment.

Crow's feet from summers at the Cape; laugh lines earned honestly; the bags… unforgiving. She glares at her reflection – a quiet betrayal of the lies she's been telling herself…

How long has it been since she laughed?

Her reflection feels old.

The grief… the constant crying… have left her feeling hollowed out.

Her thoughts drift to Martin's final days, the weight he carried before leaving town. He'd been distracted by that last-minute trip. He'd promised her the Vineyard when he returned.

Then, the unthinkable.

The plane crash that crushed her heart – and the hole that it left behind.

She remembers, with unbearable clarity, the morning everything fell apart.

On that fateful morning, soft early sunlight filtered through the curtains – casting shifting patterns on the walls.

The house was quiet, only the distant hum of a neighbor's lawnmower. Laura lay

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curled beneath the covers, stretching lazily and indulging in the comfort of a slow morning.

The sheets still held Martin's scent, a lingering presence that made her feel warm and cozy while snuggling up inside the six hundred thread count that caressed her bare skin. The gentle odor of l'eau de parfum teasing her nostrils.

A gift for Martin on his forty-eighth birthday.

She recalled that scent, and the first moment she found it – shopping in the city.

She loved it. Especially mixed with his musky smell, after a hot game of tennis.

Or after a taste of afternoon passion.

Thinking of him, in that way, always made her damp down there.

She missed him as she touched herself lightly, fantasizing between the sheets. Her fingers exploring the soft folds between her thighs. He could still make her feel desire.

She missed the feeling of him inside her.

She wanted him there now…

Her fingers made steady, circular motions…

Her breathing in sync with her touch…

Slower at first, then faster, firmer until…

Chills erupted along her stomach and sides.

Gentle shivering – satisfaction, followed by the finish.

She never took for granted the strength of their attraction, especially in later years, when the honeymoon phase should have been over. Even after the birth of their only

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child Claire, the magic seemed as potent as the day they first met. Perhaps it was their grounded natural rhythm. A spiritual alchemy, rooted in simplicity. Enhanced by sexual potency.

She was always careful never to discount it as sheer luck, or a privileged upbringing. No. It was a rare communion built on trust and mutual respect.

She lay there for a while, quietly content, listening to the birds outside when…

The shrill ring of the telephone ripped through that tranquil morning.

Laura groaned and rolled over. A quick glance at the clock…

Too early for a casual call…

A prickle of unease skated down her spine as she reached for the receiver.

Her pleasure vanished, replaced by the jolt of adrenaline.

"Hello… who is calling?" her voice sounding addled – raspy.

The voice on the other end spoke softly – with trepidation.

"Mrs. Barrett? I – this is Raymond Gaudin. From Martin's firm? Laura…" he paused, "I'm so sorry to call like this, but I'm afraid there's been an accident."

An uncomfortable silence followed.

Laura frowned as she sat up to collect herself. Her drowsiness evaporated.

"What do you mean, an accident..? Who..?" She could feel the anxiety mounting.

After a long moment, "Laura, it's Martin… his plane…"

Laura's vision tunneled as the words sank into her gut…

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Her breath caught in her throat.

She could feel her ears getting hot. Face flushed.

Blood rushing to her head.

“There was a storm. A nor’easter. His flight went down over Lake Michigan early this morning. The Coast Guard… They’re searching, but…” his voice wavers.

He gradually becomes professionally restrained.

“I don’t quite know how to tell you this, but… there were no survivors.”

The words landed like a lead balloon. Laura's grip on the phone slackened; her pulse thundering in her ears. The room began to tilt as the walls started pressing in. She sucked in a breath between her teeth, but the air was thick and unyielding, as if the room had suddenly become devoid of oxygen.

How can that be?

She struggled to process, “Are you sure? This can't be happening!” She tried to sort it out. “It was supposed to be a quick trip. Routine. A personal closing on the deal?”

Her emotions unraveled.

“He promised he’d be home tonight! We’re going to the Vinyard this weekend!”

“I am truly sorry, Mrs. Barrett... Everyone at the firm... we’re all devastated.”

She could feel herself going into shock.

Then, quietly and barely audible, “No…”

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

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Raymond murmured something – apologies, condolences – but it was just noise. Meaningless. Distant.

His words slowly drowned out by the sound of the neighbor's lawnmower.

The droning bled into a piercing tone as Laura slipped toward unconsciousness.

The phone receiver slipped from her shaking hand and fell to the floor in a slow, protracted motion. Her gaze drifted to Martin's side of the bed. The pillow still bore the faintest impression of his head. The sheets were tangled, as if he'd only just risen. His warmth barely gone.

She reached out instinctively, but there was nothing for her desperate grip to hold onto. Just empty space.

The hum of the lawnmower continued outside – drowning out all other sounds. Birds that she could hear chattering in the trees slowly blended into a rising, steady tone. Like tinnitus, reaching a piercing crescendo in her head.

Then, as the edges of the room dissolved into blackness, *the world outside kept moving. Seemingly indifferent to the moment when everything in her life collapsed…*

She glances out the window at the gloom…

The weather matches her mood. From her seat, she sees the barn that was her husband's separate peace. It looms in the gray morning light, its timbers dark as old walnut – weathered, enduring, holding warmth even on a day like this.

A mnemonic vault.

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A quiet guardian of their shared history.

If she narrows her eyes, she can almost make out Martin's silhouette inside – bent over his work, sleeves rolled, sawdust in his hair. The wooden sailboat he was restoring seems to glow faintly in memory's haze, as though the hull still held the last measure of his devotion.

And under it all…

A flicker of something older.

An echo, or a feeling – like a pulse trapped in the grain.

She inhales and the sensation slips away.

A memory stirs deep within.

In a breath, she is swept back in time.

The gloom thins, peeling away to reveal an early spring morning.

Before the calamity, the ceremony, the condolences.

Before any of this…

Golden sunlight washed over the barn…

Martin stood beside the unfinished hull, his hand gliding over the smooth wood with quiet reverence – as though plumbing for the boat's pulse.

From the bedroom window, Laura watched him in secret.

She sat with her journal open, capturing her most intimate thoughts – the ritual that helped her hold each moment a little closer.

He lifted his face toward the window, that boyish grin cutting straight through her.

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"I see you!" he called, his voice drifting up through time.

"Come down here! I want to show you something…"

In her confused imagination, she hesitates, then smiles back – absently.

When she moves to rise, the memory quickly fades…

She blinks and slips back to the present…

What was golden morning light dissolves back into a flat and colorless murk.

Lifeless. Cold.

Out the window, the barn door is ajar, revealing only darkness within.

No Martin, only an edgy stillness. Then…

Dissonant voices seep up from downstairs – low, officious, self-important.

They remind her what day it is. Martin's colleagues. His cronies. His orbit, not hers; congregating like carrion birds in her home. The people who spoke of him in numbers, deals, and deadlines – not in the thousand tender ways she knew him.

She hates them. All of them. And one of them most of all.

She studies her reflection in the mirror – a tired, hollowed-out version of herself.

She smolders.

Downstairs, the murmur of voices rises and falls like a hive she wants no part of. She can hear snippets carried up the staircase.

"Distraught," says one.

"Dysfunctional," says another.

"Pitiful," from a third.

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And the one that cuts deepest.

"Intractable grief… unbecoming for a woman of her upbringing."

The whispers. The speculation. The eyes that will follow her every movement.

She knows she should go down, circulate, play the role expected of her – but the thought of facing their scrutiny makes her stomach turn.

They haven't come out of devotion. They've come because appearances demand it. Even their condolences feel transactional, perfunctory, delivered with one eye on the weather and the other on the buffet.

They complain about the food. About the rain. About the inconvenience of death itself. It's all so unbearably tedious that she cannot bring herself to leave the sanctuary of her room.

An untouched breakfast tray sits by the door. Her clothes lie where they fell. The vanity is crowded with makeup, half-used creams, silver combs, and an antique mirror; beside her diary, the tabletop is a small ruin of her former routines.

Along the back edge, the pill bottles stand in an obsessively neat row.

Judging her…

A pharmacy of false countenance.

Pills to lift her mood.

Pills to put her to sleep.

Muscle relaxers for aches and pains.

Xanax for the anxiety.

Valium for the stress.

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And one bottle with a name she can't pronounce.

Her precious opiates.

She studies the labels, the amber bottles glinting in the gray morning, while her mind drifts back to the dream. Or was it a warning? It's hard to tell anymore. Her medicated mind moves through fog, thick with misery and sleeplessness.

She dreamed she was being battered by the power of a massive storm…

She lurched out of the narrow bunk, heart hammering, hands searching blindly for the light. The boat was pitching violently – too violently – and she fumbled for her harness, her raincoat, anything to shield her from the chaos that waited above.

In her haste, she forgot one small detail.

Her safety lanyard…

The ladder swayed under her as she climbed. When she burst onto the deck, the world was nothing but wind and water – an impossible gale swallowing *the vessel* whole. Walls of dark water reared and crashed over the bow, each one heavier than the last, drenching the deck in sheets of icy spray.

She tried to steady herself, gripping the rigging as the bow heaved skyward like a breaching creature. Rain blasted her face – like needles, or sand, or glass. She could barely keep her eyes open.

Then… a flash of lightning tore across the sky.

For an instant, she saw everything: the writhing sea, the trembling mast, lines

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snapping like guitar strings. And above it all…

…the full moon, burning through the torrent, flanked by three bright stars.

Even in the dreamscape, the sight pulled a shiver through her…

Familiar. Foreboding… though she couldn't say why…

Then, like ripples on a pond, the vision dissipates.

The weight returns at once – pressing down on her head and chest, making her breathing shallow.

She shakes her head. Her scalp prickles.

Is that the faint smell of seawater on her skin?

She grips the edge of the vanity, trying to clear the nightmare from her mind. The images refuse to disperse.

Her eyes fall to the Valium container.

She twists the cap with trembling fingers. One modest little tablet rolls into her palm. She scrutinizes it… closes her eyes… and gulps it down.

It catches in her throat. She swallows hard, fighting past the lump already forming there.

She spills the bottle.

Pills scatter across the table – a pale green avalanche.

A morbid, quivering finger runs through the mess.

A handful of these could stop the nightmares…

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Could stop… everything.

She gives the idea unwholesome consideration.

Why not?

"It wouldn't take long for the vultures downstairs to pick my bones clean," she mutters at her reflection.

She sits with that poisonous thought.

"Besides… it was Martin they all favored anyway..."

He was one of their own.

She fiddles with her wedding ring – burning with loss.

I was just a spouse. A trophy. A wifey…

She waits, as if her mirror-self might answer.

"Well?"

Laura regards her reflection with a blend of self-pity and contempt. Martin knew her – truly knew her – and now that love is gone, she is left a shell. Hollow. Unfamiliar.

Alone…

Could their denigration possibly hurt more than this?

"Poor, wretched… widow." The words stick.

She shifts. A flicker of defiance.

Don't do this to yourself. Not now. Not with them around…

"Buck up, Laura." She chastises the mirror... "Make your mother proud."

She rises slowly, adjusting herself for the slings and arrows that will inevitably

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follow. The sordid politics of the firm, the gossip, the false smiles – all of it repulses her.

She grapples with the veil again when a faint knock interrupts her.

Lillian's voice leaks through the doorframe.

"Laura, darling… people are waiting to pay their respects."

A pause – thick with expectation.

"Please come downstairs?" Lillian's pleads. "They're growing impatient."

"To hell with them," she mutters – then exhales.

"Coming, Mother," her words oozing resentment. "Mustn't keep them waiting…"

She glides into motion.

Years of conditioning have taught her to obey when Lillian demands decorum. She descends the stairs like a ghost in borrowed skin, drifting through the dining room and into the hall. She slips past the gathering without seeing their faces – only colors, blurred shapes, murmuring.

Charles has rejoined Judith.

"Laura, dear! Don't you look lovely!" Judith trills. "Charles and I are very proud of how well you are holding up."

Charles nods with oily sentiment.

Lillian intervenes, managing the moment. "Yes, well… she comes from good stock." Charles winces at her coded strike.

Laura acknowledges none of them.

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She pushes open the front door and leaves it yawning behind her. Her breath crystallizes in the cold as she crosses the lawn toward the barn – drawn by something unseen, pulling beneath her thoughts.

Her heels crunch through the carpet of leaves. The wind glazing her skin. She steps inside the doorway, inhaling the lingering scent of teak, linseed oil, and sawdust. The air is heavy – thick in her nostrils. A draft threads through the rafters with an eerie, wheezing sigh.

Wisps of sawdust dance along the rough-hewn timbers that lie unfinished. The hulk is in there lying motionless in the dark – not a boat, not yet. A vision unfinished. Speaking… through her.

Waiting…

In the unsettling silence, she imagines a faint whisper calling out – haunting – distant.

L a u r a...

A chill runs through her, giving her goosebumps. Her thoughts race as the dream floods back – vivid, insistent. Lingering in her mind. And beneath it… something else. Something she can't quite put her finger on. Some resonance she cannot name.

Again the whisper – closer – clearer.

"N o t... y e t..."

She repeats it aloud, softly.

"Not yet…"

Again, firmer, "Not yet? For what?"

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Her voice breaks. “Who’s there…?

A far-off shout answers back – not a specter, the human kind. One of the guests has spotted her, “Not yet. She’s out in the barn.”

The words snap her back. The guests are looking for her. The spell fractures. The world – heavy, colorless, uninvited – rushes back in.

Lillian steps onto the porch, arms folded against the cold.

From here, she can see Laura’s figure drifting across the lawn – wraith-like, hollowed out, pulled toward the barn as though the place exerts its own wily influence.

Lillian does not understand Laura’s fixation.

It unnerves her.

Alan emerges beside Lillian. A junior partner from the firm, wiry, balding, with the faintly hungry look of a man who has subsisted in Martin’s shadow… a would-be surrogate. Always eager. Always watching. He studies Laura drifting across the lawn. He doesn’t understand this behavior either, but senses an opportunity others might have missed.

They share a glance: an unspoken pact between two people who believe they know what’s best for Laura… Control.

“Jesus,” Lillian mutters under her breath. “Let’s hope she’s not about to spiral again.”

She gestures – a subtle flick of her fingers.

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Alan obeys instantly, descending the steps with the silent glide of something that knows how to stalk wounded things.

Claire appears in the doorway, wrapped in a shawl, eyes sharp with worry.

“Has my mom gone down to the barn?” she asks with a sigh. “…Again?”

Lillian softens her expression – it is a performance as old as motherhood itself.

“Some people find comfort in artifacts, dear. Others… in the company of family.”

Claire’s gaze snaps to Alan’s peculiar pursuit. “What is he doing? Did you send him in after her?”

Lillian’s smile is faint, practiced, and unreadable. Her eyes glued to Alan’s every move. “He understands her better than most… At least, he used to…” she murmurs. “And she listens to reason… sometimes.”

Muffled voices rise from the barn – indistinct, strained.

A gesture here, a shadow there. Alan’s arms cutting the air in frustration.

Laura standing firm, shoulders squared.

Claire leans forward, anxious. “Are they… fighting?”

Lillian waves a dismissive hand. “If she had an ounce of sense, she’d let him help.” A tight purse of her lips. “Your mother has always had a sink-or-swim mentality. It makes her… difficult.”

She reaches into her purse for another Tareyton menthol.

“Lord knows,” she mutters, fiddling with her lighter, “I don’t have a clue where she gets it from!”

The striker scrapes. The cigarette flares to life.

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Lillian watches the barn as she takes a long drag, exhaling a heavy plume toward the gray afternoon. Her gaze stays fixed, evaluating, calculating.

Above them, the rain begins to thrum harder on the roof.

“Alan seems kind, Grandma,” Claire observes naively.

Lillian smiles without warmth. Takes a measured breath – closing her eyes.

The pugilist showing patience dressed in pearls.

“Kindness,” she murmurs, “is a poor investment with certain people.” A thin stream of smoke escapes her lips. “Firm-handed conditioning is far more reliable.”

She opens her eyes and gives Claire a hollow, chilling smile.

Inside the barn, there is a sudden shift – a sharper rise in voices and movements. Alan closes in on Laura, his posture insistent. Laura pulls back, rigid, resisting his advances. Even at a distance, the distress radiates off her.

Claire flinches. “I don’t like this.”

Lillian’s hand tightens subtly on her shoulder. “Don’t look away – remember it.” Her tone softens, but never warms. “Pride has ruined more women than men’s deeds have ever done.” She draws Claire closer, imparting the lesson rather than mere comfort.

She whispers in Claire’s ear, “Learn from this, dear.”

The barn doors swing open.

Laura emerges first – pale, unfocused, gaze fixed on something distant. Unseen.

Alan follows, a step behind, face drawn – his jaw set.

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Claire whispers, “Mom?”

“Leave her be,” Lillian murmurs, drawing the girl back to her bosom. “Let her plumb her own depths.”

Claire watches, helpless, as Alan comes to a halt at the foot of the portico, unwilling to face Lillian in his moment of failure. His expression flickers between frustration and something more fragile – uncertainty, maybe even fear.

Lillian notices Claire studying her mother’s sedated behavior with growing concern. For a moment, her gaze lingers on her granddaughter – older, sharper, changed by her time away at college.

Lillian squints her eyes, deep in thought. Calculating.

“You’re becoming an elegant young woman, Claire. Just like your mother used to be.” The comment falls short.

Laura breezes past them without acknowledgment, drifting into the house like a ghost. A glazed look in her eyes.

Claire calls after her, “Mom?”

She looks to Alan, incredulous. “What happened?”

Alan shrugs, defensive but trying to sound reasonable. “I found her in the barn again. Mooning over that old pile of driftwood.”

“Oh God, not that boat again! Was she talking about finishing that damned thing? Someone has to tell her that it would be a very bad idea.” Her voice cracks with fear disguised as irritation. “That was Daddy’s dream.” She shakes her head. “She’s never going to bring him back by sinking herself into that… thing.”

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Alan spreads his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “We’re all trying, kiddo! She isn’t listening to reason right now.” Then, softer – duplicitous. “Give her time.” He slips an arm around Claire. Easing her away from Lillian’s grasp.

This garners a dangerous glance.

Alan reads her loud and clear:

Don’t overstep.

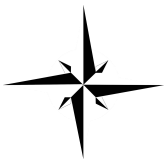
She is not ready to relinquish control over her resources.

Not yet…

As they move back inside, each tries to manage Laura – to gain the upper hand. While Claire and Alan struggle to help Laura mingle with her guests, Lillian hangs back, remaining on the threshold – watching.

Cogitating.

Already recalibrating her strategy.



Moments later, Laura stands at the kitchen sink, gripping the counter and trying to steady herself. The funeral crowd murmurs in the next room – already restless, growing impatient.

Lillian bursts through the double doors.

“Laura, darling – what’s gotten into you? You’re behaving oddly.”

She stops short, noticing Laura’s distress, but what truly arrests her is a faint

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smear of sawdust on Laura's dress. Instantly, she snatches a linen napkin from a stack of dishes and begins dabbing at her like an errant child.

"Honestly, dear. The barn? Today of all days? Can't you stay out of that filthy place for one afternoon?"

Laura exhales long, listless, lifting her eyes toward the ceiling – prostrate.

"Mother… please. I just needed to get away from the pressure for a minute." She turns to face her, choosing her words carefully – guarding the thin edge between vulnerability and sounding unhinged. "That firm – those people – they were Martin's world. Not mine. And when it gets too loud… the barn still *feels* like him. Being in there calms me."

She searches her mother's face for understanding.

"You must know what that's like… after Dad?"

Lillian keeps dabbing at Laura's dress, as if erasing sawdust could erase the larger mess. She pointedly ignores the mention of Laura's father.

"Yes, well, it's upsetting the guests, dear. Some of them have come a long way to pay their respects. You should be mindful of their sacrifices." She presses harder at a stubborn pleat, her voice thinning.

Laura feels the flare rising.

"Their sacrifices? What sacrifices? Am I missing something?"

Avoidance won't work – and Lillian knows it.

"As for your father… when he died, it was hard. You're right. But your father didn't spend his days in the garage chasing pipe dreams. He was… practical. More

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grounded." A brittle scoff. "I never understood half the eccentric things he did, but a boat, Laura? Really? People are talking. The optics are bad, dear. Remember – this isn't *just* about you."

The argument stalls. Laura tastes the futility – her words against Lillian's. Grief against image. It was always about appearances. Continuing this will only pour fuel on a fire that is already burning out of control.

Laying waste to everything.

She exhales, conceding a battle she cannot win. "You're right, Mother. I'm sorry. I'm being selfish." She collects herself, managing a thin smile. "I'll try to be more attentive."

"Thank you, dear. Now everyone's moving toward the motorcade. We should get you into the car." A lift of her chin. A practiced little smile. "We're out in front. Mustn't keep them waiting."

Lillian threads her arm through Laura's, steering her toward the foyer with the gentle insistence of someone staging her own procession. Funerals may be grim, but attention is attention, and Lillian has never been one to waste an audience.

Laura resists for half a heartbeat – just long enough for Lillian to feel it – then releases a long breath… and yields. Some battles aren't worth fighting.

Not today.

They step out into the gray afternoon. Claire joins them on the porch, shawl wrapped tight. And together – three women bound by blood and grief; with very different instincts for survival, walk toward the waiting limousine at the head of the

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line.

Lillian moves with the grace of a monarch, basking in the moment.

Laura and Claire, linked arm-in-arm, move with less pageantry. Holding each other up more than they realize.

The entire scene feels unreal.

Every detail is rendered with morbid clarity.

The pea gravel crunches underfoot with each deliberate step, the sound oddly amplified in the damp, drizzly air. Raindrops patter through the branches above the car.

The motorcade stretches behind the lead vehicle in reverent formation – engines idling and wheezing, thin curls of exhaust drifting like dragon's breath. Windshield wipers *WHOMP WHOMP* with a slow, sullen cadence.

At the curb, the driver holds the door open for the Barrett women.

First, Lillian – who offers her gloved hand for the obligatory theatrical assist. The chauffeur grants her a polite, almost patronizing smile as she settles inside.

Next, he eases Laura into the seat across from Lillian, with Claire sliding in beside her. He takes extra care to guide Claire's feet in before closing the door.

"Mind yourself, miss – watch the door." He checks that all three women are settled, then: "If you ladies are well situated, we'll be heading off."

Lillian gives him a stately nod, as though blessing the procession. Then, turning to her family – her audience – she resumes the performance.

"Claire, darling, help your mother get buckled. We don't need to make this event

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a doubleheader. My therapist and I can only manage one tragedy at a time!"

Claire gives her grandmother a faint look of disapproval.

"Shame on you, Grandma."

From her seat near the window, Laura doesn't miss her cue. "Yes, Mother," she says, her tone sharpened to a keen edge. "Try not to appear too eager. People might get the wrong idea."

Lillian absorbs the blow, then smiles – stiff-lipped, unbroken.

"I certainly hope so, dear. I'm old enough to know people don't notice me unless I'm acting out. It's a survival mechanism. All women who've lived with pain have one." She shifts her gaze to Claire. "You'll find yours in time."

Lillian exhales, wriggling down like a coiled serpent. She turns her face just enough so that they both see the fangs. When she speaks again, her voice is venom.

"We – women – are encouraged to compartmentalize our suffering. And those bastards…" she nods toward the driver, a proxy for the entire male gender, "Expect us to hide our pain to protect their delicate egos." A bitter laugh. "Does anyone ever ask us how we feel? No. They simply *assess* our emotions, *disqualifying* any that *deflate* their *ambitions.*"

She flicks her wrist dismissively.

"So, we bury our grief, lie about our anger, swallow our pride. And in return, we get… what? A fraction of the respect men receive for simply walking into a room."

She turns her attention back to Laura, pointed, almost pitiful.

"You think your sorrow is unique? You think the world will coddle you because

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you loved someone utterly?" A cold shake of her head. "Well, it won't. It will punish you for being vulnerable." Her eyes narrow. "Christ, it's enough to drive anyone crazy."

She leans back, her voice lower but losing none of its bite. "We learn to adapt… to function under pressure. We please…" Her jaw tightens from decades of anguish. "And yes… we learn to smile on cue."

Her lip trembles; her eyes turn icy.

"Because no one comes to rescue women like us. No one ever has."

That last line hangs in the air – cold-blooded, impenitent. Her nerves flare.

She fishes out another cigarette with trembling fingers.

Laura scowls, reaches across, and plucks the pack from her hand.

She's heard enough for one day.

"Give me one of those," Laura sneers.

She lights up, cracks her window, and blows smoke into the rain. Then tosses the pack and lighter back into Lillian's lap like a passing verdict.

Claire watches in disgust, caught between two generations of hard-boiled anger.

"Mom, you shouldn't smoke. It's not good…"

Lillian cuts her off sharply, "Leave her be, child. We're all frayed today. Haven't you heard a word I've said? Mind your own pretty pink lungs and don't deny the dames their coffin nails. We're afforded so few vices as it is."

Laura takes a final drag, stokes the ember to a cruel glow, then flicks the butt out the window. She rests her head against the glass. The landscape blurs past – wet fields,

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bare branches, the vague smudge of the river. Raindrops stream down the window in crooked rivulets, shadows slipping across her reflected face like ghostly tears.

Her own refusing to come.

She is too exhausted, too hollow, too chemically muted to weep.

The limousine slows, turning beneath the archway of Chapel Hill Cemetery, a modest parcel overlooking the river. Woods flank two sides of the grounds; the third is bordered by a whitewashed split-rail fence that leads to a small cobblestone gatehouse. One by one, the cars file inside – quiet, orderly.

Near the water's edge, under the broad canopy of a chestnut tree, Martin's plot waits. The Frigid Streamliner stands draped in a forest-green skirt, attended by two funeral home staff members.

A pastor in dark robes waits at the head of the knoll, hands folded against the cold.

When the limousine stops, Laura stumbles as she steps out.

Lillian and the chauffeur each grab an arm, steadying her as she fights a swell of vertigo. The Valium has taken the edge off her panic, but not the weight of it.

Charles rushes over from the next car, eager to insert himself.

"Come, my dear – let *me* support you. Lean on *me* in this hour."

He dismisses the driver with a subtle gesture and takes Laura's arm as though claiming her.

She yields out of necessity, not trust.

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He settles her into the front row beside the Streamliner, then retreats to sit with Judith a few rows behind. Lillian and Claire flank Laura just as the hearse rolls onto the grass.

Six pallbearers in black suits and white gloves gather at the rear. They slide the coffin forward, brace themselves two by two, and lift. Slowly – deliberately – they begin their procession up the hill.

Laura can't take her eyes off the box.

It looks implausibly small for the man who once filled her entire life.

The sight of Martin's colleagues carrying his coffin is too much.

Laura folds in on herself, sobs tearing loose in short, shuddering bursts. No words could have prepared her for this moment. And none can console the breaking of a heart that has never imagined itself alone.

Lillian watches – helpless, unsettled by her daughter's unraveling in public – and turns her eyes to Claire. Loss affects people differently. Surely, the girl's youth will grant her mercy. Her grief will rebound, reshape itself with time.

But Laura…

Her daughter was never built for this kind of blow. Even her father's passing, painful as it was, never reached this depth. Lillian wonders how far Laura will bend before she breaks.

Some losses break people permanently.

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A steady rain begins to fall. Soft – insistent.

The sky hangs low, swollen with grief-heavy clouds.

The cemetery is old – generationally old.

Gothic spires and Baroque monuments dot the hillside, rising like broken teeth from the sodden ground – their inscriptions weathered by time and loss. The scent of wet earth and dying leaves blends with the sharp bite of cold air and rain-soaked stones.

A cluster of mourners stands assembled. A sea of black overcoats, veils, and soaked dresses. Umbrellas bloom like dark petals on forlorn flowers – silent and shivering in the wind.

Laura stands at the center of it all.

A solitary figure, framed like a Flemish painting, the mourners flanked around her like patrons observing a tragic tableau.

Martin's staff lingers close, their presence more duty than devotion.

Her mother – prim, poised, and immaculate – scans the crowd with a discerning eye – a strategist tallying alliances, even in grief. No malice. Only quiet pragmatism from a survivor of decades in a world dictated by power and partnership.

The lawyers cluster together like a rogue's gallery – polished shoes sinking into the mud. Expressions fixed and solemn. Their wives, a wicked coven draped in black

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silk, whispering behind gloved hands. They observe Laura with sideways glances and measured curiosity – weighing how well she will navigate the shifting tides of widowhood.

Laura's tears have dried.

She remains rigid, her gaze locked on the casket, suspended above a raw wound in the earth – waiting to swallow what remains of her heart.

But she knows – Martin is not there.

This is theater.

Ceremonial motion for the living. A ritual closure for those who require it.

She does not.

The pastor speaks – his voice muted, droning sound beneath the patter of rain – his words heavy with scripture.

Laura hears the eulogy, but it doesn't register. Damp and distant, like words spoken underwater – muffled by grief that doesn't feel like grief at all. More like… *emptiness.*

She sits close to the open grave, gloved hands clutching a program she hasn't read. The pages tremble faintly. *Is it the wind? Nerves?* None can tell.

The pastor clears his throat. Opens his Bible.

His voice carries, low and measured.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth…"

The words land heavy, older than stone.

"And the earth was without form and void…"

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To the mourners, this is scripture.

To Laura, it's all echoes in a cavern. A vastness without shape, stirring at the edge of suffering.

He continues, "… and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

The Streamliner shifts, sending clods of dirt raining down into the gaping hole. A sibilant hiss travels through the gathering as the casket sways gently back to rest.

Laura's chest tightens.

She remembers: Martin once gestured to the skeleton of the Sea Hawk in the barn,

"The spirit of the *Spray* returned from the void," he said, his eyes bright with the poetry of it.

She shuts her eyes – pressing her lips together.

… returned from the void…

The pastor's voice recedes into surf and static, words dissolving into waves.

"Dust to dust," she heard him say. But not merely earthen – dust of bone, dust of stars, salt carried on the wind out to sea.

For a moment, it all feels the same.

Lillian's gloved hand lands on her arm. A gentle correction.

Laura stills herself, spine straightening by instinct, not obedience.

She resists the touch, if only for a heartbeat.

… theater for the living…

The eulogy is winding down.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green

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pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters… He restoreth my soul…"

The bier begins its descent. The straps creak, and the winch groans as the casket sinks lower into the earth.

Laura's breath catches.

She feels the pull of it – as if Martin is being taken not just into the soil, but into the darkness that has been haunting her dreams.

She closes her eyes.

The pastor's measured drone continues, but in her mind the words reshape themselves; not Genesis, not scripture, but Martin whispering softly…

"… the serpent does not lie… it merely reveals what has always been there…"

Her eyes open to the raw mound of earth, the dull gray sky – a world darker, lonelier, holding a truth she now senses rising from deep within – long buried, *beginning to stir toward the surface*.

The pastor closes his book.

The rain intensifies, pattering against the umbrellas like muted applause.

One by one, the mourners step forward, dropping roses and offering farewells.

Laura remains still, watching the earth reclaim its own.

A gust of wind lifts the hem of her coat, sending a shiver up her spine. Her fingers tighten around the cold symbol of Martin's vows – hidden beneath her glove. A tether to something real in a moment that feels utterly unreal.

As the last of the mourners step forward, Lillian leans in, her voice a delicate

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whisper laced with quiet amusement. She eyes the procession. Evaluating them one by one.

"Bleak prospects, I'm afraid. No charm, no distinction… Just a flaccid parade of balding ambition," she sighs, surveying them like livestock. "How do you feel about older men, darling?"

Laura stiffens. The insinuation feels like cold fingers curling around her heart. A silent acknowledgment passes between them.

A cynical smirk tugs at her mother's lips – nothing cruel, just the practiced poise of a woman who has long played at this game. The politics of survival.

The unspoken name lingers between them…

She gives Laura a qualifying look up and down.

"We need to strike while the *iron* is still *hot,*" Lillian murmurs.

She places a hand on Laura's arm – gentle, firm, transactional.

Time to move forward… Time to step back into the world…

Laura lingers for just a moment.

"Remind me to thank you later," Laura breathes, looking around at the mourners.

Lillian's brows lift. "For what, dear?"

"For making me feel like a piece of meat. And a cheap cut at that."

Lillian takes offense at the jab. "Oh, for heaven's sake! I'm just being practical. Besides, your *meat* ain't getting any younger!" She lights another cigarette out of irritation – taking a long drag.

"You know what? Do what you want." She releases a billow of smoke. "Lord

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knows you always have." Then, she points vaguely toward Claire. "Maybe I'll have better luck with that one!"

Laura looks across at Claire, lost in conversation – unaware of the barb. Claire notices and gives them both a confused look.

The rain thickens. The umbrellas flutter.

The ceremony ends not with a prayer, but with a heavy silence as the group begins to disperse into the gloom.



The rain has settled, soft and steady; a misty drizzle that confounds the umbrellas but persists, clinging to fabric and skin, making everyone slightly uncomfortable.

The mourners drift toward the sleek black cars waiting in muted procession, their movements sluggish, as if wading through a common heaviness.

Conversations are hushed.

Polite nods and soft handshakes reveal carefully managed grief.

It is a quiet pantomime of power and position epitomized.

Laura reaches the limousine last.

Her fingers are numb. Her pulse is laggard. She reaches for the door when…

Charles steps forward, his presence a measured weight beside her. He makes no contact with her, but his proximity signals intent.

Her mother hovers nearby – attentive.

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His voice is low and smooth. The tone respectful, but with a subtle hint of tender persuasion.

"Laura… you shouldn't be alone tonight. Let us take care of the arrangements. There's a small dinner – just close associates. I think it would do you good to be among friends."

Laura meets his gaze.

His expression is composed, solemn, even appropriate… Yet there is calculation in his eyes – the careful guise of a man who knows how to maneuver without seeming predatory. He has chosen his moment.

He's moving quickly.

She glances at her mother, who watches with a subtle lift of her eyebrow.

Is that approval? Encouragement? Tacit acceptance of the offer?

"He's right, dear," Lillian murmurs. "You shouldn't be left all alone with your thoughts." Her endorsement is unmistakable. A subtle form of currency.

Laura exhales slowly. The world around her feels smaller, the air thick with expectation. For a moment, she considers stepping into the role carved out for her – *the widow who moves forward, who aligns herself wisely*. But, something inside her resists. A deeper flight instinct is taking root.

"No," she says softly. "I think I'd rather go home… alone," she says flatly.

Lillian's expression pinches, then relaxes as she finishes another cigarette.

Charles doesn't press the issue. He only nods, but there is something in his eyes – calculation, or simply patience. He's playing a long game that isn't over. He steps

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back, allowing her space.

Lillian's lips tighten just slightly before smoothing into a look of practiced grace.

"That's fine, dear," she sighs. "There's a time for every purpose…"

Unexpectedly, Claire pipes up, seeing an opportunity to play along. Her impulsive lunge at the bait delights Lillian, who snatches victory from the jaws of defeat.

"I'll go, Uncle Charles." She glances toward Laura, seeking permission – craving approval. "If that's all right with everyone?"

Lillian shoots an immodest look at Laura, "I think that is a wonderful idea, my dear!" she coos. "What do *you* think, Charles?" she asks, trying not to sound too glib.

Charles recovers quickly with a Machiavellian grin directed toward Lillian. Claire as a consolation prize. A bit young, but perhaps an investment for the future.

"Of course! All are welcome! I'll let the staff know to set up two extra seats."

Claire beams, unaware she has stepped into the ambush Laura avoided.

Laura tunes them out. Her stomach turning in knots.

"Two for the price of one, eh, Charles?" Lillian looks at Laura dismissively.

"Okay, I'll go too."

Laura steps into the car, closing the door with a soft, decisive click. The interior feels colder than the rain outside. As the vehicle pulls away, she watches the trio through the rain-streaked rear window – her mother and daughter entrusted to Charles' maneuvering – their figures growing smaller, dissolving back into a world in which she no longer belongs.

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She can feel the past aching in her chest – sharp and intractable.

The pain in her gut is telling her to let go – to leave it all behind.

Don't look back.

Not now… Not ever…



Autumn's roar arrived fierce and low,

in the playland of billows and storms.

Frigid gusts ignite the foliage where

the Brunswick and Cape Fear flow,

rushing toward the deep sea churning.

Do you hear the raven's call?

When the chill brew stings with winter's yearning,

in the kingdom of silence and awe…

Laura sits in the breakfast nook, staring through the bay window at the bare landscape. The weather is cooling fast now. The skies grow grayer by the day. Soon the leaves will fall and the first snow will blanket the world in white.

She sips a steaming mug of freshly brewed coffee, the aroma winding softly

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through the house – coaxing Claire from her slumber.

Claire pads down the back staircase and into the kitchen. She pours herself a cup of the strong brew and settles beside Laura.

The two sit in silence for a time, watching the rain drizzle down the glass.

The irony isn't lost on Laura. Not long ago, she'd shared a similar morning with her own mother, both of them suspended in the same post-funeral malaise.

The silence feels deafening.

Laura breaks it – quietly, without shifting her gaze from the autumn beyond the window.

"How'd you sleep?" she asks.

"Terrible," Claire whispers. "It's like a nightmare I can't wake up from." She rubs the dark circles under her eyes.

Laura nods. She knows all too well. As Claire chatters softly, Laura feels a faint, inexplicable pressure behind her sternum – like a tide pulling at the edges of her consciousness.

A heartbeat. Faint. Not her own.

Then it passes…

Laura's journal lies discreetly in front of her – open to a busy page.

Claire notices the graphite smudged across her fingertips. A detail about her mother she remembers fondly from childhood.

"You've been drawing again..." she observes.

Laura slides the page toward her.

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"I'm getting a lot of practice lately." She smirks faintly.

Claire studies the sketch – rough, heavy pencil strokes.

"Oh..." she whispers. Pushes the journal back.

Laura looks out the window. Eyes narrowing through dull pain.

"Sometimes, words aren't enough..." she says closing the book.

Claire begins tapping the outside of her mug – soft, rhythmic, anxious.

A telltale tick…

Laura notices it, recognizing Lillian's imprint, and the raw wound left by Martin's death. She wonders what else churns beneath her daughter's tidy surface, what small fractures have already begun spidering outward.

Claire catches her mother observing her.

"You probably won't approve," she says carefully, "but… I have started having a cigarette with my morning coffee. It helps me deal with stress at school…"

Laura gives her a flat, almost amused look. Then gets up and crosses to the cupboard. She retrieves a battered pack of cigarettes and a Zippo – worn to a dull finish.

She throws open a side window. A stiff, cold breeze cuts into the room, smelling of rain and damp earth.

Claire gives her a blank stare.

Laura takes a moment to enjoy Claire's reaction – the shift in power.

"I'm not a prude, you know," Laura says, a brittle humor in her voice.

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“Sometimes, your father would pour a whiskey after a long day working in the barn.” The memory softens her shoulders, just for a moment. “We’d sneak out onto the deck and have one together. It felt wicked.” She smiles to herself – but the ache rushes in behind it, dulling the glow.

“I miss Dad too, you know?” Claire whispers. “It hurts… deep inside. In places I didn’t know existed.”

Laura plucks the cigarette from her daughter’s hand and draws hard. A ragged drag that tells a story of unspoken regret.

Claire watches. “You too?”

Laura exhales slowly, a pale ribbon of smoke unraveling into the cold air. She catches Claire’s expression, and something shifts – a desire to be honest, maybe even raw… for once.

She wasn’t prepared for this…

“Wait until you’ve spent a life with someone,” she says quietly. “Made plans, built routines… dreams,” she manages a twisted smile. “While you’re trying to breathe through it, you’re expected to manage everyone else’s emotions… when you can’t even find your own footing.”

Claire sees something crack open in her – something vulnerable, unfamiliar.

“Sucks…” she murmurs.

“Yeah…” Laura huffs a bitter laugh. “Everyone says, ‘He’s in a better place.’Christ, the platitudes are nauseating.”

Claire hesitates, “Will it..?”

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"The grief… get better?"

Laura directs her gaze out the window.

"Yeah, I guess," she says softly. "You find a way. Self-medicate. Go on binges. Try to run from it, but it always finds you. Or, bury it so deep you forget it's even there – until it kills you. Or turns you into someone unrecognizable."

"Is that what happened to Grandma after Grandfather died?" Claire asks.

Laura stifles a disaffected laugh.

"No. Your grandmother was always a calculating bitch." she says flatly. It was a defense mechanism. A means of survival." She thinks better of it. "Mostly…"

Claire sits. Quiet, contemplative. It takes a tectonic shift for the Barrett women to crack open – even a fraction.

Laura sips her coffee. "When do you have to leave?"

"For school?" Claire shrugs. "I should probably leave on Saturday." She hesitates, uncertain. "I can be back for the holidays, though… If that's okay?"

"Of course, dear." Laura's answer is immediate. "This is your home. You're always welcome here."

Claire is relieved. "I want to come home." she admits in a small voice. "I love you, Mom."

Something shifts slowly – in the quiet between them.

Laura sees Claire as a woman emerging from her own grief. Not afraid to be vulnerable. Open.

A newer, steadier version of herself…

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It feels… awkward. Like a foal testing its legs. Uncertain.

Anyway… it's a start.

"I love you too, kiddo." Laura whispers.

Even as she says it, some part of her already knows – love is not enough to anchor her anymore.

They lapse into silence, finishing their coffee and sharing their cigarette while the kitchen cools around them.

Outside, Mother Nature is gathering her strength – conjuring a sloppy nor'easter. Promising to make travel difficult. She doesn't understand why it unsettles her.

Only that it feels familiar, like she has stood inside it before.

Cape Fear feeds the storm that is forming.

Inside and out, forces are already set into motion…



Days later, Laura sits curled up in the dim glow of her bedside lamp, a book resting open on her lap. The binding smells of old paper and salty air, as though the sea itself had written these pages long ago – breathing life into them with ink and brine.

She traces a finger along the printed page, letting the legend seep into her mind.

The book has been on Martin's bedside table for months.

Ocean's Daughter: The Voyages of Ellen Babcock.

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She remembers him tracing the pages, night after night, soaking in the lore and wisdom of this iconic memoir.

The image on the dust jacket depicts a sturdy, serious-looking woman.

An inscription on the facing page reads: *To Martin – Fair winds! – Salty.*

Quaint.

It's the caption under the photo that truly catches Laura's eye – scribbled in faded ink, the hand uncertain, as if written long ago by someone already lost to time.

Not all who are lost wish to be found.

The phrase lingers, curling through her thoughts, like mist over silent water.

What did Babs mean?

Did she truly disappear by choice?

The world believed she retired, but Laura isn't so sure.

There is something dangerously alluring about the idea of disappearing into the vast unknown – slipping between the waves and emerging as someone new on the other side.

She exhales nervously, pressing the book against her chest.

I'm not planning to disappear… am I?

Of course not… not really.

But the seed of something is stirring within her, deep and quiet, waiting to take root. She smiles to herself, dismisses the thought for the time being and settles back into the pillows for a quiet read.

"Well, Ellen," she murmurs, "let's see what my husband found so irresistible

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about your story!”

The book begins:

` *Ellen "Babs" Babcock was born into the salt and spray of New England’s rugged coast in the early twentieth century. The daughter of a renowned shipwright, she grew up with salt in her hair and the sound of a hammer on a chiseled hull as a lullaby. From a young age, she defied the expectations of polite society, preferring the company of sailors and the open sea to the drawing rooms of well-bred ladies.*

Laura marks her place and reflects on that passage.

"Hmm, I like her already!”

She reads on:

By the time she was fifteen, she could splice a line faster than most seasoned deckhands and understood the intricacies of celestial navigation better than many of the ship’s officers who passed through her father’s docks. But it was in 1948, at the age of twenty-two, that Babs made history.

With nothing but a refurbished cutter named Wayfarer and a sextant gifted to her by her late father, she set out to circumnavigate the globe – alone.

Laura pauses on that last line. Something in her cloudy memory tugs at her – a nagging feeling, faint but familiar, like a distant voice calling to her from the past, already dissipating into the air.

She continues:

Many thought her mad. Others believed she wouldn’t last her first month at sea.

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But Babcock defied them all. Through squalls and doldrums, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in a gale that would have sent lesser sailors to the depths, she pressed on.

The newspapers caught wind of her daring voyage, and by the time she reached Cape Verde, she was already a legend in the making.

In the Indian Ocean she truly cemented her place in maritime lore. One night, as she plotted her course beneath an inky-black sky, she spotted the spectral glow of a ship on the horizon – a ghostly brig that sailors spoke of only in hushed tones. Some claimed it was the Phantom Téméraire; others insisted it was the Celeste's Wrath, a long-lost merchant ship doomed to sail the seas forever.

Babs never elaborated on the sighting, but when she reached Cape Town months later, her logbook contained a single, cryptic line:

"Not all who are lost wish to be found."

Laura is intrigued by the legend – by its defiance, its quiet perseverance.

The story continues:

Babcock returned to New England three years after her departure, weathered but victorious, and soon vanished from public view. Some say she took to the sea again, slipping away aboard a nameless schooner bound for some unknown destination. Others claim she lived out her days in a quiet coastal cottage, telling her tales only to those drawn to the deeper mysteries of the sea.

Rumors persist that she was casually acquainted with an enigmatic sailor whose identity remains unknown. A few whispered that the bond ran deeper than professional respect – that theirs was a love story lost to the tides.

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Whether truth or embellishment, Ellen "Babs" Babcock remains one of the more inscrutable characters from maritime lore. Her name is still whispered by sailors who dare to chase the waves beyond the known world.

She closes the cover thoughtfully.

"Well, I'll be damned. I wonder if this involves Salty?"

Ellen's story raises more questions than answers.

Nah! There must be hundreds of potential personalities lurkin about…

The idea is titillating.

"Anyway, I can see now why Martin couldn't put this book down."

She marks her place and closes the book.

"Perhaps I should pay Salty a visit," she muses, "learn more about this 'Babs' person… Find out what kind of hold she had on Martin's imagination."

As these thoughts drift through her mind – intertwining memories with longing, and the lingering presence of her husband – Laura slips into a deep sleep. The kind she hasn't known since before her nightmares began.



It's been two weeks since Martin's funeral.

Laura decides to visit the law firm, consolidate Martin's belongings, and assess her financial situation. It's not likely to be an easy task. More of a formality really.

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She's not sure what to expect, and she's in no mood for a negotiation. Nevertheless, she accepts the offer of a hired car to ferry her into town for the day.

Charles welcomes the opportunity – another chance to try and maneuver Laura. He is accommodating. Prepared. Without hesitation, he dispatches the car.

Laura steps out of a sleek black limo.

The driver jumps out to open the door for her, waiting patiently on the curb.

As she steps onto the sidewalk, her gaze drifts upward to the citadel of glass and steel above her. The Firm roosts atop the building like a nest of predatory birds, overlooking an abundant hunting ground.

She adjusts her coat, gives the driver a cautious look, and prepares herself for what may amount to a civil fight.

She exits the elevator at the top floor, opening into the expansive outer office. A secretary meets Laura and escorts her down a long corridor toward an ornate door at the far end. The allegory too obvious – like a scene from a movie about the dead man walking.

The secretary opens the door and gestures for Laura to step inside.

She does not follow.

Laura enters – her expression composed but weary.

Charles rises from behind his mahogany desk, extending his hand.

"Laura, my dear. You look radiant as ever – though I can see the weight you're

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carrying. Please, sit." He offers her a chair. "How are you holding up? How is Claire? Lillian?"

"Thank you, Charles. They're fine. I guess I am holding up as well as can be expected. It's hard," she says. "Especially at night when the mind is overtired. That's usually when the phantoms return."

Charles listens intently – suspicious of the ghostly reference.

"Claire is young," Charles says. "You know how the kids are these days. They're too wrapped up with their social lives and their *post-childhood trauma* to understand what their adult parents are dealing with."

She pauses, thinking of Claire and what this whole experience has done to her.

"She'll be fine. That is, if I can keep my mother from corrupting her!" She smirks at the thought of Lillian's interference. "I am afraid Lillian has given up on me, so she's eyeing Claire as her next project."

Charles finds this last statement amusing.

"God help the man who crosses that woman! Her reputation is legendary!"

"Yes, and her resolve is equally matched to the task. Martin was the only man I ever dated who seemed to know precisely how to navigate past Mom's disposition."

"That's why we all valued him around here. Martin had a way with people. You know we all admired him don't you? He was a good man, Laura. Believe me when I say that his death took us all by surprise. He will be missed."

"Thank you," Laura sighs.

"I truly hope you believe me when I say that." He looks to her for confirmation.

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"So," he says at last, glancing at his watch, "how may we be of service to you?"

His bait and switch has an air of dismissal about it. He feigns being a busy man. Shuffling papers on his desk as though there are pressing matters that must be addressed.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to disrupt your busy schedule. I just wanted to go over the documents Martin kept at home. You know – finances and such." She pauses to produce an envelope from her purse. "I thought, if you had the time, we might sort through what's here and determine what happens next."

She lays a tranche of documents on his desk marked, SAVE FOR EMERGENCY.

In turn, Charles produces a dossier from his desk drawer. He places it on his desk close at hand. He doesn't offer it to Laura immediately. He pauses to look her over as if choosing his words carefully.

"Of course, of course. You've always been a practical woman. Martin admired that about you. As do I!"

He rests his arms on the desk. Fingers interlocked – thumbs tapping.

"Now, as you know, he left certain... entanglements that must be reconciled. You understand? Investments that require careful navigation."

She senses his elusiveness – the way he skirts inconvenient truth. She feels her patience begin to wear thin.

"What sort of *entanglements?* May I see the documents?" She motions toward the file that Charles is protecting.

He pauses, fiddling with the folder while he considers her request.

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"Very well."

He spreads the papers across the desk like charts on a captain's table.

"Think of this as uncharted waters, Laura. So far, you've had a steady hand at the helm. Martin knew the circumstances surrounding your family's position. We… I helped him navigate certain… *complexities*."

She senses the other shoe about to drop.

"I would agree that Martin had a pretty steady hand." She says, trying to divine his point from all the kibitzing.

"He did, of course he did!" Charles quickly counters. "But, even the best sailors find themselves in torrid waters." He struggles to control Laura's access to the documents. "How else do you think you could have amassed so much…" he pauses to gesture in air quotes, "… 'good fortune' so quickly? The house? The property? The membership at the club, the social life of a high-profile trial attorney?"

He is building his case.

"Some people work all their lives to reap such dizzying rewards! Martin did it all within a few short years of joining the firm. Did you ever stop to wonder how so much could be achieved so quickly and so easily? Why, he made partner in record time? Quicker than my own path?"

He sits back in his overstuffed leather chair, like a litigator who has just presented all the damning evidence.

"Surely, you understand?"

Laura gives him a curious look.

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Here it comes…

"That's where we come in. Uh… that is to say, the firm."

Charles spoke in a litany of liquidations and leveraged interests, but the words slid off her like rain on fresh varnish; all she heard was his ownership in every syllable. Then, amidst the financial jargon and legalese, he said something that jarred Laura back to reality…

"Then, of course, there's Alan. He's been keen to... support you, shall we say… through this difficult transition."

"Alan?" Laura is confused.

He leans forward conspiratorially.

"A good man, Laura. Ambitious, yes, but loyal to the firm, to me, to Martin – *and* to you." He pauses to let that sink in. "He could be a fine contingency in these turbulent times."

The innuendo is thick and sounds vaguely familiar, like the day of the funeral. When she had to endure his sketchy invitation, aided by her own mother and daughter. Laura stiffens at the suggestion as it sinks in with the weight of an anchor.

"I see," she replies in a measured tone. "So, I am simply to play along like chattel – is that it?" She can feel her blood beginning to boil. "Martin would be furious at the suggestion!"

"My dear, whose idea do you think this was?" he offers slyly.

She is shocked at the inference and doesn't believe him.

"Do you expect me to believe that Martin, my husband, endorsed this perverse

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plan?" She looks at him with disgust. "To swap me around among your hand-picked successors?"

The idea fills her with indignation.

"I'm shocked to hear what little regard you have for me or my virtue! Not to mention my value as a human being!"

Her indictment follows.

"So what does that make you?" she asks quietly. "My *pimp*, Charles?"

Her barb is dipped in venom.

"I hardly think that's called for, Laura. Shame on you for suggesting it!" he cries.

"Shame on me?" Her eyes are filled with rage. "My husband helped build this firm! He honored his profession, and he trusted you! And this is how you choose to recognize his service? His memory? *His widow*?"

She is trembling.

"With betrayal?"

"Laura, please. You've got this all wrong. I'm throwing you a lifeline. Dammit, can't you see that?" Wagging his finger, "Christ, you're as stubborn as your mother!"

"So that's it then? I'm to be horse-traded, like one of your shady commodities?" Her voice falters as she glares at Charles.

"Laura! It's not like that. You're being obtuse!" he whines.

She sees the exchange going nowhere. Clearly, her value to him entails her ability to couple.

"And if I choose to steer a different course?"

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He responds, smiling thinly. “Then you’ll need to weather the storm alone, my dear. I’m sorry, but the firm is not set up to be an enclave for disenfranchised spouses. Martin was the captain in your relationship. I’m afraid you were simply the first mate.” His remark has a tone of finality to it.

Laura meets his gaze without backing down. The hurt slices deep and feels devastating, but she will not give him the satisfaction of falling apart.

Charles senses her defiance and presses further – his patience waning.

“Come now, my dear. What did you think was going on here? Altruistic nobility?”

Her expression hardens. She stands, gathering her composure like a sail catching the wind. There will be *no quarter* here today.

Instinctively, Charles goes for the jugular.

“And what is your misguided intention for that incongruous pile of receipts Martin called his dream? A sailboat?” he scoffs. “What do you know about sailing?”

“I know enough. I know that his love for the sea and that vessel were real, and that I am the benefactor of his passion – his will to be free – from you, this firm, all of it!”

The attack takes Charles off guard.

He never suspected Martin might be unhappy.

“What’s the matter, Charles?” she asks quietly. “Jealous of Martin’s dream? Or, just frustrated that you traded yours for a bag of silver.”

“Be very careful, Laura! I have been more than patient with you.” He checks himself. “And I think I am being very fair… *very practical*. You should consider what

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I am offering you here." He gestures around the office. "You could continue on without missing a beat. You could continue to flourish under the protection of the firm! All you need to do is accept my terms… and take Alan to your bed as a sign of the pact between us. Hell, no one is expecting you to *love him*, Laura. We're all aware of the stakes here!"

He sits back in his chair, anticipating her rebuttal. Resting his case.

Laura composes herself, despite his appalling argument.

"Thank you, Charles. This meeting has been very enlightening. I see now what my true value is to you. I'm glad you could be so forthright with me today."

Charles leans forward expecting her to accept his indecent proposal.

"You've made it very clear what my only option can possibly be!"

He waits for it.

"I think I'll take my chances with the abyss."

The proverbial pin drops as Charles sits back in his chair. He stares at her for a long moment. His eyes flash briefly as he realizes he has misjudged her.

"You've never had to fight for anything, Laura. Martin made sure of that." He casts one final lot. "You really think you'll last out there in the wild? Alone?"

Laura's jaw tightens. The insult stings.

"Well, I guess I'll find out,' she says. "I'd rather be *consigned to the deep* – with my dignity intact – than sell myself to you!"

She exits the room, leaving Charles alone in his office, his face a mixture of surprise and disappointment. He pushes the papers off his desk in frustration. Then,

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calls for his secretary to clean up the mess.

"Deborah!" he shouts. "Where is that blasted woman!"

A timid, frazzled woman enters from another door and frantically gathers his briefs.

As Laura walks through the outer office, the whispers follow her. She holds her head high – spine straight – barely.

In the elevator, she exhales sharply. For the first time, she feels the world tilt beneath her. Doubt washes over her as she exits the building.

Did that really just happen?

She looks around at the city streets. An icy drizzle has coated everything with a false luster that Laura recognizes for the first time.

What's done is done.

She almost smiles at the thought.

A journey of a thousand miles…

She stops herself… No.

It starts now!

A breeze moves through the street, cutting through the damp air, carrying with it the faint, unmistakable odor of caking salt. Laura steadies herself and takes her first steps forward – away from the building, toward the sea.

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The world outside is gray and losing shape.

In time, all things must fade…

The rain is pitter-pattering against the windows of a small café that sits around the corner from Martin's old office. Inside, the café is a hush of clinking cups and muffled conversation. In the background, the hissing and popping of an espresso machine breaks the monotony.

whirring… whistling… gurgling…

Laura sits alone in a booth. Brooding… like the world outside.

A black coffee sits in front of her, cold and neglected. A second cup lies nearby, untouched – waiting. Laura fiddles with a small handkerchief, dabbing at tears. Her discomfited mind simmers, absently doodling, creasing and marking a paper napkin into sharp, repeating angles. The unseemliness of her meeting with Charles has left her feeling rattled.

The front door swings open.

The clamor of the outside world momentarily invades the space.

Lillian washes in morosely – wearing her London Fog – dripping from head to toe. Her umbrella snaps violently shut as she deposits it by the door. Her face is woefully carved from doing battle with the stormy world.

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She crosses the dining room toward Laura's table.

Patrons slip by her on all sides, avoiding her gaze as she moves among them.

She folds herself into the booth without a word.

For a moment, they sit in silence. Two refugees from the tempest outside. Two women – two lifetimes apart. One elemental – the other existential.

Lillian breaks the silence. "You said it was urgent."

Laura looks at her mother with the calm of a soldier who has already buried the dead. In a low, soft voice, "I told Charles no. I'm through."

Lillian doesn't flinch. She lifts her coffee cup and sips it without savoring it. Then sets it down again with deliberate care. The coffee is cold… appropriate.

"So, it's to be *a drowning* then," she states ironically. "You've never shied away from help before..."

The rain weeps against the glass. Outside, cars are passing through rainy puddles, sending waves of water over the curb onto the sidewalk. In one stormy display, man's violent fervor is seen emulating the chaos of nature.

Laura smiles – a small thing, almost broken.

"This is different. He's not offering a lifeline. It feels more like… a noose."

Lillian watches her with something like empathy.

The old masks fall away for just a moment. Beneath them – something brittle. Damaged.

"You know, when I was your age… I lacked the credence you carry," she says softly. "I learned to pick the right battles – to save myself with cunning. But, it seems

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the rules of warfare have changed." She releases a steady sigh. "All it really teaches us now is how to…" she winces at the prospect, "…bury the parts we can't live with."

She looks long at her daughter: disillusioned, vulnerable. Mascara is running down Laura's cheeks. Hands shaking as she wipes away the tears. The telltale signs of the veracity of her encounter.

"What now?" Lillian asks. "What will you do?"

Laura smiles faintly. "What I always do, I guess," after an uncomfortable pause.

"Leap," she says softly, "… and trust that the net will appear… or not…"

"Well, at least you're consistent," she huffs. "I don't know how you do it," treading lightly. "Was what he was offering so bad, dear? I know it won't bring Martin back, but lord knows… it was a chance… at a life."

"Not my life. Not anymore…" Laura states with finality.

Lillian senses the conversation drawing to a close. Her daughter seems determined to *go down with the ship*. She sits back in defeat, questioning her own motives.

They sit again in silence.

Laura searches Lillian's face for any sign of empathy. Her mother is too hard to read. Even her body language is cryptic. Hallmarks of her experience.

Seeing no common ground, Laura stands. No pretext. No anger. No melodrama. She feels the gravity of something pulling at her – insistent, insoluble – somewhere her mother cannot follow. For the first time, she realizes… it's okay.

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"I'm not like you, Mother."

Lillian looks up at her daughter – then away.

There is something resistant in her composure.

"I didn't meet you here – hoping to be saved," Laura says quietly.

Then, she remembers the quote from Bab's memoir.

"You know something? I read these words the other night, but I didn't know what they really meant until just now… 'Not all who are lost wish to be found.'"

Then, without another word, Laura walks out of the cafe.

Lillian looks down into her coffee. Oddly, she sees only a cold, black void. Nothing reflected there. She doesn't rise. Doesn't call after Laura. There's nothing left to be said.

Laura steps into the rain – head held high – into whatever world awaits her.

Turbulence be damned.

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