

## An Inch of Water

They met at the Peter Iredale, a ship run aground in 1906. Sam was admiring the tourist attraction. Aggie was admiring her handiwork.

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The beach was deserted, except for the woman.

She stood straight and medium-height. She had teeth like an Illuminati cemetery. Her eyes were bright and annoyed.

They widened when Sam stumbled in the sand. His head bounced off the skeleton of the Peter Iredale. He was unconscious before he hit the water.

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In some ways, Aggie was a lot like Sam's previous girlfriends.

She was attracted to shiny things. She liked being called pretty. She had fingernails that could be more aptly described as talons. She insisted on moving into a two bedroom (one of the bedrooms was for her clothes).

They moved in together fast by some people's standards, but it was only practical. Sam lived in a studio. Aggie lived in a nest.

In some ways, she was nothing like his previous girlfriends.

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When Sam woke up, the woman was giving him CPR. His first thought was, “I almost drowned in an inch of water.”

His second thought was, “Worth it.”

Sam was a veteran. He was used to bedding that could rate on the Mohs’ scale of mineral hardness. Nowadays, he was used to bedding that could rate on the Topographic Wetness Index. He was not used to both at the same time.

He tried to sit up, but the woman held him down.

“My guardian—”

Her mouth latched onto his neck, and he realized that she had not been giving him CPR. She had been giving him kisses.

“—angel?”

"I'm not an angel." She sounded offended, which was belied by the fact that she was trying to burrow a hole to China through his chest. “Their bones aren’t the only thing too dense for flight. I had to fly all the way from Greece. I sure as hell wasn’t taking a *boat*.”

Sam stopped trying to sit up. After the third try, he was just embarrassing himself.

“Greece?”

“Oregon has much better cloud cover.” She kissed his temple. “We were always getting into it with sailors, and gods, and—”

“Gods?” Sam felt like a myna bird or a Marine. “No, wait. I’m not touching gods.”

She shrugged, which was an entire *ordeal*. “Zeus wouldn’t mind.”

“So you’re a...?”

“Siren. Don’t look at me like that. It’s in my nature. I’m pretty sure Carly Simon still takes the Grammy for passive aggressive singing.”

"Aren't you supposed to have fins?"

“You’re thinking of mermaids. Do you know how much lung power it takes to sing a proper fermata? Fish don’t even *have* lungs.”

“I also thought you were...”

“If you say virgins—”

“A myth.”

“No,” said the woman. “Reverse racism is a myth. I’m Aggie.”

“Nice to meet you, Aggie. I’m Sam. Can I ask one more question?”

“Shoot.”

“Why are you kissing my stomach?”

For the first time since he’d met her, Aggie hesitated. “Wasn’t that your mating dance?”

“Yes,” said Sam. “Yes, it was.”

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Like most birds, sirens mated for life. Unlike most birds, they were immortal, so it was usually somebody else’s.

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“The last time I tried this, it didn’t go so well,” said Aggie.

“What happened?”

“We lost to the Muses. They plucked out our feathers and made them into crowns.”

“That doesn’t happen when you lose on American Idol. Simon Cowell looks disappointed, but I think that’s just his face. Anyway, you won’t lose. You can sing for millions of viewers without killing anyone. Worst case scenario: You make someone fall off the StairMaster.”

The tour bus had set up alongside the Garden of Surging Waves, a park dedicated to Chinese immigration and heritage in the region.

“My ID looks fake.”

“No one’s going to look that close. You’re white.”

“Doesn’t the weight seem high?”

“Most people don’t have hollow bones. You’ll be fine. Think of your emotions like a wave. They may crash over you, but then they wash back out to sea.”

“Now you’re just making fun of me.”

Sam rubbed her back, although he wasn’t sure if she could feel it. She was wearing the goose-down puffer vest he’d gotten for her first molt. It came in handy when she started shedding feathers.

“Where is she?”

A man in a windbreaker with the word POLICE on the back had found a producer who didn't look too busy. She was only doing three things at once. One of those things was pointing at Aggie. As they approached, Sam saw the word underneath POLICE.

"Let's see some ID," said Sam.

The ICE agent flashed his badge.

"For more than two seconds," said Aggie. "Pro tip: women like to take things slow."

Sam didn't laugh.

"Your turn," said the ICE agent. He barely glanced at the ID before grabbing Aggie's wrist.

"Hey, don't touch the art," she said. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing," he said. "That's why we're going to deport you."

"Just let her sing first," said Sam.

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, she'll just do it on the drive to the detention center. Hope you're a Carly Simon fan."

Aggie approached the canopy tent, and Sam plugged his ears, just in case. Her song had limited effect on him. She liked to think it was his natural pluck, but it was probably just the tinnitus from all those IEDs.

The contestants were nodding their heads. The ICE agent was snoring. The producers were only doing two things at once.

Aggie stopped singing when they were out of sight.

"So was that song about me or Narcissus?" asked Sam.

Aggie had tear ducts for lubrication, but sirens didn't cry. They made distressed chicken noises. Sam hugged her, although he wasn't sure if she could feel it.

"They were going to take them."

"Your wings?"

"My vocal cords. Sam, they were going to take my *voice*."

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If they clipped Aggie's wings, she couldn't fly. If they declawed her, she couldn't fight. If they took her voice, she couldn't *kill*. The Greeks may not have written the Old Testament, but they had clearly read it.

Sometimes Aggie scared Sam a little.

In that way, she was exactly like his previous girlfriends.

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They couldn't go home, so they went to Aggie's nest.

Sam had been meaning to go off the grid since 2016, but had also been picturing a literal nest. He should have known better. Aggie's nest looked like it belonged on HGTV's *Small House, Big Living* or a list of CIA black sites. It was a treehouse with mirrored sides, the glass coated with a special film that made it visible to birds. There were two bedrooms (one was for her clothes). She promised to clean it out.

“Aren’t we going to share a room?” asked Sam.

“Yes,” said Aggie, “but we’ll need one more.”

Sam hadn’t known that was possible. His Birds and the Bees talk had come from Twitter and 4chan, which was very informative when it came to sex, and even sex with animals, but not for the purpose of procreation.

He let his worries crash over him, like an inch of water, and then wash back out to sea.