

## CHAPTER 1

### The Northeast Coast of Australia

Mountainous clumps of staghorn coral littered the seafloor like remnants of an exposed grave. The diver edged along the reef. He remained focused. Determined to capture the growing destruction, staccato flashes from his underwater camera reflected off the remaining bright purple sea fans. Delicate air bubbles floated above while he photographed the masses of stark white ‘bones.’ Closer to the shore, waves crashed over adjacent brain coral without effect. The coral sat unmoved; their pale fissures lifeless, devoid of thriving soft polyps.

Diving off this isolated stretch of beach had once been wondrous—all varieties of colorful aquatic life captured by the camera lens. Gone were the majestic manta rays that swam at his side, their broad wings flapping as they searched for zooplankton. Only a few remaining ornate butterflyfish, glorious in their brilliant orange-yellow stripes, darted in and out of the coral in search of polyps.

The change was undeniable. Bleaching had progressed. How could the Great Barrier Reef come back from this latest insult? The diverse ecosystem he had documented over the last fifteen years continued to collapse. He stopped. His fins fanned through the water, stirring the sand below. The ocean gasped for breath.

Tiny coral polyps had taken fifty million years to build the reefs. By comparison, human impact took less than two hundred years to unravel Mother Nature’s work. If these bastions of marine life died, the world would lose fifty to eighty percent of its oxygen emitted via plankton and photosynthesizing bacteria. A quarter of the planet’s marine life would lose their habitat, as coral reefs provide food, shelter, and protection for spawning. And, as lower organisms disappeared, those higher up the food chain, too, would be threatened.

The discouraged diver headed back to shore, lost in thought, believing the Great Barrier Reef was on the precipice of death. Only the sounds of his breathing filled his ears. Soon, he planned to meet with the Climate Council and deliver his report. What he would say would turn the world upside down. He made a mental note to call the Council Chair and request the presence of a security service at the conference.

Another diver hid, and watched, within the mounds of bleached coral. Her mask and snorkel allowed her to see the seafloor yet stay undetected—no bubbles to give her away. Strapped to her left leg, a diving knife remained ready. She took a few shallow breaths and waited. When her target stopped to remove his fins so he could step the remaining yards through the shallows, she made her move. The pouch at her side writhed in undulations. Using a set of snake tongs, she pulled the sea serpent from the bag, and with her own fins beating like a dolphin's tail, she swam silently to the unaware diver and positioned the head of the snake at his exposed ankle. The bite was swift. The snake, agitated from its journey in a blind pouch, squirmed and lunged with a second bite. The man stumbled. Gravity pulled him face-first into the water, his mask slipping off the top of his head.

The woman returned the snake to the pouch, grabbed her victim's camera, and swam along the shore with the deftness of a water ballerina. When she reached a dense cluster of orange mangroves, she rose from the ocean like a sea creature adapted to land. Hidden behind a tree, she dropped the writhing bag onto the sand and loosened its opening. In one swift gesture, she sliced off the serpent's head. A spurt of dark fluid missed splashing her face—the turn of her head, too quick. Picking up the still wriggling pieces, the lithe diver cast them into the ocean, knowing the fish would finish off what she had started.

Damp, blond tresses curled in ringlets spilled from under her diving cap as she prepared to change. She took a deep breath and, with some difficulty, stripped off her dive skin to expose a royal blue print bikini. Gathering her things, the shapely diver waited for her contact's arrival and thought, *one down*.

Back down the beach, gentle waves pushed the man's body toward the sandy shore, nudging curious ghost crabs in its path. Their scurrying etched tiny trails in the sand, defining their movements. Overhead, squawks from silver gulls filled the quiet as they eyed the lifeless form below. Circling blowflies landed on the salt-soaked corpse, depositing eggs in the eyes, nose, and mouth. By now, the sky was a glorious red with streaks of purple, blue, and gold. Polluted air created a spectacular sunset as particles of smoke and dust reflected beams of brilliant light. And when the bright was replaced with the dark, only a ribbon of stars lit the heavens.

## CHAPTER 2

### Boston

My name is Lily Robinson, and I'm on the upside of my recovery from a gunshot wound suffered at the hands of a terrorist. Remnants of my past stay with me, plague me, tangled in what's to come. It's the past I now hear knocking at my door. And maybe the future, too...