

ONE: Over the Water

Grief is a scab that I can't stop picking at, no matter how hard I try. It pokes at me now as I sit in my truck on the deserted ferry dock, surrounded by dense morning fog and waiting for the boat to take me across an expanse of dark water to a house rumored to be cursed.

My fingers trace a photograph taped to my dashboard. My hand trembles, likely from an empty stomach or sleeplessness, as both are constant companions. But I outline the beloved face, forever frozen, like a precious object in amber. Lost to me in the real world, calling to me from the next.

The ferry slides into the dock in front of me with a bump against the pilings. A lone figure moves across the empty deck, while an old, grizzled seaman stays inside the tiny wheelhouse. One captain and one first mate.

Tying the ferry off with ropes thicker than my arm, the mate's actions are practiced and steady. He lowers a ramp and waves me forward. Ever so slowly, I roll across the water, fighting against holding my breath—the superstition I've clung to my entire life every time I cross a bridge. The thirty-minute sail to Salish Island, and tiny Monk's Rock where my new job awaits, won't allow me the indulgence, so I might as well continue to breathe despite my need to cling to anything, even a silly belief, to keep me safe.

After parking the truck as the mate directs, I wait as he shoves bright orange chock blocks around all four wheels, as if, without a barrier, my vehicle might drive itself into the sea.

I open my door a crack; our eyes meet. "Can I get out?"

"Of course."

The first mate is rugged, with an air of confidence like he'd be good in a crisis. Smooth skin on his cheeks. Bright, inquisitive eyes. Broad shoulders visible under the bulky uniform of dark green waterproof overalls and a yellow slicker.

He holds out his hand as I step out. "Careful. Parts of the deck can be slippery when it's this wet."

Electricity flies between our fingers, and I pull away as if he poses a threat. I don't want to feel desire. Intimacy is dangerous. But what does it mean that I'm looking at men again?

He gives me an odd look. "We'll be underway in a few minutes." He walks back to the ramp, where two men unload a battered white cargo van. The three of them quickly stack boxes to one side, lashing them in place. No doubt provisions for an island that's home to five hundred hearty souls—and me. At least for the time it takes to complete the finish carpentry in one enormous house.

I'd once been a very good carpenter. Before my life exploded into hospitals and medical visits, overwhelming helplessness and all the endless paperwork connected to dying. Since then, I've done a poor job of putting myself back together. The rough pieces of grownup life refusing to fit a new pattern now that I'm alone.

My mentor Bill Thomlinson had started this project less than a week ago but fell and broke his leg in multiple places. After he came through the surgery, metal pins in place, he convinced the homeowner to take a chance on me.

“You need this,” he said to me over the phone, his voice surprisingly strong for someone coming out of anesthesia. “I’m done watching you flail. This job can save you. Don’t let me down.”

Now I stand on the deck of a private ferry while the engines roar out a steady vibration under my feet, and wonder if I’ve made a terrible, terrible mistake.

Crossing to the rail, I pin my eyes where the horizon must lie out beyond the mist. Clouds above and waves below. Indistinguishable from each other because of the heavy air, thick like smoke. My stomach lurches at the thought of everything that swims underneath my feet and the unknown depth of the sea.

Breathe in . . . breathe out . . . focus on the future. Focus on the work.

All I know about the job ahead of me is that the original carpenter vanished, forcing the owner, Cameron Lang, to bring in someone else, but then Bill ended up with pins in his leg. Given that I haven’t slept in so long that I shouldn’t be trusted with power tools, I hope that whatever the curse is, it doesn’t come in threes.

When I feel like I’m losing my mind, it helps to ground myself with something physical, so I grip the hard, cold rail in my hands. No matter how much ending my life is a viable choice, some small part of me refuses to let death win again.

The fog brightens, and we cross a physical line in space, plunging into a blue so pure it hurts my eyes. I gasp and grip even tighter as the sky separates from the water, which now spreads out below me in an endless black void.

“Not quite got your sea legs?” The first mate watches me with barely disguised curiosity.

Salt spray traces tears down my cheeks. I must look like I’m crying. “I didn’t expect to come out of the fog so abruptly.”

“It does that sometimes. Now you see it, now you don’t. No matter how often we sail through a bank, it always feels like magic.”

“I can imagine.”

He lingers nearby. Maybe there’s little to do once the ferry is underway. Although small talk is beyond my ability, part of me longs to hear his voice again, even if I say things that sound insane.

The temperature drops as we head further out to sea.

We’re soon dodging between uninhabited land masses. “Some of these islands are so low they disappear in high tide.” He gestures to the slopes of land. Rocky outcroppings just under the surface. Dangerous, like unexploded mines in the sand.

Panic rises. The water below us taunts me—my troubles will be over if I simply fall into a watery grave. The voice becomes louder and more insistent that I should do something I can’t take back. To keep my mind off the words in my head, my eyes search for the defiant piece of US rock thrusting out of Canadian waters. If I can make it back to dry land, I can get through another day.

“That’s what you’re looking for.” The first mate’s breath tickles my ear as he comes closer, speaking over the hum of the engines, the slap of water on the hull, and

the cry of seagulls. My gaze follows his arm to the far-off outline of Salish Island, where Monk's Rock perches off the northern-most end, tethered to each other by the narrowest of bridges.

"Take this." He presses a business card into my hand. "Just in case." Under his name is a single word, handyman, and a phone number.

"Adrian Han?" I look up, his eyes capturing mine. "I thought you were the first mate."

"I'm a lot of things." His words are casual, but something reflects in his expression, an emotion I can't put my finger on.

"You might realize at some point there's a project you need help with. Nothing against your skills. Everyone needs another set of hands once in a while."

"I have a helper."

"Chuck, yeah. I've worked with him before." His tone is carefully neutral.

My new boss made the arrangements for Chuck to help me with anything that requires two people. Am I going to regret his choice?

"How do you know why I'm here?"

Adrian's carefree expression returns. "Emily Grace Turner. Carpenter. Here to finish the End of the World."

It's a jolt that he knows anything about me when I've worked so hard to become invisible. He reads me again, and his tone turns reassuring. "It's a small town—people talk." He gestures toward the wood rack that fits over my camper shell and the bumper sticker: Proud Member of the Carpenter's Union. "Plus, your name was on your ferry registration."

I chuckle for thinking his words are sinister until a darker emotion, one that looks like fear, crosses his face. "That house—" His lips purse as if he holds something back. "Just call if you need help. Anytime."

The island takes clearer shape, and Adrian returns to the wheelhouse, his absence palpable, as if a physical hole remains in the air after he's gone.

He's taken his fear with him, except for the small part he's left behind with me.