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Opening Extract from...

THE WICKED DEEP

Written by Shea Ernshaw

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THE SEA

Three sisters arrived in Sparrow, Oregon, in 1822 aboard a fur trading ship named the *Lady Astor*, which sank later that year in the harbor just beyond the cape.

They were among the first to settle in the newly founded coastal town, and they strode onto the new land like thin-legged birds with wavy caramel hair and pastel skin. They were beautiful—too beautiful, the townspeople would later say. Marguerite, Aurora, and Hazel fell in love often and typically with the wrong men—those whose hearts already belonged to someone else. They were coquettes, temptresses, and men found them impossible to resist.

But the townspeople of Sparrow found the sisters to be much more: They believed them to be witches, casting spells on the men to make them unfaithful.

And so at the end of June, when the moon was nothing but a thin shard in the overcast sky, stones were tied to the sisters' ankles, and they were dropped into the ocean just beyond the cape, where they sank to the bottom and drowned. Just like the ship they arrived on.

ONE

I have an old black-and-white photograph taken in the 1920s of a woman at a traveling circus floating in a massive tank filled with water, blond hair billowing around her head, legs hidden by a false mermaid's fin made of metallic fabric and thread to look like scales. She is wispy and angelic, with thin lips pinched tightly together, holding her breath against the icy water. Several men stand in front of the glass tank, staring at her as if she were real. So easily fooled by the spectacle.

I think of this photograph every spring, when murmurs begin to circulate through the town of Sparrow about the three sisters who were drowned beyond the maw of the harbor, past Lumiere Island, where I live with my mother. I imagine the three sisters floating like delicate ghosts in the dark shadows beneath the water's surface, mercurial and preserved just like the sideshow mermaid. Did they struggle to stay above the waterline two centuries ago, when they were forced into the deep, or did they let the weight of each stone carry them swiftly to the cold, rocky bottom of the Pacific?'

A morning fog, somber and damp, slides over the surface of the ocean between Lumiere Island and the town of Sparrow. The water

is calm as I walk down to the dock and begin untying the skiff—a flat-bottomed boat with two bench seats and an outboard motor. It's not ideal for maneuvering in storms or gales but fine as a runner into town and back. Otis and Olga, two orange tabby cats who mysteriously appeared on the island as kittens two years back, have followed me down to the water, mewing behind me as if lamenting my departure. I leave every morning at this time, motoring across the bay before the bell rings for first period—Global Economics class, a subject that I will never use—and every morning they follow me to the dock.

The intermittent beam of light from the lighthouse sweeps over the island, and for a moment it brushes across a silhouette standing on the rocky western shore atop the cliff: my mother. Her arms are crossed in her knobby camel-colored sweater wrapped tightly around her fragile torso, and she's staring out at the vast Pacific like she does each morning, waiting for someone who will never return: my father.

Olga rubs up against my jeans, arching her bony back and raising her tail, coaxing me to pick her up, but I don't have time. I pull the hood of my navy-blue rain slicker up over my head, step into the boat, and yank the cord on the motor until it sputters to life, then steer the boat out into the fog. I can't see the shore or the town of Sparrow through the dim layer of moisture, but I know it's there.

Tall, sawtooth masts rise up like swords from the water, land mines, shipwrecks of years past. If you didn't know your way, you could run your boat into any of the half-dozen wrecks still haunting these waters. Beneath me lies a web of barnacle-crusted metal, links of rusted chain

trailing over broken bows, and fish making their homes in rotted portholes, the rigging long since eaten away by the salty water. It's a graveyard of ships. But like the local fishermen chugging out through the dreary fume into the open sea, I can navigate the bay with my eyes pinched shut against the cold. The water is deep here. Massive ships used to bring in supplies through this port, but not anymore. Now only small fishing boats and tourist barges sputter through. These waters are haunted, the seamen still say—and they're right.

The skiff bumps against the side of dock eleven, slip number four, where I park the boat while I'm in class. Most seventeen-year-olds have driver's licenses and rusted-out cars they found on Craigslist or that were handed down from older siblings. But instead, I have a boat. And no use for a car.

I sling my canvas bag over my shoulder, weighted down with textbooks, and jog up the gray, slick streets to Sparrow High School. The town of Sparrow was built where two ridges come together—tucked between the sea and mountains—making mudslides all too common here. One day it will likely be washed away completely. It will be pushed down into the water and buried beneath forty feet of rain and silt. There are no fast-food chains in Sparrow, no shopping malls or movie theaters, no Starbucks—although we do have a drive-through coffee hut. Our small town is sheltered from the outside world, trapped in time. We have a whopping total population of two thousand and twenty-four. But that number increases greatly every year on June first, when the tourists converge into town and overtake everything.

Rose is standing on the sloping front lawn of Sparrow High, typing on her cell phone. Her wild cinnamon-red hair springs from her

head in unruly curls that she loathes. But I've always envied the lively way her hair cannot be tamed or tied up or pinned down, while my straight, nut-brown hair cannot be coaxed into any sort of bouncy, cheerful configuration—and I've tried. But stick-straight hair is just stick-straight hair.

"You're not ditching me tonight, are you?" she asks when she sees me, tenting both eyebrows and dropping her cell into her once-white book bag that's been scribbled with Sharpie and colored markers so that it's now a collage of swirling midnight blues and grassy greens and bubblegum pinks—colorful graffiti art that has left no space untouched. Rose wants to be an artist—Rose *is* an artist. She's determined to move to Seattle and attend the Art Institute when we graduate. And she reminds me almost weekly of the fact that she doesn't want to go alone and I should come with her and be her roommate. To which I've skillfully avoided committing since freshmen year.

It's not that I don't want to escape this rainy, dreadful town, because I do. But I feel trapped, a weight of responsibility settled firmly over me. I can't leave my mother all alone on the island. I'm all she has left—the only thing still grounding her to reality. And perhaps it's foolish—naive even—but I also have hope that perhaps my father will return someday. He'll magically appear on the dock and stroll up to the house as if no time has passed. And I need to be here in case he does.

But as our junior year comes to an end and our senior year approaches, I'm forced to consider the rest of my life and the reality that my future might be right here in Sparrow. I might never leave this place. I might be stuck.

I'll stay on the island, reading fortunes from the smeared remains

of tea leaves in white porcelain cups just like my mom used to before Dad vanished and never came back. Locals would steer their boats across the harbor, sometimes in secret under a ghost moon, sometimes in the middle of the day because they had an urgent question they needed answered, and they'd sit in our kitchen, fingers tapping on the wood-block table, waiting for Mom to tell them their fate. And afterward they'd leave folded or crumpled or flattened bills on the table just before they left. Mom would slide the money into a flour tin she kept on the shelf next to the stove. And maybe this is the life I'm destined for: sitting at the kitchen table, the sweet scent of chamomile or orange lavender tea settling into my hair, running my finger around the rim of a mug and finding messages in the swirling chaos of leaves.

I've glimpsed my own future in those leaves many times: a boy blowing in from across the sea, shipwrecked on the island. His heart beating wildly in his chest, his skin made of sand and wind. And my heart unable to resist. It's the same future I've seen in every cup of tea since I was five, when my mom first taught me to decipher leaves. *Your fate lies at the bottom of a teacup*, she had often whispered to me before shooing me off to bed. And the idea of this future stirs inside me whenever I think about leaving Sparrow—like the island is drawing me back, my fate rooted here.

"It's not ditching if I never said I'd go," I say in response to Rose's question.

"I won't allow you to miss another Swan party." She shifts her hips to the side, looping her right thumb around the strap of her book bag. "Last year I was stuck talking to Hannah Potts until sunrise, and I won't do it again."

"I'll think about it," I say. The Swan party has always served a double purpose: the start of the Swan season and also the end-of-the-school-year bash. It's a booze-fueled celebration that is an odd mix of excitement to be free of classes and teachers and pop quizzes, blended with the approaching dread of the Swan season. Typically, people get way too smashed and no one remembers any of it.

"No thinking, just doing. When you think about things too long, you just talk yourself out of them." She's right. I wish I wanted to go—I wish I cared about parties on the beach. But I've never felt comfortable at things like this. I'm the *girl who lives on Lumiere Island*, whose mom went mad and dad went missing, who never hangs out in town after school. Who would rather spend her evening reading tide charts and watching boats chug into port than chugging beers with people I barely know.

"You don't even have to dress up if you don't want to," she adds. Dressing up was never an option anyway. Unlike most locals in Sparrow, who keep a standby early 1800s costume tucked away in the back of their closet in preparation for the yearly Swan party, I do not.

The warning bell for first period rings, and we follow the parade of students through the main front doors. The hallway smells like floor wax and rotting wood. The windows are single-pane and drafty, the wind rattling the glass in the frames every afternoon. The light fixtures blink and buzz. None of the lockers close because the foundation has shifted several degrees off center. If I had known another town, another high school, I might find this place depressing. But instead, the rain that leaks through the roof and drips onto desks and hallway floors during winter storms just feels familiar. Like home.

Rose and I don't have first period together, so we walk to the end

of A Hall, then pause beside the girls' bathroom before we part ways.

"I just don't know what I'll tell my mom," I say, scratching at a remnant of Blueberry Blitz nail polish on my left thumb that Rose made me paint on two weeks back at her house during one of our movie nights—when she decided that to fit in as a serious art major in Seattle she needed to watch classic Alfred Hitchcock movies. As if scary black-and-white films would somehow anoint her as a *serious* artist.

"Tell her you're going to a party—that you actually have a life. Or just sneak out. She probably won't even notice you're gone."

I bite the side of my lip and stop picking at my nail. The truth is, leaving my mom alone for even one night makes me uneasy. What if she woke up in the middle of the night and realized I was no longer asleep in my bed? Would she think I had disappeared just like my dad? Would she go looking for me? Would she do something reckless and stupid?

"She's stuck on that island anyway," Rose adds. "Where's she going to go? It's not like she's just going to walk out into the ocean." She pauses and we both stare at each other: Her walking out into the ocean is precisely what I'm afraid of. "What I mean," Rose corrects, "is that I don't think anything will happen if you leave her for *one* night. And you'll be back right after sunrise."

I look across the hall to the open doorway of my first-period Global Economics class, where nearly everyone is already in their seats. Mr. Gratton is standing at his desk, tapping a pen on a stack of papers, waiting for the final bell to ring.

"Please," Rose begs. "It's the biggest night of the year, and I don't want to be the loser who goes solo again." A slight lisp trails over the

word "solo." When Rose was younger, she talked with a lisp. All her *Ss* sounded like *Ths*. In grade school, kids used to tease her whenever a teacher asked her to speak out loud in front of the class. But after regular visits to a speech therapist up in Newport three days a week during our first years of high school, suddenly it was like she stepped out of her old body and into a new one. My awkward, lisping best friend was now reborn: confident and fearless. And even though her appearance didn't really change, she now radiated like some beautiful exotic species of human that I didn't recognize, while I stayed exactly the same. I have this sense that someday we won't even remember why we were friends in the first place. She will float away like a brightly colored bird living in the wrong part of the world, and I will stay behind, gray-feathered and sodden and wingless.

"Fine," I relent, knowing that if I skip another Swan party she might actually disown me as her only friend.

She grins widely. "Thank God. I thought I was going to have to kidnap you and drag you there." She shifts her book bag higher onto her shoulder and says, "See you after class." She hurries down the hall just as the final bell chimes from the tinny overhead speakers.

Today is only a half day: first and second period, because today is also the last day of school before summer break. Tomorrow is June first. And although most high schools don't start their summer session so early, the town of Sparrow began the countdown months ago. Signs announcing festivals in honor of the Swan sisters have already been hung and draped across the town square and over storefront windows.

Tourist season starts tomorrow. And with it comes an influx of outsiders and the beginning of an eerie and deadly tradition that has

plagued Sparrow since 1823—ever since the three Swan sisters were drowned in our harbor. Tonight's party is the start of a season that will bring more than just tourist dollars—it will bring folklore and speculation and doubt about the town's history. But always, every year without fail or falter, it also brings death.