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Siren

Written by Tricia Rayburn

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SIREN

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SIREN

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SIREN

CHAPTER 1

My sister Justine always believed that the best way to deal with your fear of the dark is to pretend it's really light.

Years ago, she tried to put the theory into practice as we lay in our beds, surrounded by blackness. Protected by a fortress of pillows, I was convinced evil hid in the shadows, waiting for my breathing to slow before it pounced. And every night, Justine, a year older but decades wiser, would patiently try to distract me.

'Did you see that cute dress Erin Klein wore today?' she might ask, always starting with an easy question to gauge just how bad it was.

On rare occasions, usually when we went to bed late after a busy day, I'd be too tired to be terrified. On those nights, I'd say yes or no, and we'd have a normal conversation until falling asleep.

But on most nights, I'd whisper something along the lines of 'Did you hear that?' or 'When vampires bite, do you think it hurts?' or 'Can monsters smell fear?' At which point Justine would proceed to question two.

'It's *so* bright in here,' she'd declare. 'I can see everything – my backpack, my blue glitter bracelet, our goldfish in his bowl. What can *you* see, Vanessa?'

And then, I'd force myself to picture our room exactly as it had appeared before Mom turned off the light and closed the door. Eventually, I'd manage to forget about the evil waiting in the wings and fall asleep. Every night I thought it would never work, and every night it did.

Justine's theory was useful in combating my many other fears. But several years later, standing on top of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, I knew it didn't stand a chance.

'Doesn't Simon look different this summer?' she asked, coming up next to me and wringing out her hair. 'Older? Cuter?'

I agreed without answering. Simon's physical transformation was the first thing I'd noticed when he and his younger brother, Caleb, had knocked on our door earlier. But that was a discussion for another time – like when we were warming up in front of the old stone fireplace at our lake house. First, we had to actually make it back to the lake house.

'Caleb, too,' she tried again. 'The number of brokenhearted girls in Maine must have, like, quadrupled this year.'

I tried to nod, my eyes locked on the swirling water and frothy foam fifty feet below.

Justine wrapped a towel around her torso and took a sideways step toward me. She stood so close I could smell the salt in her hair and pores and feel the coolness of her damp skin as though it were pressing directly against mine. Water droplets fell from the ends of her hair, plopped on the warm grey slate, and sent smaller drops bouncing onto the tops of my feet. A sudden gust of wind lifted the billowing spray up and around us, turning my shiver into a shudder. Somewhere below, Simon and Caleb laughed as they scrambled toward the steep path that would lead them through the woods and back to us.

'It's just a swimming pool,' she said. 'You're standing on a diving board, two feet above it.'

I nodded. This was the moment I'd been thinking about during the entire six-hour drive up from Boston, the moment I'd pictured at least once a day since last summer. I knew it looked scarier than it was; in the two years since we'd discovered the old trail sign marking this secluded spot far from tourists and hikers, Justine, Simon and Caleb had jumped dozens of times, never walking away with so much as a scratch. More important, I knew I'd always feel like a junior member of our little summer group if I never took the plunge.

'The pool's heated,' Justine continued. 'And once you're in it, all you have to do is kick twice, and you're at the steps leading to your comfy lounge chair.'

'Will a cute cabana boy bring me fruity drinks at this comfy lounge chair?'

She looked at me and smiled. That was it. If I was coherent enough to crack a joke, I'd already opted out.

'Sorry to say I forgot the pineapples at home,' Caleb said behind us, 'but the cabana boy's here and ready for service.'

Justine turned toward him. 'It's about time. I'm freezing!'

As she headed away from the cliff's edge, I leaned forward. Whatever relief I felt now was temporary, and my disappointment in not being able to do what I'd vowed all year long would only grow once we left Chione Cliffs. Tonight, I would lie awake, unable to sleep because of the pain I'd feel for being such a chicken, such a baby, yet again.

'Your lips are turning blue,' Caleb said.

I turned to see him shake out his favourite beach towel – the only one I'd ever seen him use, with a cartoon lobster wearing sunglasses and swimming trunks – and wrap it around Justine. He pulled her toward him and rubbed her arms and shoulders.

'Liar.' She smiled at him from under her terrycloth hood.

'You're right. They're more lavender. Or lilac. Because lips like those are just too pretty to be boring old blue. Either way, I should probably warm them up.'

I rolled my eyes and headed for my shorts and T-shirt. Justine had made her own vow for this summer – not to hook up with Caleb again, the way she had last summer and the summer before that. 'He's just a *kid*,' she'd declared. 'I'm done with high school, and he has an entire year to go. Plus, all he does is play that ratty guitar when he's not playing video games. I can't afford to waste another second on what will never amount to anything more than endless hours of making out . . . no matter how good those hours are.'

When I asked why she didn't hang out with Simon, who would be a sophomore at Bates College and was therefore more age- and intellect-appropriate, her face had scrunched.

'Simon?' she'd repeated. 'The walking, talking weather channel? The brainiac who's using college as an excuse to study cloud formations? I don't think so.'

It had taken Justine all of thirty minutes – just long enough for us to unpack the car, have a snack, and hop into Simon's old Subaru wagon – to break her promise to herself. She hadn't jumped on Caleb right away, though it was clear by the way her eyes lit up as soon as she saw him that she wanted to. She'd waited until we were in the car and down the road to throw her arms around his neck and squeeze so tight his face turned pink.

As she nuzzled against his chest now, I pulled on my

clothes and grabbed a towel. Although the sun was out and I hadn't even got wet, I still shook from the cold. This far north in Maine, temperatures in the middle of the summer didn't get much higher than the low twenties, and the biting wind always made it feel at least ten degrees cooler.

'We should get going,' Simon said suddenly, emerging from the trail mouth.

Simon might've been the elder, quieter, more studious Carmichael brother, characteristics previously complemented by a lanky frame and bad posture, but something had happened in the past year. His arms, legs and chest had filled out, and with his shirt off, I could actually see small ridges on his abdomen. He even seemed to stand taller, straighter. He looked more like a guy than a kid.

'The tide's changing, and the clouds are rolling in.'

Justine caught my eye. I knew what she was thinking: different channel, same forecast.

'But we just got here,' Caleb said.

'And what about the sunset?' Justine asked. 'Every year we say we're going to watch it up here, and every year we don't.'

Simon grabbed a shirt from his backpack, throwing it on without bothering to towel off. 'There will be lots of sunsets. Today's is going to be blacked out by that massive storm system hurtling this way.'

I followed his nod toward the horizon. Either I'd been too focused on the water to notice the sky, or the blanket of dark clouds had come out of nowhere.

'I checked before we left – the weather station said that skies would be clear until later tonight. But by the looks of it, we've got about twenty minutes to get back down the mountain before lightning strikes.' Simon shook his head. 'I wish Professor Beakman could see this.'

Before I could ask why, Caleb and Justine started talking in hushed voices and Simon crouched next to where I sat, knees against my chest, to try to warm up. 'You doing okay?' he asked.

I nodded and tried to smile. Over the years, Simon had become a protective big brother not just to Caleb but to Justine and me as well. 'A little cold and now wishing the rubber soles of my sneakers were thicker, but fine other than that.'

He pulled a maroon fleece from his backpack and handed it to me. 'It's no big deal, you know. It's just one day. We have all summer. And next summer, and the summer after that.'

'Thanks.' I looked away, embarrassed. He was sincere, but I didn't need any reminders of my failure so soon after its occurrence.

'Seriously,' he said, his voice soft but firm. 'Whenever you're ready, or never at all is totally fine.'

I pulled on the fleece, happy for the distraction.

'New plan,' Justine announced.

I took Simon's outstretched hand and jumped to my feet. Justine and Caleb had managed to tear themselves away from each other, but only long enough for Justine to drop her towels to the ground. They now stood at the edge of the cliff, holding hands and facing backward.

Justine grinned. 'Just because we're short on time doesn't mean we can't commemorate the first official day of what will surely be the best summer ever.'

'By going back to the house and warming up with hot chocolate?' I suggested.

'Silly Nessa.' Justine blew me a kiss. 'Caleb and I are going to do one more jump.'

'With a twist,' Caleb added.

As they exchanged looks, I glanced at Simon. His mouth was open, as though waiting for his brain to pick the words that would pack the greatest punch in the shortest amount of time. His new, broad back muscles tensed under the thin cotton of his T-shirt. His hands, which had hung at his sides after helping me up, clenched and froze.

'Backflips!' Justine exclaimed.

'No,' Simon said. 'No way.'

I couldn't help but smile. This was exactly what I loved – and envied – most about Justine. While I still

slept with a night-light, couldn't read Stephen King, and was physically incapable of making a perfectly safe cliff dive, Justine lived for the same blood-pumping rush I tried my hardest to avoid. Here we were, minutes away from being drenched and fried, and she wanted to guarantee her shot at electrocution by jumping into a whirlpool – backward.

'It'll take two minutes,' Caleb said. 'You can head down as soon as we take off, and we'll meet you on the path.'

'You know the tides get weird in weather like this,' Simon said. 'The water's already much shallower than it was for our last jump.'

Justine looked down behind her. 'It can't be that bad already. We'll be fine.'

I watched her, my beautiful elder sister, her brown hair now dry enough to fly in long wisps around her head. There was nothing I could say – once Justine's mind was made up there was no room for negotiation. As she smiled at me, her eyes shone against the dark clouds that seemed to swallow what remained of the sky.

A jagged shard of neon-white lightning tore suddenly through the air, striking near enough to make the ground rumble. The wind picked up, snatching leaves from branches and dirt from the ground. A long stick flew at me like an arrow from a bow, and I covered my head with both hands and dropped to

the ground. The rain started as my legs hit rock, falling softly at first and then harder, until Simon's fleece clung to my back and cold water streamed down my face. I held still for several seconds, hoping the attack would retreat as quickly as it'd struck, but the air only grew colder, the wind stronger, the thunder louder.

Scrambling to my feet but staying close to the ground, I tried to make out the ledge through the darkness and swirling debris. When another jagged bolt ripped the horizon in half, I could see everything as though the sun were shining brightly overhead.

She was gone.

Shielding my face with my arms, I sprinted toward the cliff's edge. A third lightning bolt crashed in front of me, and I saw just how close I was to completing my mission – by running right off the rocks and into thin air.

I tried to stop, but the ground was slick. I fell hard on my back, and one leg shot forward. The silver trim of my sneaker glinted in the light of another bolt, and I saw my foot sticking over the cliff. Crying out, I reached behind me with both hands and clawed at the ground.

One one thousand, two one thousand –

Thunder roared, and the cliff quivered beneath me. Counting the seconds between lightning bolts and their grumbling aftermath usually calmed me during power-

ful storms – but that's because most storms weren't directly overhead.

'They're okay!'

Simon. He grabbed my waist with both hands, pulling me up and away from the drop. Then he took my hand and stepped toward the edge. After several long seconds, he squeezed my hand and pointed.

The lightning came faster now, making it easier to see the water. The pool spun as small waves pummelled surrounding boulders. Thin trees dotting the base leaned one way then snapped back, their narrow trunks like flexible straws in the wind. I shook my head, certain Simon was seeing things – and then I spotted her, a tiny sliver of white inching through the darkness. Caleb's arm was around her as they half ran, half crawled across the rocks toward the trail.

She was okay. Of *course* she was okay.

Simon looked at me to make sure I'd seen them, and then pulled me back. Somehow, my feet managed to move, and I hurried after him. He grabbed Justine's and Caleb's towels from the ground, then darted across the clearing and into the mouth of the overgrown trail. The branches and roots we'd lifted and stepped over on our way up now slapped and tripped us, but we didn't slow down. My heart slammed against my chest, and I tried to ignore the feeling that, as we ran through the woods, something or someone ran after us even faster.

About a quarter of a mile down, our path merged with another I hadn't noticed on the way up. I wouldn't have noticed it now, except Simon veered suddenly back and to the left.

I stopped short when I saw the reason for the unexpected detour.

Justine. She was in Caleb's arms, and a thick trail of blood trickled from a gash on her knee, wound down her calf, and ended at her foot.

It's just dirt, or seaweed –

'Nessa.' As Simon took her from Caleb, she reached for my hand and kissed it. 'I'm fine, promise. I could've made the trip myself, but someone wanted to play hero.'

'I've got stuff in the car,' Simon said, starting toward the main trail with Justine in his arms.

I looked at Caleb. His face was so tense as he watched them go it was hard to imagine the laughing, cocky boy who'd flirted with Justine only minutes earlier.

'Your sister.' He shook his head and looked at me.

'I know.' We both did. It wasn't his fault. Or mine, or anyone else's. If Justine wanted to run naked through circles of fire, she would. You could wait nearby with a bathrobe and fire extinguisher, but that was the best you were going to do.

We started after them. The longer we ran, the lighter the rain fell. The thunder grew softer, and the seconds

between rumbles longer. Even the wind died down from powerful gusts to a normal summer breeze. By the time we reached Simon's old green Subaru parked to the side of the dirt road, the clouds had cleared enough to reveal patches of blue sky.

'See?' Justine called as we ran toward them. She sat on the floor of the open hatchback, swinging both legs back and forth as Simon bandaged the injured one. 'It's just a scratch.'

'It's not just a scratch,' Simon said, 'but it's not going to require a trip to the emergency room.'

Caleb placed one hand on her neck and kissed her forehead. 'Baby . . . you have to be careful.'

She opened her mouth, but then closed it when Caleb's hand moved to her cheek. As his thumb moved gently against her skin, she tilted her head, and her eyes softened.

'You know I'm all for a little adventure, but I'm gone if anything were ever to –'

'I know.' She slid his hand from her cheek and kissed his palm. 'I'm sorry. I know.'

I watched this exchange, a combination of relieved and puzzled. I was glad she was okay and thought it sweet that Caleb was so concerned, but before today, they hadn't seen each other since our last trip north at Christmas. They certainly seemed pretty emotionally connected for two people who occasionally made out.

Which made me think that the making out was exceptionally good, or that exciting near-death experiences just brought people together. I wouldn't know the effects of either possibility.

'You'll need to wash it out,' Simon said, securing Justine's bandage. 'But this will get you home.'

'Thank you so much, Dr Carmichael.' Justine took Caleb's hand and hopped to the ground, landing on her good foot. 'Do I get a lollipop?'

Simon gave her a look which prompted Caleb to lead her around the side of the car and into the back seat.

I helped Simon gather gauze and medical tape. 'We really got things started early this year, huh?'

His hands froze, then pushed down the first-aid kit contents and closed the case. He looked at me, his eyes locking on mine as if there was something he wanted to say, but didn't know if he should. Finally, he reached over to squeeze my shoulder. 'There's an old blanket in the front seat if you want to dry off.'

He closed the hatchback and headed for the driver's seat. I looked once more to the sky, which was now as blue as it had been when we'd arrived, then rounded the other side of the car and climbed in the passenger seat. Inside, I peeled off the fleece while Simon slouched in his seat, and Caleb and Justine did who knew what quietly in the back.

'So . . .' I said when no one had moved or spoken a few minutes later. 'What *was* that?'

Simon looked at me, then out the windscreen, toward the trail. He laughed once and let out a long, deep breath. 'That was Chione Cliffs, welcoming you back.'

I shifted in my seat, knowing what I would find when I looked behind me.

Justine, tucked under Caleb's arm with her injured leg propped up on a folded wool blanket, was grinning from ear to ear.

'What a rush,' she said happily.

'What a ruse.'

'A ruse?' Justine held up her plate as Dad came around with another platter of grilled steak. 'What does that mean?'

Dad speared two slices of meat with a fork, then looked over the deck railing, toward Lake Kanasacka. 'Ruse. An act of shifty deception, usually intended to avoid capture.'

'I know what the word *means*, Daddy. But you really think I scratched my leg climbing rocks on the beach because I wanted to avoid abduction? Are all kidnappers turned off by a little blood? And who's doing the kidnapping? Loony lifeguards? Crazed seashell hunters? The elusive Winter Harbor yeti?'

I smiled into my mug of hot tea. There *was* one person who'd probably kidnap Justine if he had the chance, and given earlier observations, she'd probably go willingly. I couldn't joke about this aloud, though, as our parents still thought of Caleb and Simon as the same 'sweet Carmichael boys' they'd known since the boys were babies. They knew we spent a lot of time together during the summer, but they definitely didn't know what one half of our little group had done with much of that time in recent years. And Justine had made it clear that she wanted to keep it that way.

'The elusive Winter Harbor yeti, huh?' Dad dropped a steak onto Justine's plate and replaced the platter on the closed grill. 'Is that what they're calling me now?'

Justine and I looked at each other across the table and laughed. Dad was six feet four and usually stooped forward – something he attributed to dealing with lower door frames 'back in the day', but which was more likely a result of forty years spent at a computer. His slouched yet imposing frame combined with a head of frizzy white hair and a full matching beard did resemble the legendary creature.

'What happened to Happy Papi? Top Pops? Rad Dad?' He sat down and poured himself another glass of red wine. 'And what was the most recent one? Large, something?'

'Big Poppa,' Justine said in mock exasperation, like she couldn't believe he'd forget one of her pet names for him.

'Right. I still don't know whether I should be offended by that one.' He rubbed his round belly. 'But I actually thought of another one on the drive up that I think we should incorporate into our daily conversation as soon as possible.'

'We'll take it into consideration,' Justine said.

Dad took a roll from a basket in the centre of the table, tore off a chunk, and popped it in his mouth. 'King.'

'King?' Justine said. 'King what?'

He shrugged. 'That's it. Just King.'

'Not bad . . . but that would technically make Mom Queen. And I really don't think she's cool being second in command – even just by title.' Justine looked to Mom for confirmation.

Mom, who'd been sawing her steak with a knife like it was made of metal instead of meat, paused. 'I can't believe you're still doing this.'

'The girls are getting older,' Dad admitted, 'but I'll always be their Big Poppa. Until old age catches up with me and I start to shrink. Then I'll be . . . Little Big Poppa? Medium Poppa? Poppa Grande?'

'You can be Grand Master of the Universe for ever. That's not the point.'

Dad raised his eyebrows, considering the title

suggestion instead of the fact that Mom wasn't amused. Not that that fact was out of the ordinary, since Mom was rarely amused. Of the two, she'd always been the more serious one, the disciplinarian. She was president of Franklin Capital, a financial services firm in Boston, and Dad was a writer and professor of American literature at Newton Community College. The characteristics required for their respective professions usually translated to their home life.

'Then what is the point, my sweet?' Leaning across the table, he gently removed the knife and fork from her hands and took over the seemingly strenuous task of cutting her steak.

'That you're eighteen.' Mom frowned at Justine. 'That you're an adult. That mistakes you make now actually matter.'

'So I might have a small scar for the rest of my life,' Justine said. 'Big deal.'

'You're lucky to have walked away with only that.'

Justine glanced at me, the smile she'd worn since climbing into Simon's Subaru fading. 'Mom, we got caught in a rainstorm and slipped on some rocks. Accidents happen.'

'They do. And if you were eight years old and had really been at the beach, I'd kiss your knee and it'd be all better.'

'Wow!' I exclaimed, pointing to the lake. 'The

Beazleys finally got a new canoe. It's so . . . long.'

Finished cutting Mom's steak, Dad replaced the knife and fork on her plate and leaned toward me. 'A for effort, kiddo.'

Justine shook her head. 'I'm confused.'

I tried to catch Mom's eye so that I could silently beg her not to say what she was about to, but it was no use. She was on a mission – and about to get me into serious trouble with the one person I always wanted to keep happy.

'You weren't at the beach, Justine. You were at Chione Cliffs.'

I held my breath. Mom's words were followed by silence.

'That's impossible,' Justine said finally, picking at the napkin in her lap. 'I've never even heard of such a place.'

'Really? Then which dangerous, life-threatening cliff was your sister referring to?'

I closed my eyes and sat back. I didn't have to look at Justine to know she stared at me now, her expression a combination of surprise, doubt and hurt.

'Last summer,' Mom continued, 'you were out and Vanessa was here, upset. I asked what was wrong, and she told me how you had found the cliff, how you go there every year, and how she felt awful for being too scared to jump.'

'Speaking of, maybe we should all take a quick dip in the lake after dinner,' Dad said lightly. 'What do you say?'

'We said we wouldn't tell,' Justine said to me, like we were the only ones at the table. 'We said it was just our thing. That's what made it so special.'

I looked up. 'I know, I –'

'Don't blame Vanessa,' Mom said.

As Justine slouched in her chair, Dad buttered a roll, and Mom drained her wine glass, I frantically searched my brain for the words that would make this better. I wanted to tell Justine that I hadn't meant to say anything, that I was just frustrated with myself after our trip to the cliffs last summer, and that that had made me frustrated with myself for being afraid of everything else in the sixteen years before. I wanted to tell her that Mom was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that she promised she wouldn't say anything, so long as I did my best to try to keep Justine from jumping whenever we went again – and that I hadn't done that, because I would never want to stop my sister from doing something that made her happy. And I wanted to tell her that I was sorry, so sorry, for all of it.

But I couldn't. I couldn't tell her anything. Maybe it was because I was scared it would come out all wrong, but the words just weren't there.

'And what are your plans with this Carmichael boy?' Mom asked.

My eyes widened as I looked from Mom to Justine. I definitely hadn't said a word to anyone about Caleb.

Justine's face reddened. 'My *plans*?'

'Between diving off cliffs and doing who knows what with a nice boy who wouldn't know the difference between a video-game system and a laptop, you're risking your entire future. Dartmouth. Medical school. Years of success and happiness.'

'Isn't the steak delicious?' Dad asked. 'Not too rare, not too crispy.'

'I don't think a little fun is going to ruin my life.' Justine pushed back her chair, her blue eyes flashing in the grey dusk. 'And besides, some things are more important than an overrated Ivy League education and a high-paying job.'

'Big Poppa has an idea,' Dad said, licking his fingers. 'How about we call it a draw for now and pick up again tomorrow, after a good night's sleep?'

Justine stood up, her good knee hitting the table and rattling our plates and glasses. She leaned toward me as she passed, and her eyes seemed even brighter than usual, as though lit from behind. She turned her head so Mom and Dad couldn't see her face, and said one word, just loud enough for me to hear.

'*Boo.*'

Warm tears sprang to my eyes. Stunned, I watched her cross the deck and enter the house, letting the screen door slam behind her.

'I just want her to stay on track,' Mom said after a pause.

'And I just want someone to help me paint the front porch,' Dad said. 'I was teasing about her using the scratch as a ruse to get out of it, but now I really might be rolling solo.'

Ignoring them both, I looked toward the lake.

Boo. Not 'Thanks a lot,' or 'You've really done it this time,' or even 'You're on your own now,' all of which probably would've brought tears to my eyes, but wouldn't have made my skin tingle like that one word did.

And there was no way of knowing it then, but that was the very last word Justine would ever say to me. In the days and weeks that followed, I would replay the moment over and over again in my head, seeing her blue eyes, hearing her soft voice, and, for some reason, smelling salt water . . . as though she still stood next to me on top of the cliff, her skin and hair wet with the sea.