CB ANDERSON

Little

They called her Little though she wasn't anymore. She resembled her father, red-haired and tall. As a kid she'd been the one who hauled with him when his sternman didn't show. Lobstering was a franker education than what she got at school. If you weren't in the present, it came and found you. A bloodied hand, a tangled line—Little did not like to swim.

She was twenty-three and worked her own boat now.

The sky was cloudless, the ocean calm. How had Little's sternman wound up on his back in front of her like that?

Her mother was gone, and a neighbor was dropping traps into Little's water. Lobstering: the beauty and the freedom. But—turf disputes, a seesaw market, weather. And her sternman, Earl, who lectured her unendingly. Earl had worn her down.

On board that morning, he'd been going on for an hour, one thing after another. Little stared at him. *You need to stop,* she'd finally said.

Listen to me, Little. How come you won't use anything but herring? Really, you should switch to—

Anger wound itself around her arms. *No more*, she said.

Mackerel, even if it takes more prep. And we should shorten the sink lines. Less rope means less hauling. I'm surprised you—

Little stepped forward, pushed. Earl stumbled back and toppled overboard; she had not intended that. After a while he surfaced, face down and limbs starfished. Her heart thumped. But when she hooked his shirt with the gaff, he kicked. She winched him up, laid him on deck. Seawater spread around him like a baptism gone wrong.

Murrays had been lobstering for ninety years. The town was mostly rock and ledge—shallow-rooted pines keeled over, and crops grew grudgingly if at all. Little's great-grandfather had quit farming and bought a lobster boat, the remains of which sat behind the house alongside old pickups whose scavenged parts had kept the family on the road for decades. Murrays did not get OUIs or speeding tickets. They were regular.

Little had explained three times to Earl: herring was practical and cheap, and the sink lines needed what slack they had.

She had pushed him overboard. She leaned close—eyes still closed, but he was breathing.

For the first time in months, the boat was quiet. Little almost cried.

Her brother Billy was living in Portland with a man. Freepoint wasn't the worst place to be gay, but it wasn't good, either. Little missed him.

Earl pushed himself to sitting, opened his mouth.

She put up a hand. *Not now.*

I was just trying to tell you—

Little went into the cabin and knelt by the idling engine. The world was designedly unknowable.

The ocean slapped upside the hull, indifferent, indifferent, indifferent. Little imagined docking, Earl walking up the ramp and across the parking lot to the bar filled with fishermen. How long would it take for her father to find out what had happened? He wouldn't say much, but he would not be pleased.

They'd lived for four generations in the same house, green mesh traps piled outside like luck, like a barricade against all that could befall a family. Maybe Billy would have stayed if their dad were a little easier. If their mother hadn't died when Billy and Little were teens. The last time Little had texted him, it was a day before she heard back. She figured he was leading a busy city life.

Back on deck, she handed an old workshirt to Earl. *Something dry,* she said. He took it and kept talking.

Fifteen yards off stern, seals rolled and floated side by side. Every day she saw them here, knew them by their faces, as distinct as those of humans. April—the water was still frigid.

Could Earl swim? Little wasn't sure. Thinking about it made her forehead sweat.

She rubbed her arms where the anger had been. The flesh was warm, her fingers cool. What she knew: she loved the ocean—the salty, endless spread of it—the stink of the boat, the catch. She was a woman in a working world of men. A Murray. She'd apologize to Earl and give him a week to find another job. Hire a new deckhand.

Her father would get over whatever upset he'd feel. Billy might come home for a couple of days if she asked him to.

Little took off her cap. Breathed. The wind lifted her hair, whirled it, dropped it. The sweat evaporated. She put the cap back on. Her real name was Elizabeth.