

## IN THE BELLY

The rhythmic creaking of an unlatched galley door and the engine's laboured whine were keeping Johanna awake—that, or her clamorous thoughts. The deep waters threatened to heave and, even low in the vessel's hold, Jo felt the roll and heard the faint plashing of waves against hull.

Try to escape Canada's snow and this is where it gets you, she brooded. So far, the working vacation hadn't yielded much of a retreat. As a travel agent specializing in last minute sell-offs, she'd often researched destinations in person, but she'd never before resorted to buying passage on a cargo ferry! Then again, this was the first time she'd been caught in an airport security shutdown. Athens International had been a nightmare, throngs of stranded travellers snatching up available transportation and her own intended seat on the local island-hopper long since pirated away from her.

Bound for Crete, Jo had boarded the *Ikhtus* in the dark and been greeted by a swarthy Greek in Levis. She couldn't understand a word he spoke as he gripped her luggage, and with sinking confidence she plunged after him down salt-crusty wooden stairs to the bottom of the old boat. The toilet facilities were crude. Her cot was wedged between casks and tarped boxes, lit by a low-watt bulb. She wondered which deck-hand had slept there the previous night, and visualized the spa in Heraklion where the refuge of immaculate sheets and the oiled hands of a masseuse awaited her. All winter she'd been anticipating the luxury of those gentle hands but felt now, instead, as though she were being handled by something much greater.

Of course, it wasn't northern winters Jo was avoiding. Even her mother knew that.

“What are you running from?” Amita had asked, squinting in the bedroom doorway as Jo was packing her bags yesterday.

“Nothing,” she lied. “It’s my job, Mom. The company expects me to keep up with the itineraries, especially now that I’m management.” Funny how, even with such deteriorating vision, Amita’s gaze saw right through her.

It had been that way from the beginning, Jo thought. Perhaps transparency was part of being her mother’s only child. Certainly the bond strengthened when the two of them had been left alone over twenty years ago—deserted by the high-and-mighty Professor Byrd for the wiles of a philosophy student with long legs and easy fertility. He was only following his feelings in doing his ethical duty, he’d said, unfeelingly abandoning his eight-year-old duty.

“If you have a spell, who will help you?”

“I’ll be home by the ninth, Mom—hardly time to get sick. Mrs. Norton will check in on you every day,” Jo had said as she poked the strap of her silk sun-dress into the suitcase and quickly zipped it shut, trying to think of a response before the next inevitable question came. She hated her mother’s prying questions and resisted revealing details of her travels and of herself, something that was becoming increasingly difficult in the months since she’d moved back home. Jo was now literally Amita’s eyes, an incarnation of Mom’s vision in shopping for the groceries, tidying the house, paying bills. Or, maybe Amity was looking after Jo again.

“Have you called the others yet?” There it was.

“Mom, I told you that I don’t have their number.”

“Surely you can get it somehow from that Internet? You found out their names, after all, didn’t you?”

“You overrate technology. It was just pure luck that I happened to be reading the obituaries.” Honestly, Jo thought with exasperation, you’d think the woman wasn’t over her grief yet. Not that the funeral announcement had even mentioned Jo and Amita:

“Adam Byrd leaves to mourn his companion and two sons . . .”

“Now that you know for sure, isn’t it only common sense to contact them as soon as possible?” her mother asked. “And kindness? Wouldn’t you wish for someone to tell you, Johanna, if you were in the dark about your health?”

Kindness? That’s the last thing that Jo would have felt for them. Common sense she could understand; it had only been common childhood sense, for example, to avoid the park where her daddy had played catch with the black-haired toddlers. As for kindness, had it been kind of him to deny her the inheritance of his parenting? Jo almost hoped he *had* bequeathed to her usurpers the same genetic legacy he’d left to her.

“Why don’t you find them yourself?” Jo challenged, unfairly. “Why expect me to be your mouthpiece? Hire a detective and root them out, if you’re adamant about extending grace like some sort of twisted martyr.”

“Why are you so angry?” her mother asked.

“Why are you *not*?” Jo snapped, shrugging off her mother’s hand. She swung her suitcase out of the door and into the waiting taxi, and turned her face away from Amita.

Now, she shifted on her bunk and turned towards the ferry’s wall as the undulations rocked her security and threatened to dump her out of bed. As desperate as she was to be swallowed up and delivered from her insomnia, the narcotic of sleep

slipped from her in the rolling of these seas. She clung to the timber ribs of the boat. Her fury rose with the battering of the storm inside her, the memories of the on-going dispute.

Her serious symptoms had appeared just this past year, and she'd managed to hide the abdominal pain and weight loss while she lived alone, out of province. But during a holiday visit home, Amita had insisted on a specialist.

Dr. Sirocco's words scorched her: "The tests show that you have an inherited gastrointestinal condition that is a certain precursor to colorectal cancer. We can keep ahead of it, but it will require radical surgery. The new screening procedures we used on you can determine carriers long before the cancer actually develops. In light of how you've described your father's early ailments, Johanna, you had a fifty percent chance of carrying this gene. Any other family members do as well."

It took Jo several weeks to tell her mother. She anticipated Amita's response. "Now we know for sure how he died, Johanna—twisted up with that pain in his gut and decayed from within," Amita said at first, with a hush of reverence like new sorrow. Then, immediately, "The boys need to know."

Panic twisted Jo's own stomach even now, remembering. It was understood—by her, anyway—that they didn't speak about the other children. The half-brothers. She'd hoped her mother had forgotten about them, or at least put them out of her mind in her concentration upon Jo, her daughter. Her own flesh and blood.

"They don't even belong to you," she implored. "Mom, they are not your responsibility."

"Aren't they yours? You share a common ancestry with them. Your father may have abandoned them with the same disease, without them even knowing."

Now Jo pressed her face down into the coarse fibers of the marine blanket, feeling the roughness soak up her sweat.

For years she'd imagined how a conversation with them might go. Since diagnosis, she was obsessed with the thought of looking into their eyes, seeing a reflection of her father and of herself, hating them. She tried relentlessly to displace the image, to distract herself, to fly away in her travels like a dove on the wings of the morning. But where could she go from the truth? Where could she flee from its presence?

If she avoided the task just a little longer, it would be easy to justify not being able to find them. People move residences—they get lost. Jo wished they would get lost. Her life would be so much more comfortable.

“If you lose them, no one wins,” her mother had said. “They could die in this illness, Johanna. Why shouldn't I be concerned about them as well as about you?”

“Leave me alone,” Jo muttered now to her mother, whose presence in the boat was as palpable as the great gust of accusation Amita hurled out to sea after her. Hopeless of getting any sleep, she glanced at the luminous face of her watch. Only three hours since she'd left port—it felt like three days.

Abdominal cramps sent Jo stumbling to her feet towards the privy. Hunched on the commode with her elbows on her knees and hands clasping her face, she felt the spasms as though the ship itself were trying to squeeze her out, to defecate her into the flood of chaos that was her fear.

“Where's your dignity?” she'd challenged Amita. “You would let his litter intrude in our life, when they were the reason he left in the first place.”

“The vengeance isn't yours, Johanna.”

How could Jo believe this? Her mother had taken Adam in holy matrimony and, while untouched by his disease, she bore the disease in her own body when carrying Jo, and birthed her with all the DNA needed to condemn her. She had borne Jo—but all Jo bore were filthy tumors.

“I deserve more than this, Mom. At the least it’s my right to live in peace. Why don’t you just get a lawyer to contact them through the funeral home address?” Not that Amita would ever consider retaining an attorney. Even Adam’s rejection had gone uncontested. He’d sent no support checks, and Amita hadn’t insisted, just able on her secretarial wages to pay for her daughter’s education. Jo should have known that an impersonal legal notification would never suffice.

“How would *you* feel receiving a cold document announcing your doom?” Amita asked. That was ludicrous. Did her mother think Adam’s cold letter of divorce hadn’t sounded the knell on his daughter’s own life? And the very absence of correspondence had been worse—the dearth of birthday cards, the refusal to reply to her repeated teenaged entreaties scribbled desperately in the seclusion of her room. His sons deserved no more.

In one way it would be a relief to spew upon them the bad news of their illness, but for the fact that it would become their good news and effect their salvation.

Drifting in this flotsam of her thoughts like a gull unable to nest, Jo herself despaired of salvage.

“Mom,” she whispered finally, her forehead clammy with pain and the strain of hatred. “Don’t leave me alone.”

The engulfing night and the spasms eventually receded. The crew was awakening now; she could hear the sailors above her yelling orders to one another as they neared the harbour. Purged from her consuming dreams of the spa escape and reckless now about the loss of her reservation fee, Jo ascended the narrow-throated stairwell and scanned the waterfront for an internet cafe—a connection home. She stepped onto the deck and turned her face up into the northerly wind.