

I used to call the shadow my old friend. It seemed less frightening that way. I would say it with a wry smile, but nobody else would find it funny.

It has been such a long time since the shadow last came around. "I think I've been defriended," I once said to Elias. He just looked at me, unamused.

I suppose I've been too busy with the wedding arrangements to think much about the shadow. It doesn't like to be forgotten though. It always lingers nearby. As I arrived at the hotel yesterday, I should have predicted that the shadow would make an appearance. After all, it is an old friend.

The Terrace Bar is different today. I feel it as soon as I step inside. Something foreign in the air greets me like a scent I can't quite place. It's darker here than in the rest of the hotel. It struck me as odd when I first saw it yesterday, this gloomy cavern hidden within a palace of light.

My eyes adjust and all I see are flowers. They're an unnatural shade of yellow, worn by a woman softened with age, her skin like an overripe plum. She's seated alone at a table and stares straight ahead, motionless. The sadness on her face is even more unnerving against the yellow flowers of the dress hanging limply on her.

A few other guests sit at tables scattered throughout the room. Like the woman in the floral dress, their stares are fixed on something in front of them.

The bartender stands behind the long countertop to my left, framed by a wall of glass bottles. He greeted me with such warmth yesterday. Every smile he gave felt earned, inviting my confidence whenever he leaned forward or held eye contact longer than what I'd usually find comfortable. Now his arms are crossed over his chest, his eyes narrowed. A dishtowel lies forgotten over one shoulder. He's staring in the same direction as everyone else in the dim room, his head tilted upward as though listening to god.

Following their gaze, I see it's something ordinary: a television set mounted on the wall behind the bar's counter. I can't quite tell what they're watching, but it looks like the ocean. The waves are more grey than blue, churning across the screen with lashes of foam.

Why is everyone so interested in this?

Several jagged objects come into view. They rock along with the rhythm of the waves, the red paint bold against the coldness of the sea. Their shapes lack symmetry.

Are they little boats?

A woman appears on the screen. She's dressed inoffensively in neutral tones and crisp lines. Her delicate hands are placed on the surface of a lacquered desk. I hear her voice but don't hear the words.

My body begins to shiver like a taut wire as my phone vibrates in my pocket. I don't reach for it, like I normally would. It goes off again. And again. I just let it continue its inaudible cry, a silent alarm bell. But I don't need to read the messages or answer the calls. I know what has happened, why everyone at home suddenly feels the need to get hold of me. I know what everyone in the room is seeing on the television, what those floating objects

After Elias

are. I know, because I've always known this would happen one day. Today is that day.

The shadow comes to me.

I recognize it immediately, even though it has been so long.

It cloaks itself around my body. I feel its touch, a sickening static. A familiar numbness washes over me.

It seeps into my skin. The pricking begins softly before it gets sharper, quicker. A thousand stabbing needles.

It whispers in my ears. A deadening hum surrounds me.

Hello, old friend.

Invisible hands wrap around my throat.

I can't breathe.

I can't move.

If I had been paying closer attention earlier, I might have seen it in the periphery of my vision, felt its touch against the tips of my fingers. It was so close.

I don't know how long I stand there before my legs can move again. They march me out of the dim room, and I stumble through the hall. The light sears my retinas. The sound of my shoes on the cold floor becomes louder with every step as the hum subsides. I find my suite, the door emblazoned with numbers polished so well I can see my reflection in them. My hand shakes as it fumbles in my pocket for the key.

I throw myself into the room and slam the door shut behind me. I pull the curtains closed and switch on the television above the dresser.

This must be a mistake.

The unholy messenger in the neutral tones stares back at me, though she seems less benign. There is an emptiness in her eyes as her lips move. I can understand her words now.

Flight XI260 was on its way to Vancouver from Berlin when it crashed into the Arctic Ocean one hour ago. There were 314

passengers on board, including fifteen crew members, one relief pilot, one captain, and one co-pilot.

A face appears, and I know it so well. The square chin and uneven lips that make him look more arrogant than he is. The arrowhead slope of his nose, something he's always been self-conscious of.

Most striking of all, the darkness of his irises. Almost black, they reflect the light as tiny white orbs — two satellites in the night sky.

He's the man I'm supposed to marry in seven days, this co-pilot.

His name is Elias.

Part One

The Pilot and the Botanist