

A  
WRECK  
OF  
SEABIRDS

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## THE SHORE

Briony stood on the boardwalk that snaked between the dunes; she shrugged her hoodie back. She'd been warm as she ran, but now stillness brought back the bite of the wind. The new light of the sun spilled over the rows of houses behind her. Her hands rested on the wooden railing, and she breathed in the crisp sea air. Her gaze fell on a solitary figure at the water's edge, standing eerily still. She turned her head and squinted, before spinning towards the sandy track between the dunes. She could feel the chill of the sand.

She trudged slowly across the beach, approaching the shoreline. A few metres away, now, was a guy. He couldn't be more than a few years older than her. A quick tilt of his face towards her was the only indication he knew she was there. He didn't speak. Briony opened her mouth, but her greeting stuck in her throat as she took him in. His hands clenched tightly at his sides, trembling against dark jeans. He was almost knee-deep in the water. She swallowed hard, looked again to his face. It was slick and glistening. He was staring resolutely ahead. His nose ran, tears dripping down his chin. He didn't move to wipe them away, and some settled and clung to the rough shadow that darkened his jaw.

Briony hesitated, unsure if she should just turn away.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, her voice small against the steady rhythm of the ocean slapping at the shore. 'Are—' It seemed a stupid question. 'Are you okay?'

His eyes closed, his lashes wet and dark against pale skin.

‘You should go,’ he whispered flatly, and Briony instinctively stepped closer to catch the words. ‘You don’t want—’ He raised an arm and wiped a sleeve across his face, his eyes flicking open and resting on Briony, a step behind him. ‘You should just go.’

He was shaking, and she wondered how long he’d been standing here, knee deep. She wondered what exactly he was talking himself into. Or out of.

The water lapped at her toes, seafoam seeping through her shoes.

‘I don’t think I can do that,’ Briony whispered.

He let out a strangled, gulping sort of sound, as if his body fought between the need to sob and to breathe. She stepped forward, her sneakers squelched and sunk into the sand, water soaking her leggings. Her fingers grazed his arm. He trembled beneath her. He was freezing.

‘Hey,’ she said, and stepped around him, so that her body stood between his and the sea. The water was biting cold. She felt strands of seaweed cling to her legs. She gripped his arms. ‘What’s your name?’

He drew in a deep breath, as though he wasn’t sure of the answer.

‘Ren.’ A flicker of recognition surfaced somewhere beneath Briony’s anxious concern.

‘Okay, Ren. I think—’ *What was she doing?* ‘I think you should get out of the water.’ He stared down at her. His expression was filled with uncertainty. She tightened her grip on his arms, hoping he wouldn’t pull away. ‘Will you come somewhere with me?’

His face twisted — he almost looked angry — and then fell soft. ‘Okay.’ His stance relaxed. He spoke again, louder. ‘Yes, okay.’

Briony exhaled. The relief made her want to laugh. ‘Okay,’ her fingers flexed on the damp fabric of his sweatshirt, ‘good.’

She kept one hand on his arm, turning him away from the water. He stepped shakily back from the shore. Water drained from

Briony's shoes as she lifted her feet heavily from the surf. Her toes were numb. She walked beside him, keeping hold.

'Do you want me to take you home? I can drive you—'

'No,' he cut in, his voice low but firm. He glanced at her. 'I don't want to go home.'

'Okay ...' Briony hesitated; she didn't know what to say. 'Do you want a coffee?'

'It's really early.' He gestured to the barely-risen sun. *That wasn't a no.* Briony smiled grimly and gripped his arm tighter.

'I know a place that's open.'

\*

Ren must have been almost numb with cold, his jeans and shoes heavy with sea water, but he insisted on sitting out on the deck, overlooking the harbour. The water there was still, a rippling, inky purple not yet touched by the sun. Briony pulled out the wicker chair beside his and placed a number on the table. She slipped her bank card back into a pocket in her leggings.

He looked sidelong at her. He'd stopped shivering, but a flush lingered on his cheeks and his lips were an eerie shade of indigo, mirroring the shadows set beneath his eyes.

'I can pay you back,' Ren murmured.

'No need,' Briony settled into the corner chair. 'It's just a coffee.'

He smiled, his lips twisting grimly. 'Is it?'

A waitress placed two mugs down on the table. 'Almond flat whites,' she announced, her eyes flicking back and forth between them before she left.

Briony reached for the coffee eagerly.

'Do you come here every morning?' Ren nodded to the door that had fallen closed. 'She knows you.'

'Most mornings. After I run.'

‘You’re dedicated.’

She smiled. ‘I guess I am. What about you?’

‘I used to come here. A long time ago.’

Briony shook her head. ‘No. I mean ...’ she trailed off, her words hanging awkwardly between them.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ he said, by way of explanation.

He downed half his coffee in a single gulp.

They sat in silence, the gentle surge of water beneath the boardwalk filling the space between unspoken words. Somehow it still felt too soon when he set his mug down and spoke again.

‘Look ...’ His words came out softly. ‘I feel like I owe you an explanation, but I’m not—’

‘That’s okay.’ She placed a hand on his arm. ‘I don’t need one right now.’

He looked relieved and sat back in the chair. They settled again into silence, the sounds of the harbour a gentle lull. Briony’s eyes flicked over to him every few minutes.

When she reached the dregs of cold coffee in the bottom of the mug, she cleared her throat.

‘Just ...’ She searched for the right way to phrase it. ‘I hope you won’t be right back there when we leave here?’

He tilted his head to one side, like he was trying to read her mind. He smiled a half-hearted smile again. ‘I’m sorry if I freaked you out.’

‘That wasn’t much of an assurance.’

He reached for her phone where it lay on the table, a tangle of headphones beside it. His hand hovered. ‘May I?’

Briony nodded.

His thumbs moved over the glass, and he handed it back to her with a steady look. ‘No passcode?’

‘Maybe I don’t have anything worth hiding.’

He raised an eyebrow as she took the phone. ‘Everyone’s hiding something.’

‘Ren,’ she pressed, his name sounding not-quite foreign on her lips.

‘Promise.’ He stood in a single fluid motion and let out a sigh. ‘I should get going. My dad has some stuff on today.’

Briony wanted to say more, but she held her tongue.

‘Wait.’ She leaned out of her chair and grabbed his arm. ‘Can I check on you? I’ll worry.’

He smiled, nodding at the phone now clutched in her lap. ‘You have my number.’ His grin faded, and it was like a shadow settling over his features.

Briony forced a smile, and Ren walked away.

\*

There was a heaviness that descended on him the further he got from the beach. The glare of the morning sun hit his face with a sharpness that made his eyes water and his forehead clench in a frown. He’d taken off his wet shoes, and they hung heavy in his hand, leaving a trail of droplets behind him on the footpath. He could only imagine how he looked, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

He swallowed hard. He hated the tightness in his throat, the pounding behind his eyes, the weight in his chest. He lifted his wrist to look at his watch.

His dad’s carer would be waiting for him. Ren had arrived late in the night, having put off the drive again and again the day before. There were ghosts here he wasn’t prepared to face.

His father would be sitting in that chair, with a cup of bitter coffee and an unread book in his lap. He’d ask Ren where he’d been, but the answer wouldn’t matter. *I was just knee-deep in the water where we lost Sam*, he could say, *considering going after him*. He might not

even remember that name. Neither of them ever spoke it, at least not aloud.

Ren contemplated stopping in the park, sitting on a bench, putting off the inevitable, but he was still half-wet and holding back shivers. He could feel skin on his bare feet rubbing raw on the pavement. The sharp wind blowing in over the Indian Ocean behind him ruffled his hair and sent a deeper chill through him.

His mind flashed back to the girl on the beach, her hair whipping loose from her ponytail, thrashing around her face. *Briony*. He remembered the pressure of her hands on his arms. Her lips, chapped and bright red against her pale skin. The look on her face.

*Fuck*, he thought. *What an impression*. If he did hear from her, it would be out of pity.

He sighed, thinking of the dark house he'd left in the early hours of the morning. The piled boxes in the garage he'd committed to sorting through. The neatly filed away childhood he was bound to relive along with his father's disordered memories. He was in that strange in-between state of frantic nervous energy and exhaustion.

He raised a hand against the glare of the new sun and made his way home.

\*

It was late morning by the time Briony reached her parents' house. She'd moved out the year before, but this place still settled over her the moment she pulled into the drive. She felt the heaviness of memory, like layers she'd never shake. She let herself in, rapping her fingers on the glass panel as she stepped through the door. The air was colder inside.

'Mike?' she called out.

'About time, Bee'. Briony followed his voice to the open living room, where he sat sprawled on the couch, a book in his hand and

his thumb holding his place. Mike fixed her with a serious look. He pouted for a moment, before letting his face break out into a grin as he sprung to his feet.

‘C’mere.’ He pulled her into a hug and she settled into him. ‘Missed you.’

She smiled back and nodded at the book in his hand. ‘Light read?’

It was a bound copy of criminal case law, dog-eared and marked with post-its. She knew if she opened to any given page she’d find it full of scrawled notations and references. He laughed, throwing the book back onto the couch behind him. ‘One of us needs to back up this fight.’

Briony’s gaze flicked to the old school photos still perched on the bookshelf and she felt the familiar tightness in her chest. Mike placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. ‘Hey,’ he said softly, drawing her gaze back to him. ‘I didn’t mean that how it sounded.’

She held the smile on her face. ‘I know what you meant.’ She raised the keys in her hand. ‘Ready to go?’

He nodded, grabbing a jacket from where it hung by the door.

‘I could’ve driven, you know,’ he said as they approached her Kia. She rolled her eyes. He’d sold his perfectly respectable car and bought a roaring beast of a motorcycle in its place. Briony had ridden with him once, and sworn never to repeat the experience. She suspected it was a final act of rebellion to get him though the next few years before he condemned himself to a lifetime of starched shirts and dress shoes.

Mike was smart, and he was driven, and their sister’s disappearance had made Briony anything but that.

After the search had been dropped, she’d spent the better part of a year in a haze of depression, blackout-drunk nights, and beds that weren’t her own.



Her parents blamed each other. Her grown-up brothers drifted further away. After one too many slammed doors and bitter accusations, their dad walked out, and kept moving all the way to Brisbane. But she'd had Mike. This year he'd moved to the city to be closer to uni, but he still spent as much time as he could at home, often making the two hour commute back to Perth in the early hours of the morning.

She turned to look at him as they waited at a red light.

'I met this guy earlier,' she began.

He nudged her gently with a curled fist, an eyebrow raised suggestively.

She smiled back.

'Not like that. He reminded me of *her*, I guess. Or maybe of me. How I felt when it happened.'

He stared at her intently. 'How do you mean?' he asked carefully.

She was quiet for a moment. The light turned green, and she didn't reply until they'd pulled into the parking lot before their most-frequented café. She killed the ignition with a deep sigh and finally looked over at him.

'I guess he reminded me of bad days.'

\*

His father didn't notice the damp footprints he tracked through the carpet, or the puddle that settled around his shoes by the door.

'You're out early,' was all he observed.

'I went for a walk,' Ren replied.

His dad turned back to the window. There wasn't much out there to look at. The plants that had once filled the courtyard had long since died, moss and dirt crept over the carefully placed paving stones, and the wicker chairs had moldered and started to decay. Ren wondered if all his dad stared at was ghosts.

Ren let the shower run scalding hot. He looked at himself in the mirror. Dark circles beneath his eyes, rough stubble along his jaw, his face pale and windblown. His hair was a mess. Too long. He turned away and stripped off his clothes, dislodging salt and sand from his jeans as he kicked them to the tiles.

The water thawed his frozen fingers and toes. He stood beneath it until it ran lukewarm.

He dried himself off, wrapped a towel around his waist, and emerged into the cold hallway, making for his old room.

In the quiet still of the morning, he could almost see the ghosts himself.

## THE SHALLOWS

Wreck Island was an old research site, abandoned years ago and left to the wind and surging tides. Its perimeter was almost entirely rocky outcroppings, savagely sharp reefs and towering limestone cliffs. You had to circle the island and battle the open sea just to reach shore.

‘What did they research there, anyway?’ Aria asked, glaring in the direction of the horizon.

‘Officially?’ Sarah yelled back over the wind. ‘They didn’t write about any findings. None available to the public, anyway.’

Aria blinked. ‘But there were teams sent over, right? *Someone* must know.’

A fat drop of rain hit her face, and she looked up to the sky.

‘Couldn’t we have waited for a clearer day?’ Aria knew she was moaning a lot, but she was nauseous, damp, and her lips were dry and stinging from the wind.

Sarah squinted at something in the distance. Aria hoped it was the damn island. In the haze of approaching rain she could barely see thirty metres ahead of the boat. Sarah leaned on the engine line, changing the angle they were moving at.

She looked back to Aria. ‘It has to be today. It’s a king tide.’

Aria shot her a look. As if she knew what that meant.

Sarah ignored the hostile expression. ‘A high tide. Everything’s aligned. The sun, the moon, the planet.’ Her eyes flicked upward. ‘This helps too.’

Aria looked at her blankly.

‘The storm. It’s a low-pressure system,’ Sarah explained. ‘The water will be high enough on the north side of the island for us to get over the reef.’

Anxiety washed over Aria. ‘What happens when it goes back down?’

Sarah hesitated, before pasting what Aria knew was supposed to be a reassuring smile on her pretty face. ‘It’ll be high for days.’

‘And then?’ Aria pressed.

‘Then it becomes a fortress.’

Aria turned back to the bow. Finally visible through the fog — looming and sinister — was Wreck Island.

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