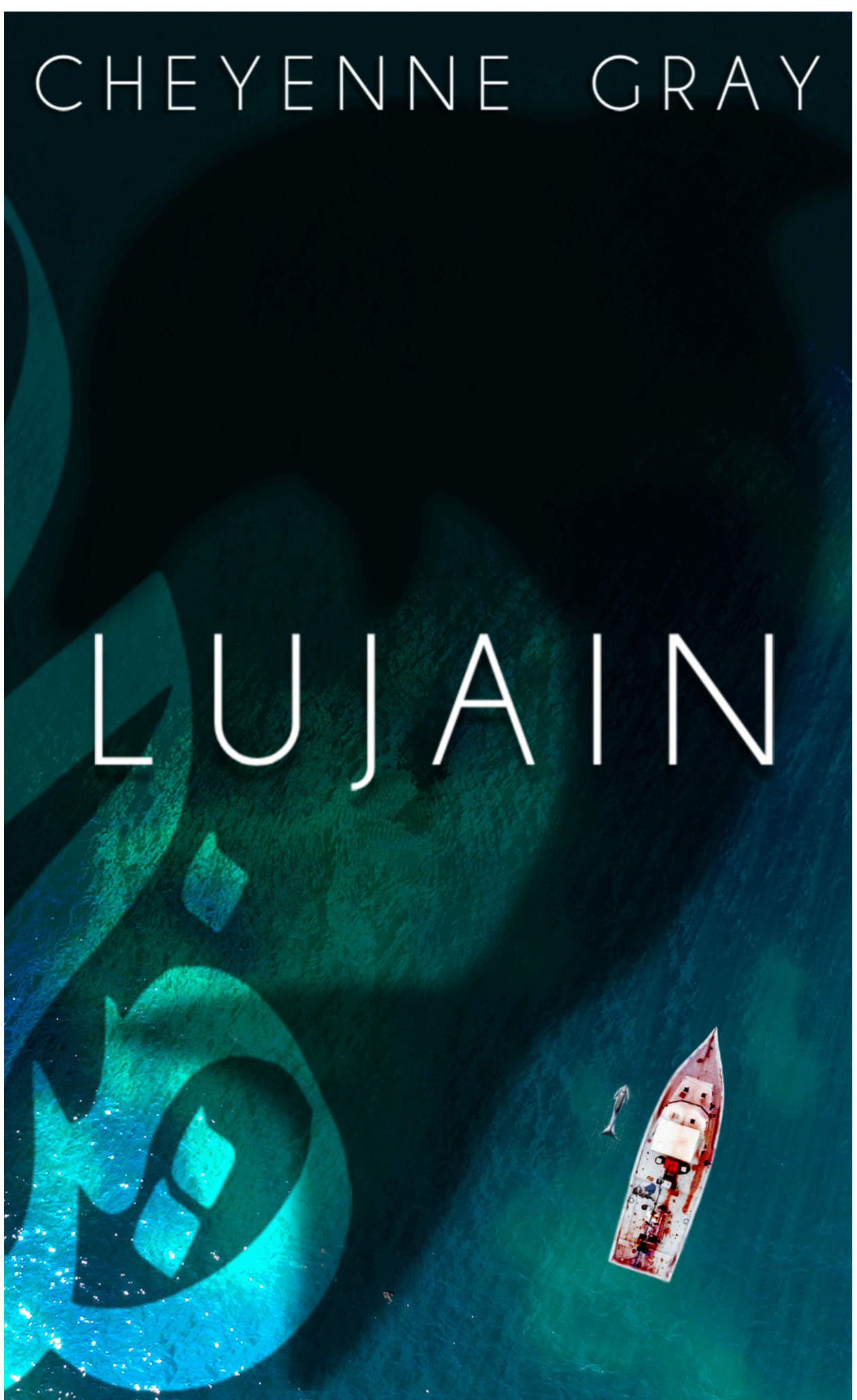


CHEYENNE GRAY

# LUJAIN



## Chapter 1. Thirst (Day 93)

My name is Lujain. Today I am going to die.

The ocean stretches around me like a hungry mouth, silver-blue in the morning light, ready to swallow what's left of me. Just a normal girl who turned fifteen this morning. Its appetite is endless. I've watched it digest my memories of Philadelphia one by one—my father's hands guiding mine as we crafted model ships that never knew water; my mother's voice singing lullabies in Arabic that turned English at the edges.

The sun burns my cracked lips. My skin peels like old wallpaper. I am becoming something else entirely—no longer the girl who worried about science tests and whether Aisha Talat liked my new sneakers. That girl dissolved weeks ago. What remains is mostly thirst and bone.

Najma circles the boat again, her dorsal fin cutting the water like a question mark. My dolphin, my star in the night, my only friend in this vast emptiness. She nudges the boat's edge, clicks in rapid succession, then dives. For a moment, I think she's mocking me, flaunting her endless drink. Then her eye meets mine—pleading, not cruel—and guilt stabs sharper than thirst. She doesn't understand that I've stopped eating the fish she brings, that my cupped hands no longer collect the morning dew. Her leaps grow more desperate now.

I trace the gunwale's notches, each marking a dawn since the cartel's gunshots shook this boat. Ninety-three marks. Ninety-three dawns watching the horizon birth new emptiness. I still feel the weight of that first mark, carved with trembling fingers after I emerged from hiding.

That night, I had been pinned beneath Mama's cooling body, her blood sticky in my hair, while stars scattered like pearls across the darkness, mocking the corpses. When the killers finally left, I crawled out into a night so beautiful it felt obscene. The men who killed them never saw me. They took our money, our food, our hope, and left me with the dead.

I wonder if Baba still waits, if he searches the horizon from some American prison window. Does he know Mama is gone, her body swallowed by the same ocean that cradles me? Does he feel her absence like I do—a phantom limb, still aching after amputation? He warned us the protest was dangerous, but Mama insisted we stand for Palestine, for our people. How could we know a policeman would fall, that Baba would be blamed, that ICE would appear at our door the next morning? "National security risk," they called him. Us.

Thirst colonizes you. It begins at the lips, a whispered warning you ignore. Then it crawls down your throat, scraping until swallowing becomes an act of courage. Your tongue swells, a dried sponge stealing space where moisture should live. Your gums shrink, exposing teeth that feel too foreign.

By the third day, without proper water, thirst becomes the dictator of thought. The mind—once capable of dreams, hopes—becomes a single-purpose engine grinding out the same command: drink, drink, drink. You bargain with gods you never believed in. You fantasize about mundane moments—a drinking fountain in a school hallway, ice clinking in a restaurant glass. The fantasies grow explicit, pornographic—condensation sliding down a cold bottle, the weight of water on your tongue.

Each morning before the sun rises, I stretch the black plastic—torn from the jacket of a man whose name I never knew, whose body fed the sharks weeks ago—across the hollow at the boat's bow. The darkness of the material draws what little moisture remains in the air, tiny beads forming like tears on its underside. I lie beneath it, watching with reverence as the droplets grow heavy enough to surrender to gravity, falling one by one into my bottle caps. Hours of waiting for mere tablespoons of life. The plastic still smells faintly of him—cologne or sweat or just the memory of human presence—a ghost collecting water for the barely living.

Three bottle caps a day. The discipline of it is all that separates me from madness. The ritual of collection, of measurement, of slow careful sips that I hold in my mouth before reluctantly swallowing. Sometimes I dream of gulping it all at once, draining my precious reserve for one moment of blessed relief.

Najma leaps suddenly, her body arcing through the sunlight, water cascading from her skin like shattered crystal. She splashes down hard, spraying the boat's edge—not accident but intention. A tiny droplet lands on my arm. I stare at it, this impossible gift, then lick it from my skin before it can evaporate. Salt and fish and life.

The irony cuts deeper than thirst—surrounded by water that would kill me if I drank it. When I sleep, which is often now, I dream of drowning in ecstasy. To be consumed by water, to have it fill every cavity, every cell—even as it kills me, it would end this torment.

I think of that protest in Philadelphia—the signs bobbing above the crowd, Mama's grip tight on my hand, the confusion as people ran. I remember Baba kneeling beside the fallen officer, his dentist's hands pressing against the wound.

The cell phone video that made his mercy look like violence. The look on his face as they took him away. One day later, ICE arrived at our door. "National security deportation—new Executive Decision." Our passports meant nothing against our Palestinian birth.

For ninety-three days, a stubborn flame has kept me breathing. But today, I feel it flickering, guttering in the wind.

I have made my decision in the clarity that comes with absolute surrender. Today, if the clouds don't gather, if the sky doesn't crack open with mercy, I will drink from the ocean. I know what the salt will do—how it will draw, what little moisture remains in my cells, how my organs will fail as the poison floods my system. The convulsions will be swift compared to this lingering crucifixion of thirst.

But before the end, for one magnificent moment, I will know what it feels like to drink my fill again. To gulp without restraint, to feel liquid—any liquid—flooding my mouth, coating my throat, filling the desert my body has become. That moment of relief will be worth whatever follows.

"I'm sorry, Baba," I whisper, my voice a brittle scrape of sound. "I tried to be strong."

Najma circles closer, her dorsal fin cutting through the water with unusual urgency, as if she senses my decision. She makes a sound I haven't heard before—not her playful clicks, but something more plaintive, questioning. She dives deep, disappears.

The sun climbs higher, burning away what little hope the morning offered. I finger the bottle caps lined up beside me—my daily ration, pathetically inadequate. Not enough to live. Only enough to postpone dying.

No more postponement. The ocean has won our standoff.

I lean over the edge. My reflection—a hollow-eyed stranger. I reach toward the water, my fingers trembling.

Najma's cry pierces the silence—sharp, urgent, almost human. She surfaces twenty yards from the boat, thrashing, drawing my attention to something dark on the horizon.

I hesitate, my hand suspended above the water, and prepare to drink my death like medicine.

But I squint at that darkness. A shadow. A shape. A—

Is that a boat?

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## Chapter 2: Najma (Day 93)

The ship on the horizon was nothing. A floating piece of debris, a mirage, another lie told by an ocean that specializes in deception. I've learned to distrust hope the way I once distrusted strangers. Hope is the cruelest companion on a journey like mine.

A wave slaps against the hull, sending vibrations through the splintered wood beneath me. My hands grip the gunwale as the boat lists slightly to port, then rights itself. The endless rocking—a rhythm that once made me vomit but now feels like being cradled. I stretch carefully, feeling the pull of sun-damaged skin across my shoulders, the protest of muscles atrophied from confinement.

Najma circles the boat again, her dorsal fin slicing through water turned copper by the sinking sun. The hole in her fin whistles faintly as she cuts through a wave, a sound I listen for, like a heartbeat. It anchors me to this world when thirst threatens to dissolve the boundaries between reality and hallucination.

I reach for the red notebook wedged beneath the seat. My fingers brush against something sharp—a loose nail working its way free from the wood, another small betrayal by this vessel that's become both sanctuary and prison. I pull the notebook free, careful not to tear the softening pages. It once belonged to a weathered old man whose name I never knew—Jose, perhaps. His blood has turned the bottom corner of the pages brown, a stain I've grown accustomed to touching as I write.

The light shifts as clouds drift across the sun, casting momentary shadows that ripple across the deck. The temperature drops instantly, a small mercy on skin perpetually burned and peeling. I use this brief respite to examine the horizon

again, squinting against the metallic glare of water stretching endlessly in every direction.

In the distance, the ocean's surface darkens—not a ship, but a patch of rougher water, wind creating patterns across the waves. Weather changing again. The thirteenth week at sea, and I've become a reluctant meteorologist, reading the sky's moods with desperate attention. That darkened patch might mean rain, though it's just as likely to pass me by as the last three squalls have done. Still, I need to prepare.

I use a shard of lead extracted from one of the bullets that killed my mother, pressing hard against paper that grows softer with each passing day, humidity turning it to pulp. If I die today, at least some record will remain of what happened to us.

The Andalusia rocks again, more insistently this time. Bullet holes pepper her sides, constellations of violence turning the white fiberglass into grotesque lace. The red wooden interior is now a kaleidoscope of burgundy—blood turned brown with time, peeling paint, the rust of oxidizing metal. With each passing week, the boat deteriorates further. Yesterday, I discovered a new leak near the stern, water seeping through a hairline crack that wasn't there the day before. I patched it with a strip torn from a dead man's shirt, but the repair won't hold forever.

Najma surfaces beside the boat, blowing an arcing spray of mist that catches the day's remaining light. She rolls slightly, exposing her pale belly—a vulnerability she shows only when perfectly at ease.



I envy her, how she belongs to worlds I'm barred from entering. She watches me with her obsidian eye, the cloudy ring around her right iris giving her a permanently quizzical expression.

Sometimes I imagine what she sees when she looks at me. Her vision, I've read, is excellent in water and air both. Does she see a girl anymore, or just a desiccated shell, skin stretched tight over bones, lips cracked and bleeding, hair matted with blood salt? How does she recognize me from one day to the next as I slowly transform into something barely human?

I remember the day she found me, a week after the massacre.

The memory comes with the smell of rotting flesh, not an abstract recollection but an olfactory assault so vivid my stomach contracts even now. That seventh day, I'd finally found the strength to push the bodies overboard—five on the first day, including my mother. I saved her for last, her weight nearly impossible to move, not just physically but emotionally. The feeling of her skin, cool and waxy under my hands. The strange looseness of her limbs. Her head lolled, revealing the bullet wound in her throat, as I lifted her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I'd whispered, the words carried away by wind, lost like everything else.

As her body slipped beneath the surface, I'd touched my own neck, feeling the pulse that continued without reason or justice. Why her and not me? The question still haunts my nights.

That evening, as the sun set on an empty boat scrubbed inadequately with seawater, I'd used the small knife I'd found on a keychain to carve a notch into the gunwale—day seven.

My throat had been so parched that swallowing felt like pushing glass shards down my esophagus. The three jugs of water left behind by the cartel men had become my religion, each carefully measured sip a communion with survival.

Something slammed against the hull with such force that water sprayed over me. I scrambled to my feet, knife raised, ready to face whatever fresh horror the ocean had delivered. Instead, I saw her—Najma, though she had no name then. Just a sleek gray form circling the boat, intelligent eyes studying me with unmistakable curiosity.

She slapped her tail against the water, soaking me again. The droplets felt against my salt-crusted skin like tiny kisses from a universe that had otherwise abandoned me. I laughed for the first time since the killings. A sound so foreign it frightened me.

"What do you want?" I'd asked her, expecting nothing.

She'd responded by diving deep, disappearing for what felt like an eternity, then resurfacing with a fish held gently between her teeth. She'd tossed it into the boat at my feet, a silver offering that flapped weakly before growing still. I stared at it, uncomprehending, then at her. She clicked and whistled, the sounds bright and insistent against the empty horizon.

"For me?" I'd asked, my voice cracking from disuse.

She'd circled the boat faster, her movements almost gleeful, her body curving in graceful arcs that seemed choreographed specifically for my benefit. I picked up the fish, studied its glassy eye, and realized I had no idea how to prepare it. In Philadelphia, fish came in neat fillets, plastic-wrapped on styrofoam trays. This was alien—scales, bones, guts intact.

The memory of my father teaching me to eat sunflower seeds flashed through my mind—his patient hands showing me how to crack the shell with my teeth, extract the tiny morsel inside. "Like this, Habibti," he'd said, his fingers nimble despite their size. I'd been five, Teetering on his lap in our backyard, the smell of mint tea rising from his cup, the sound of my mother laughing as she hung laundry on the line.

Hunger shattered the memory. With the keychain knife, I mimicked what I'd seen in cooking shows, slicing away scales, cutting into flesh that bled a different color than human blood.

I used the red Bic lighter I'd found on one of the dead men to create a small fire in the metal bucket that had once held bait. The fish cooked unevenly, charred on the outside, nearly raw within. It was the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted.

That night, Najma stayed beside the boat, her breathing a metronome that lulled me into the first proper sleep I'd had since watching my mother die.

She's been with me ever since.

Now, on this ninety-third day adrift, I study her scarred body, knowing every mark as intimately as I know my own. Evening light catches the crescent-shaped hole in her dorsal fin, creating a window through which I glimpse the darkening sky. The scar along her left flank gleams silver against slate gray. The small notches in her left flipper fan the water as she moves.

The first fat raindrop hits the deck with an audible plop, followed by another, then three more in quick succession—widely spaced precursors to the squall I spotted earlier. I scramble to position my collection containers—the three plastic bottles, positioned strategically where the most water will run off the boat's canopy.

The bullet-damaged water jug, repurposed as a rain collector, goes in the center of the deck. Every drop matters.

"Did you come back to watch me die?" I ask Najma now, setting the notebook aside to protect it from the coming rain.

She clicks rapidly, circling closer, moving with sudden urgency. Her tail slaps the water hard enough to send spray across the boat—intentional, not accidental. When she surfaces again, her eye meets mine directly, the pupil dilated in a way I've only seen when she's alarmed. She repeats the motion, splashing me, then dives completely beneath the boat, emerging on the other side, her movements increasingly frantic.

"What?" I ask, irritation flaring. "What do you want from me?"

Najma clicks rapidly, bobbing her head up and down like she's arguing with me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Am I not being attentive enough for you?" I roll my eyes, the gesture so normal it momentarily erases our circumstances. "You know, most teenagers get nagged by their mothers, not dolphins with boundary issues."

She slaps her tail against the water, spraying me again.

"Very mature," I mutter, wiping saltwater from my face. "You know I can't drink that, right? We've been over this. Multiple times."

Najma dives, then reappears on the other side of the boat, fast as thought. She makes a high-pitched whistle that sounds suspiciously like mockery.

"Yes, I'm aware you can drink whatever you want. Rub it in, why don't you?" I gesture broadly at the endless ocean. "You've got an all-you-can-drink buffet. I've got three bottle caps and impending kidney failure. Life's not fair."

She nudges the boat hard enough to rock it, making me grab the sides to steady myself.

"Hey! Some of us don't have built-in blubber flotation devices. Thank you very much." I pat the splintered gunwale. "This floating coffin is all that's keeping me from becoming fish food."

Najma emits a series of clicks that rise at the end, almost like a question.

"No, I don't know what happens next," I answer, somehow understanding her meaning perfectly. "I'm fifteen, not a nautical expert. My survival experience before this was limited to that time I got lost at the King of Prussia Mall." I pause, realizing I'm talking to Najma the way I used to talk to my best friend Leila back in Philadelphia. "Though I did read 'Hatchet' in seventh grade, so basically I'm qualified to survive anywhere as long as there are berries and a convenient hatchet lying around."

Several more fat raindrops hit the deck, sparse messengers from the darkening clouds above. Not yet the downpour I need, but promising. Najma's behavior changes with the weather. She cuts through the water more sharply, her movements precise rather than playful, her attention seemingly divided between me and something beyond my perception. Her clicks take on an unfamiliar pattern—shorter, more staccato, almost urgent.

Najma dives suddenly, her powerful tail sending up a spray that spatters across my face.

Instinctively, I lick the droplets from my lips, tasting salt that only intensifies my thirst. When she surfaces again, she holds something in her mouth—not a fish this time, but something bright, unnatural. She pushes it toward the boat with her snout, persistent until I reach for it with trembling hands.

A granola bar wrapper.

The foil still shines in places, the plastic torn but recognizable. The expiration date printed on the back reads three months from now. This isn't debris that's been floating for years—this is recent. Someone discarded this, perhaps days ago.

My hands shake as I turn the wrapper over. The Spanish brand name means nothing to me, but the newness of it means everything. The foil is barely corroded by salt water, the colors still vibrant. This hasn't been adrift for months. Weeks, maybe. Days, possibly.

I reach for my water ration, recalculating. If there's even a chance of rescue, I need to stay alive another day. Three tablespoons of water won't sustain me through tomorrow, but it might keep me conscious enough to signal if something appears on the horizon. I bring the first bottle cap to my lips, tilting it carefully to ensure not a single drop is wasted. The water touches my tongue—barely enough to swallow, certainly not enough to moisten my throat—but the ritual of it matters. Discipline against madness.

The red notebook balances on my knees as I pull it back out, protected from the increasing rain by my hunched body. I continue writing, using the bullet that killed my mother to preserve our story. The cruel symmetry doesn't escape me. An instrument of death becomes a tool for memory. This is what my life has become—a series of bitter transformations.

A pleasure cruise turned mass grave. A mother turned to bones on the ocean floor. A pampered American teenager turned to a desiccated husk, calculating the minutes of her remaining life in tablespoons of water.

A crack of distant thunder draws my attention skyward. The raindrops are coming faster now, larger, striking my upturned face like tiny blessings. I close my eyes, letting the water trace paths down my cheeks, catching what I can with my tongue. Najma watches this ritual with what I swear is something like satisfaction, her movements calmer now as she circles the boat at a leisurely pace.

The granola wrapper clutched in my hand represents something I barely dare acknowledge—the possibility that we're not alone in this endless blue void, that somewhere beyond my limited horizon, human life continues. Ships move. People eat granola bars and discard the wrappers. The world I came from still exists.

And yet, there's Najma. Her existence defies explanation. Why has she stayed with me? What does she gain from this companionship? Dolphins are social creatures—I learned that in fourth-grade science—but she's alone, like me. No pod, no family visible in these empty waters.

For over three months, she's brought me fish and squid, circled my floating prison, offered a presence that kept madness at bay. Her motives remain as mysterious as the depths she comes from.

I drag my fingers along the knife's edge, not enough to draw blood—I can't spare the moisture—but enough to feel its bite against my skin. If I die today, it will be by choice, not surrender. I'll drink the ocean on my terms, knowing exactly what it will do to me, how the salt will leach what little water remains in my cells, how convulsions will rack my body before peaceful darkness claims me. The knife

offers a quicker exit, but I've survived too much to choose that path. My death, when it comes, will have water in it—cruel consolation for a body that's forgotten the feeling of being fully hydrated.

The photo of my parents rests beside the caps—edges curled from salt spray, colors fading like my strength. They stand on a beach in Palestine, years before I was born. My father's arm around my mother's waist, both squinting against the Mediterranean sun, the ocean behind them different from the one that imprisons me now. That water cradled them. This water seeks to devour me.

A sharp crack splits the air—not thunder, but the sound of the boat itself protesting. The leak at the stern has worsened, water now visibly seeping through the widening crack. I abandon my position to crawl toward it, using one of the remaining clean bandages from the first aid kit to plug the breach. The cloth darkens immediately, soaked through in seconds. This is bad. If the crack widens further, The Andalusia might not remain afloat through another night.

Najma senses my alarm. She approaches the stern, eyeing the damage with what looks remarkably like concern.

She ducks beneath the surface, reappearing moments later on the opposite side, completing a circuit of the boat that seems deliberately investigative.

When she returns to the stern, she pushes her snout against the hull, just below the waterline, as if testing its stability.

The sun touches the horizon, setting the ocean ablaze. In a few minutes, temperatures will drop, the air growing heavy with potential moisture. Despite the worsening leak, despite everything, I follow my ritual—stretching the black nylon



square across the hollow at the boat's bow, ready to collect tomorrow's dew, though I no longer believe I'll be alive to drink it. Still, habits die harder than people.

Najma leaps suddenly, her entire body arcing against the crimson sky, water streaming from her in liquid rubies. The wound in her dorsal fin makes a high, keening sound as air rushes through it—almost a song, almost a warning. She crashes back into the water with uncharacteristic force, splashing me again, demanding my attention.

"What?" I ask. "What now?"

Faster than I've ever seen her move, she races from the boat, stopping abruptly about fifty yards away. She slaps her tail against the water—once, twice, three times—before racing back to the boat. She repeats this pattern, swimming out and returning, each circuit more frantic than the last.

Her behavior has shifted dramatically from just minutes ago. The playful, almost teasing quality is gone, replaced by something more purposeful. Her clicks come rapid-fire now, her body language tense. When she surfaces beside the boat, her eye meets mine with an intensity that feels almost desperate.

She nudges the hull, not gently as usual, but with enough force to rock the boat alarmingly, the sound of splintering wood suggesting she's worsened the leak.

I shield my eyes against the setting sun, squinting at the horizon in the direction she's indicating. At first, there's nothing—just endless water reflecting the day's dying light. Then a shadow. A darkness that doesn't belong. A shape.

My heart climbs into my throat, choking me more effectively than thirst ever could. Is it another mirage? Another trick of light and desperation? I've seen phantom ships before, watched them dissolve like sugar in water as I approached them.

But Najma's behavior... this is different. She's never acted this way before.

I fumble through the supplies I've hoarded, searching for something reflective. The three pairs of men's sunglasses I collected from the dead, tucked safely in a corner to keep them from scratching. I hold one pair up, angling it to catch the sun's last rays, attempting to create a flash that might catch an eye, a signal that might cut through miles of emptiness.

Is that a boat?

I don't dare speak the words aloud. Hope is too dangerous a visitor to welcome freely. Instead, I watch Najma's frenetic movements, her insistent circling, her leaps that seem deliberately spectacular, as if she's marking my location for something—or someone—I can't yet see clearly.

The boat creaks again; the stern settling lower in the water. The patch isn't holding. I have perhaps hours before The Andalusia surrenders completely to the sea that's been trying to claim it for over thirteen weeks.

The decision to drink seawater retreats to the periphery of my mind, not forgotten but postponed. I reach for the second bottle cap, allowing myself this luxury of additional water, this minor act of faith. The thimbleful of liquid slides down my throat, barely registering against the desert my body has become.

Night falls fully, stars emerging like pinpricks in black velvet. I've lost sight of whatever shadow Najma was indicating, but I keep signaling with the sunglasses,

moving them mechanically from left to right, right to left, unsure if they're catching even the faintest moonlight. Najma's dorsal fin, a darker shadow against dark water, continues its restless patrol around The Andalusia.

I write until I can no longer see the page, using the bullet lead to press words into paper I can barely distinguish. My fingers remember the shapes of letters my eyes can no longer confirm. When darkness makes writing impossible, I close the notebook, tuck it beneath the splintered seat, and lie back, one hand trailing in the water.

Najma nudges my fingers with her snout, her skin cool and rubbery against mine. Tonight, the touch feels different—more deliberate, more communicative. She pushes against my hand with gentle insistence, then withdraws slightly, repeating the gesture with rhythmic precision. It reminds me of how my father used to tap Morse code against my arm when I was younger—a game we played, our secret language. Dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot. SOS.

I fall asleep with my hand still touching her, anchored to the one living being who has witnessed my entire ordeal, who knows what I've survived, who might be the last creature to see me alive.

My last conscious thought is a question that follows me into dreams: If I die tomorrow, will she stay with my body until it sinks, or will she finally swim away, free of the strange obligation that has kept her tethered to my floating coffin for thirteen weeks?

I dream of my mother's voice singing lullabies in Arabic, the taste of cardamom on my tongue, the scratch of her embroidered shawl against my cheek as she bent to kiss me goodnight. I dream of my father's hands steady as he extracted toys from

cereal boxes for me, the scent of his mint-flavored toothpaste when he leaned close, the sound of his laughter echoing in our tiled kitchen. I dream of Philadelphia streets washed clean by summer rain, the feel of puddles splashing beneath my yellow boots, the weight of my backpack thumping rhythmically against my spine as I ran to catch the school bus.

I dream of drinking water from cupped palms, of the weight of it sliding down my throat, of the miracle of hydration I once took for granted.

I dream of a ship on the horizon, growing larger with each passing minute, and of Najma leaping before it like a herald, announcing my presence to saviors I can't quite believe in.

Morning will tell me which dreams were prophecy and which were merely the hallucinations of a dying girl.

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## Chapter 3: Crackdown

The television in the detention center's waiting room flickered, its grainy light casting shadows across the linoleum floor, as cold and unyielding as the handcuffs that had bitten into Baba's wrists. I sat beside Mama, our hands clasped so tightly my knuckles ached, her hijab frayed at the edges from nights spent twisting it in worry. The fabric still smelled faintly of home—cardamom, mint from our garden, the ghost of her jasmine perfume—scents already fading like our American dream. Three weeks had passed since they'd dragged Baba away, since I'd watched them force him into a car while onlookers filmed with expressions caught between horror and vindication.

The news ticker screamed in red: Palestinian Family to Be Deported to El Salvador in Historic Crackdown. My name—Lujain—flashed alongside theirs, a stranger's name now, belonging to a girl who once believed in justice.

My throat constricted, dry as it would become months later on the open sea. I swallowed against the sandpaper feeling, remembering the water fountain outside this room, its steady stream now an unimaginable luxury. Beside me, Mama's breathing remained steady, measured, her composure a lifeline I clung to as the room's fluorescent lights buzzed like persistent insects.

The anchor's voice was sharp, a blade slicing through the room. "The Al-Masri family—Ahmad, a U.S. citizen charged with murdering a Philadelphia police officer at an anti-war protest, his wife, Lilly, a known Hamas sympathizer with ties to UNRWA, and their daughter, Lujain—will be the first to face President Trump's new executive order targeting 'homegrown criminals.'

Sources confirm El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele has agreed to house them in El Salvador, a move hailed by the White House as a bold stand against anti-Semitism."

Mama's breath caught, a sound like a wave breaking against the boat that would soon carry us away. Her eyes, dark as the Gaza nights she'd described in lullabies, burned with the fire of her speeches—speeches that had painted her as a traitor. "Resistance is not terrorism," she'd declared at rallies, her voice a beacon for the displaced, her UNRWA work feeding children the U.S. called enemies. Now, that beacon was a noose.

"They can't do this," I whispered, my voice brittle, like the splintered wood I'd later cling to. "We're Americans. The video—it's blurry. It proves nothing."

I remembered the morning they took him—how the pounding on our door had jolted me from sleep, how I'd crouched at the top of the stairs watching officers swarm our living room, their boots tracking mud across the rug Mama's grandmother had hand-knotted in Ramallah. Baba had stood in his pajamas, barefoot, dignity intact despite the chaos, asking to see the warrant, to call a lawyer. The officers had laughed, one of them knocking Baba's glasses to the floor, grinding them beneath his heel before cuffing his wrists.

Mama's grip tightened on my hand now, her fingers trembling. "They don't need proof, Habibti. They need an excuse. And we're it."

The television cut to footage of the protest—April 2, 2025, a date carved into my bones. Thousands marched outside City Hall, banners waving like the sea I'd come to know too well.

Baba, his beard flecked with gray, stood at the front, chanting for Gaza, where our cousins' homes lay in rubble.

Then chaos—shouts, shoves, a police line breaking. The cellphone video looped endlessly: Fireworks erupting, the officer falling, blood pooling on asphalt, a man, maybe Baba, his hands on an officer's neck. Grainy, uncertain, yet enough to brand him a killer.

The television showed what the video didn't—what I'd witnessed firsthand before Mama had pulled me away from the violence. Baba kneeling beside the fallen officer, his dental training kicking in, fingers pressed to the man's carotid, checking for a pulse, trying to help. The protest had been peaceful until counter-demonstrators arrived with their Israeli flags and megaphones. Until someone—I never saw who—had thrown a rock that struck an officer's helmet. Until the batons came out, the pepper spray, the chaos.

Outside the detention center, Philadelphia roared. Protesters clogged Market Street, their signs a forest of defiance: Justice for Ahmad Al-Masri, Stop Deporting Palestinians. Counter-protesters screamed back, their placards venomous: No Hamas in America. Police in riot gear formed a wall, batons gleaming under streetlights, a mirror of the night Baba fell. Social media boiled—[#AlMasriCase](#) trending, memes calling us terrorists, others pleading our innocence. A senator tweeted: Trump's sending a clear message: dissent is danger. Another: Bukele's prison awaits these homegrown.

Bukele. The name slithered through the news, a man with a dictator's smile, his El Salvador a fortress of cages. The anchor played his statement: "We stand with President Trump to eradicate terrorism.

The Al-Masri family will find no sanctuary in my country, only justice." Justice, he called it—locking a family with no ties to his land in a concrete tomb, 3,000 miles from Gaza's ruins.

Trump's voice followed, triumphant at a Mar-a-Lago press conference: "This is the first of many. If you support Hamas, if you kill our heroes, you're gone—citizen or not."

I closed my eyes, suddenly overwhelmed by memories of our Philadelphia life—the small dental practice Baba had built from nothing, the garden where Mama grew herbs and vegetables native to Palestine, the kitchen table where I'd studied for science competitions, winning ribbons that now hung on a wall we'd never see again. I thought of my bedroom with its telescope pointed at stars that had seemed benevolent then, not the distant, cold witnesses they would become during my months at sea.

"What about my asthma medication?" I asked Mama, suddenly remembering the inhaler confiscated when they'd taken us. "What if I have an attack?"

Mama's face softened momentarily, her hand reaching to smooth my hair, a gesture from childhood that now felt like a luxury. "We'll manage, Habibti. You haven't had an attack in months."

Not since the protest, I realized—not since watching Baba fall to his knees beside that officer, not since seeing the hatred in the counter-protesters' eyes, not since understanding that the America I thought I knew was a mirage, dissolving at the first test of its principles.



Mama's face hardened, her jaw set like the women of Gaza she'd honored. "They think they can erase us," she said, her voice low, a storm gathering. "They forget—we are stone, not sand."

The detention center's door swung open, and an ICE officer stepped in, his badge glinting like the ocean's mocking waves.

He held a paper, its words a death sentence: Order of Removal: Lilly Al-Masri, Lujain Al-Masri. Destination: El Salvador. Effective immediately. Denaturalization for Baba if he ever got out of prison, they claimed, citing lies he never told about UNRWA in his citizenship papers—a fiction to strip his American dream. For Mama and me, our passports were dust, revoked for "adverse foreign policy consequences," her speeches and UNRWA work twisted into terrorism.

"Baba didn't kill anyone," I said, my voice rising, cracking like my lips would months later. The officer's eyes were stone. "Tell it to the judge," he said, but the judge—a Trump appointee—had already ruled. A rushed hearing, a gavel's thud, and our lives were undone. The ACLU filed motions, Palestine Legal screamed of Constitutional violations, but the administration pressed on, fueled by the murder's outrage, by Mama's defiance, by a nation split in fury.

Mama pulled me close, her scent of cardamom and resolve a fleeting anchor. "We are still here," she whispered, echoing the words I'd later see in Najma's spray. "Even in their prisons, we are still here."

But as the officer led us to the van, the television's final image burned into me: Bukele's prison, a gray monolith under Salvadoran skies, its cells waiting to swallow us whole. The sea was coming, but first, this—a different kind of thirst, born not of water's absence but of justice's betrayal.

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The processing center hummed with fluorescent cruelty, its walls the same institutional green as my middle school cafeteria, a color designed to pacify but achieving only despair.

We sat on metal benches, Mama and I, our belongings reduced to a single plastic bag between us—her prayer rug, my dog-eared copy of "The Kite Runner," Baba's dental school graduation photo. The rest—our house with its garden where mint grew wild, my collection of science fair medals, Mama's grandmother's olive wood rosary—all forfeit to a government auction. Possessions of terrorists, they'd labeled them, as if my stuffed camel Jamal could detonate.

"When will we see Baba?" I asked, my voice too small for my fifteen years. Three weeks had passed since they'd dragged him from our home, his dental practice abandoned, his patients redirected to doctors without Arabic names.

Mama's fingers traced circles on my palm, a ritual from childhood fears, each loop a prayer. "Soon," she said, through her eyes told a different story. "He's being processed separately."

"Processed." The word tasted metallic, industrial. Like we were meat, not people. Like our lives could be sliced, packaged, discarded at will.

A woman in ICE blue approached, clipboard pressed to her chest like armor. "Lujain Al-Masri?" she called, her pronunciation butchering the music of my name. When I nodded, she handed me a form. "Medical screening. Note any conditions requiring medication."

I stared at the paper, its boxes and lines a maze with no exit. Beside me, Mama straightened, her dignity a fortress they couldn't breach. "My daughter has asthma," she said, her accent thickening with stress, each syllable delivered with deliberate care. "She needs her inhaler. It was confiscated when they took us."

The woman made a notation without looking up. "Any medication approved for transport must be prescribed by our physician."

"She's had the same prescription since she was seven," Mama said, her patience fraying visibly.

"Rules are rules." The woman shrugged, her indifference a wall higher than any border.

Hours passed like treacle, each minute stretching into the next. Children cried in corners, their parents' hushed consolations rippling through the antiseptic air. A family of four huddled together, the father's arms encircling them as if he could shield them from what came next. An elderly woman prayed softly in Spanish, rosary beads clicking like Morse code: Save us, save us, save us.

My phone—confiscated on arrival—sat in a bin somewhere, its connections to my world severed. No texts from Leila asking about weekend plans, no news alerts about the latest climate protest, no TikToks of cats interrupted by activism. The digital silence was its own kind of thirst, information drought making reality blur at the edges.

A man's voice crackled over the intercom, listing names for transport. Ours among them. Mama gathered our meager bag, her movements precise despite the exhaustion etched into her face. Ninety-six hours without real sleep had hollowed

her cheeks, shadowed her eyes. Still, she moved with the grace I'd always admired, her spine straight as the cedars of Lebanon she'd described in bedtime stories.

"Baba will meet us at the airport?" I asked, hope a desperate fluttering in my chest.

"Inshallah," she replied, the word a talisman. God willing.

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They led us through corridors that echoed with administrative efficiency, past rooms where families like ours waited for fates assigned by bureaucrats who'd never heard their stories.

In one, I glimpsed a boy about my age, his eyes meeting mine for a fleeting moment of recognition—two planets in parallel orbits, pulled by the same merciless gravity.

Outside, Philadelphia's summer heat slapped my face, the familiar skyline a mockery of the home being stripped from us. The Liberty Bell, symbol of a freedom now revealed as conditional. The art museum steps where I'd raced friends after school, pretending to be Rocky. The corner where my aunt Fatemah sold her kunafa, the syrup sticky-sweet on summer afternoons.

The van waited, its windows tinted against public eyes, ICE emblazoned on its side—a brand, a warning, a promise of enforcement without mercy. As they loaded us in, a small crowd gathered across the street, their chants carrying like spray from a distant wave: "No deportation! No fascist nation! Free, Free Palestine!"

Among them, I spotted my history teacher, Mr. Abernathy, his fist raised in solidarity.

Beside him, impossibly, stood Leila, my best friend since third grade, holding a sign: FREE LUJAIN. Her eyes met mine through the van's window, her mouth forming words I couldn't hear but felt: I love you.

The van door slammed shut, sealing us in darkness, and Philadelphia began to recede—first physically, then emotionally, becoming a memory instead of home. Mama's hand found mine, her palm cool despite the heat.

"Remember who you are," she whispered, her voice steady despite everything. "Remember where you come from. Palestine lives in you, no matter where they send us."

Palestine. A place I'd never seen, yet carried in my blood. My grandmother's olive groves, bulldozed for settlements. My grandfather's university, bombed to rubble. Stories passed down like heirlooms, heavier than any jewelry, more precious than gold.

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The plane's engines roared like the ocean's hunger, a sound that would haunt me long after the sky spat us into El Salvador's heat. I pressed my face to the window, its plastic scratched like my hope, watching Philadelphia's lights dissolve into a memory—Baba's model ships, Mama's maqloubeh, the classroom where I once laughed with Aisha Talaat. Now, we were cargo, the Al-Masri family, bound for a land that wasn't ours.

The seat belt dug into my waist, the only thing anchoring me as my world tilted on its axis. The last twenty-four hours had passed in a blur of processing rooms, security checks, and finally this chartered deportation flight, filled with others like us—collateral damage in America's political wars.

Beside me, an elderly man clutched a plastic bag containing a prayer rug and framed family photo. Across the aisle, a woman whispered lullabies to an infant who would grow up without memories of the country that had rejected them.

"Where is Baba now?" I asked Mama, my voice barely audible over the engines.

Her eyes, red-rimmed from sleeplessness, met mine. "They're bringing him on a different flight. Security protocols." The words sounded rehearsed, official language that masked uncertainty. I wondered if she believed them herself.

The ICE officer's words echoed in my skull: El Salvador. Effective immediately. A statement, they called it, to silence the chants of Free Palestine still ringing in my ears.

Mama sat across from me, her wrists cuffed to the seat, her hijab a defiant flag against the gray of our reality. Her eyes, sharp as the Gaza stones she'd taught me to revere. "Lujain," Mama said, her voice a thread pulling me from despair. "Look at me." I did, and saw not fear but fire, the same fire that had fueled her speeches, her UNRWA work feeding Gaza's children, her cries for resistance. "They can take our papers, our home, but not our roots. We are still here, we will always be here. Allah is Greater, trust in Him we will be OK."

I nodded, swallowing the knot in my throat.

The plane lurched, descending into San Salvador's haze, the city's sprawl a jagged scar against the jungle. Pressed against the window, I watched a new landscape emerge—mountains like sleeping giants, volcanic peaks crowned with clouds, greenery so vibrant it hurt my eyes after the institutional gray of detention. In another life, this might have been an adventure, a vacation to somewhere exotic. Now it was exile, punishment, a sentence without trial.

Armed guards met us at the tarmac, their faces blank as the CECOT prison's walls loomed in my mind. I felt Mama tense beside me as we descended the airplane stairs, the tropical heat a physical force, pushing against us like a living thing. Sweat immediately beaded on my skin, my Philadelphia clothes suddenly absurd in this climate. I thought of all the things we hadn't packed—sunscreen, insect repellent, lightweight clothes. All the preparations we hadn't been allowed to make.

But we never reached the prison. A man in a suit, his accent thick with Bukele's authority, barked orders in Spanish, gesturing to a van. "No prison," he said, glancing at a tablet. "You go north."

Confusion rippled through our group. North? Back to the United States? The hope that flared was immediately extinguished by the guards' rough handling, the way they herded us toward unmarked vans with tinted windows. Not salvation. Something else.

The van's interior was an oven, the seats cracked vinyl that stuck to my legs. No air conditioning, just windows cranked down a few inches, letting in hot air thick with exhaust and unfamiliar tropical scents. I pressed against Mama, fear making me childlike again, needing the reassurance of her body against mine. Her hands, still cuffed, couldn't stroke my hair as they had when nightmares woke me as a child. Instead, she leaned her shoulder against mine, a silent promise: I'm here.

The van sped through San Salvador's chaos—honking cars, street vendors, murals of Bukele's face staring like a god. Protests had followed us here, I'd heard on the plane's radio: Philadelphia's streets still burned, ACLU lawyers filed motions, Palestine Legal called our deportation a crime. But Trump's voice drowned them out, boasting on X: The Al-Masri terrorists are gone. Bukele's with us.

The first of many more to come. Bukele's own post followed, chillingly vague: El Salvador stands against terror and anti-semitism. We cooperate fully.

El Salvador, a neutral nowhere for a family from Gaza's dust. Mama explained later, in the van's stifling dark, that Trump and Bukele had struck a deal—not prison, but a boat, a smuggler's path north, to show the world what happens to "homegrown" who dare speak. "They want us lost," she said, her voice steady despite the cuffs.

The van dumped us at a coastal slum, La Libertad's air thick with salt and despair. The sea stretched before us, vast and indifferent, its surface glittering under a merciless sun. I'd seen the Atlantic from New Jersey beaches, but this—the Pacific—seemed like a different entity entirely, deeper, more ancient, harboring secrets and dangers I couldn't imagine. The salt air clung to my skin, the first taste of the element that would become both prison and sustenance.

A boat waited, its wooden planks creaking under the weight of fifteen souls—us and thirteen others, refugees or outcasts, their eyes hollow as mine would become. The vessel was white with red trim, Andalusia painted in fading letters on its bow. Not a proper fishing boat, not a proper passenger vessel—something in between, designed for coastal waters, not the open ocean. I ran my hand along the gunwale, feeling the wood's grain, unaware this would become my entire world, my refuge and my torture chamber.

The smuggler, a cartel man with a scar slicing his cheek, tossed us aboard like baggage, his pistol glinting in the afternoon sun. "Dollars or the sea," he growled, his English broken but his meaning clear. "Pay with what you have."



We had nothing but scraps. I scavenged in the dark corners of my pockets, finding only a peppermint, now soft from body heat, worthless as currency. Mama stood before the smuggler with the dignity of a queen, though her clothes were rumpled from days of detention and her hands still bore the marks of cuffs.

"This is all I have," she said, removing her wedding ring—platinum with a diamond that caught the light, a testament to Baba's years of savings before he proposed. Next came a gold locket, a family heirloom that had belonged to my grandmother, my Teeta, who'd died in Gaza before I was born. The smuggler examined them with calculating eyes, testing the diamond's hardness against his teeth.

"Good. Good," the smuggler said, inspecting the diamonds in his new prize with a twisted smile on his face. His gaze lingered on me, assessment in his eyes that made my skin crawl. I shrank behind Mama, suddenly acutely aware of being female, being young, being vulnerable.

"The girl looks healthy," he said to Mama, his meaning unmistakable. "Worth more than jewelry."

Mama's eyes flashed like lightning before a storm. "Touch her, and I will cut your throat with my teeth," she said, her voice level but edged with steel. The smuggler laughed, but stepped back, perhaps sensing she meant every word.

The boat rocked, a liar's cradle, as we slipped into the Pacific's jaws. I traced the gunwale with my fingers, feeling the wood's pulse, unaware it would soon be my only home. The engine coughed to life, a mechanical rasp that would fade from my memory during the silent days after the massacre. The shore receded, El Salvador becoming a green line, then a smudge, then nothing but memory.

Mama's words echoed—We are still here—but the sea's hunger was louder, and the cartel's guns, glinting in the moonlight, whispered of a violence yet to come.

As night fell, transforming the ocean into polished obsidian, I sat at the boat's stern, my knees drawn to my chest, the sea stretched endlessly in every direction, a vastness beyond comprehension, beautiful and terrible in equal measure.

Somewhere, in Philadelphia's streets, protesters still marched, their signs fading like my hope. Somewhere, Bukele's prison stood empty, its threat replaced by this boat, this exile, this thirst waiting to claim me. Somewhere, Baba might be looking for us, might be searching, might be alive.

The first stars appeared, their cold light impossible distances away. The same stars that had watched over Philadelphia now witnessed our exile, unchanging while everything below them transformed. The Philadelphia skyline, already fading from memory like a mirage.

I didn't know then that in just hours, everyone aboard except me would be dead. I didn't know that Najma would find me, that thirst would become my constant companion, that ninety-three days would pass before the granola wrapper gave me reason to hope again. I only knew that water surrounded us, vast and merciless, and that even then, I felt its power to both sustain and destroy.

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## Chapter 4: Blubber (Day 24)

Fever burned beneath my skin, each heartbeat a drum of pain against my skull. I couldn't remember how long I'd been lying here, the Andalusia rocking beneath my withered body, the whale blubber still untouched beside me. How had I found it? How had I returned? The memories swam through delirium like fish darting through murky water—the sudden collision, Najma's frantic circling, the impossible mountain of flesh floating in the endless blue.

I tried to lift my hand to my forehead, but my arm refused the command, muscles betraying me after ninety-four days of slow starvation. Ninety-four days since the bullets tore through Mama's body. Ninety-four days of rationing each precious drop of water, each morsel of fish Najma brought me. And now, salvation and torment in equal measure—meat that could sustain me for days, but without strength to eat it, without water to process it.

My cracked lips parted, seeking moisture that wasn't there. The fever turned the boat's gentle rocking into violent swaying, the horizon tilting at impossible angles as my consciousness ebbed and flowed like the tide. Through the haze, I saw Najma circling nearby, her movements slower than usual, her dorsal fin with its distinctive hole cutting the water's surface like a question mark.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, the day's events returning in fragments...

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A thud had shattered my half-sleep, the Andalusia slamming into something solid—her splintered hull creaking like a dying breath.

I'd jolted upright, my body protesting with every movement, my lips cracked earth under the sun's relentless blade. For a moment, I thought it was a rescue vessel I'd glimpsed on the horizon, come to claim me at last. But the silence that followed carried no human voices, no engine's rumble.

Najma burst from the water beside me, her sleek body arcing higher than I'd seen in weeks, her clicks a frenzy of energy that pierced the air. She circled the boat with urgent purpose, tail slapping against the surface, her eyes bright with something I couldn't name—excitement, perhaps, or alarm. I dragged myself to the gunwale, my arms trembling, bones grinding against skin that had forgotten the feeling of being whole.

Then I saw it: a whale, dead, its bloated gray mass a mountain in the sea's endless blue.

The sun glinted off its skin, patches dulled by death, others still carrying the slick sheen of life recently departed. The Andalusia had drifted into it, our paths converging in this vast emptiness like stars colliding in slow motion. I stared, uncomprehending at first, my mind too parched to process what lay before me.

Flies swarmed in a buzzing storm, their drone a maddening hum, the stench of rot hitting me like a physical force—rancid, thick, a mix of decay and salt that clawed up my nostrils and coated my throat. But beneath the revulsion, something else stirred in me, something primal and urgent: hunger.

My mouth watered, a traitor to my despair, saliva pooling on my cracked tongue—a sensation so foreign it felt like betrayal. Food. Real food—not the slivers of fish Najma had nudged to me in recent weeks, their scales barely a

whisper against the void in my gut. This whale—its blubber, its meat, its fat—could sustain me for days, maybe weeks.

"Food," I whispered, the word itself a nourishment on my tongue. A sound escaped me, something between a laugh and a sob—the first time in days I'd felt anything resembling hope.

Najma dove under the whale, her snout nudging its side, then surfaced to look at me with an expectancy I'd come to recognize. As if to say, Take it, Lujain. It's yours.

I calculated the distance—perhaps ten yards. In my former life, I'd have covered it in seconds, strong strokes carrying me across our community pool where I'd practiced for swim team tryouts I never got to attend. Now, ten yards might as well be ten miles.

I remembered the shoelaces I'd scavenged from the dead men's boots after the massacre, now stored beneath the fractured seat alongside the leather belts and other salvaged treasures. I retrieved them, fingers clumsy with urgency, and tied them together into a makeshift tether, knotting one end to a belt I looped around the boat's cracked bench.

My anchor. My hope.

The keychain knife felt insubstantial in my palm as I tested its edge against my thumb, the blade small but surprisingly sharp. I stripped to my underclothes and slipped into the water.

The chill was a shock to my bones, my gasp involuntary as the ocean swallowed me to my shoulders. For a terrifying moment, I thought I'd miscalculated, that my

wasted muscles couldn't support me, that I'd sink immediately. But some ancient instinct took over, my arms cutting through the water with muscle memory that transcended starvation.

The whale loomed larger as I approached, its immensity overwhelming—a leviathan, a god fallen from grace. I forced myself to focus on the task, pulling myself along its massive flank until I reached a section where decomposition hadn't fully claimed the flesh.

I carved with the knife, hacking blubber in chunks, my hands slick with oil. The fat came away in slabs, yellow-white, dense with nutrition my body craved with an intensity that bordered on madness. Each piece I cut represented days of life, strength returning to my withered limbs, clarity to my dehydrated mind.

"Thank you," I whispered to the whale, gratitude welling up unexpectedly. This creature's death would extend my life. A transaction I hadn't sought but couldn't refuse.

I sliced off a large piece from where the meat appeared freshest, the blade slipping through blubber with unexpected ease. I tied the precious cargo to my bandana, knotting it to my waist. Triumph surged through me, a moment of pure victory against the sea, against starvation, against the forces that had conspired to erase me from existence.

I turned to swim back, already imagining the first bite, the fat coating my parched throat, when horror struck. The boat had drifted, pulled by currents invisible beneath the surface, the tether straining against its mooring.

I kicked harder, arms windmilling, the blubber a deadweight dragging at my waist. The shoelace tether stretched taut, fibers visibly straining, and then, with a sound

like hope snapping—it broke. The Andalusia began to slip beyond reach, carried by an indifferent sea.

Panic clawed at my chest, constricting my already labored breathing. I flailed, my arms lead, my legs useless, saltwater flooding my mouth and burning my lungs. I was sinking, the ocean an angry mouth trying to swallow me whole, whispering my end with each wave that washed over my face.

This is it, I thought, Baba's photo flashing in my mind, Mama's voice fading—We are still here. The words seemed a cruel joke now, as the "here" I occupied was dissolving, my existence bleeding into the vast blue. I was ready to let go, to surrender, to accept the fate that had stalked me for ninety-four days.

A nudge hit my back, hard, propelling me upward with startling force. Najma. Her snout pushed me, her fins a whirlwind of motion, guiding me toward the receding boat. Once, twice, three times she nudged, each touch precise and purposeful. Through the sting of salt in my eyes, I saw the Andalusia drawing closer—not by my effort, but by Najma's.

I grasped the gunwale with fingers that screamed protest, slipping once, twice, before finding purchase. With what felt like my last reserves of strength, I hauled myself aboard, collapsing in a heap, the bundled blubber still miraculously tied to my waist.

I coughed violently, seawater scalding my salt-raw throat, my body a furnace of pain, my vision blurring at the edges. I'd swallowed too much ocean; I needed fresh water, but there was none. The whale's fat would help, its oil a balm for my thirst, but I was too exhausted, too overwhelmed to eat now.

My hands shook uncontrollably as I untied the bandana, the blubber a heavy promise beside me. The world tilted, darkness rushing in from my peripheral vision, and I surrendered to unconsciousness, the sea's rhythm beneath me.

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Now, with fever gripping me, that triumph seemed distant, the whale blubber beside me both salvation and taunt. I couldn't lift my head, couldn't reach for the knife to cut a piece small enough to swallow. I was so close to survival, yet still teetering on the edge of death.

Through half-closed eyes, I saw Najma surface beside the boat, watching me with what looked remarkably like concern. She clicked softly, a sound I'd come to associate with her attempts at communication, though I'd never understand what she truly meant.

"I need water," I whispered, though no sound emerged from my throat.

The delirium intensified as shadows lengthened across the deck. I remembered a day in Philadelphia, crisp autumn air filled with the scent of spices from the Arabic market on 5th Street. Baba had bought me hot chocolate, the steam rising between us as we walked, his hand warm around mine. He'd pointed out constellations appearing in the early evening sky, naming them in both English and Arabic, building bridges between my worlds.

"Remember who you are," he'd said, not knowing those same words would be Mama's last gift to me before the ocean claimed her.

The memory was so vivid I could taste the chocolate, feel the warmth spreading through my chest. Then reality crashed back—the taste became the bitterness of



thirst, the warmth the burning of fever. I wasn't in Philadelphia with Baba; I was adrift in the Pacific, alone except for a dolphin who couldn't save me from this.

My consciousness flickered like a dying flame. I saw flashes of the massacre—not disordered fragments this time, but with a terrible clarity that penetrated even my fevered state. The cartel's boat approaching in predawn light. The men boarding with military precision, not the chaotic aggression of pirates. The leader checking a photograph before the shooting began, confirming identities.

Not piracy, I realized, my fevered mind suddenly piecing together what I'd been too shocked, too focused on survival to comprehend. The precision of the attack, the specific targeting of our boat among many in these waters, the lack of demands or robbery beyond Mama's wedding ring—it all crystallized with terrible clarity.

An assassination.

The protests about our case had been gaining traction when we left Philadelphia—legal motions filed, senators asking questions, media coverage growing. We weren't just deportees; we were symbols of policy failure, living evidence of injustice that could be paraded before cameras if we returned.

"They wanted us dead," I rasped to Najma, my voice a shard of glass, my lips cracking with each word. "Not random violence. Not opportunity. They chose us, tracked us, assassinated us."

The knowledge burned hotter than the fever, made the world's edges sharper despite my delirium. It wasn't just bad luck that had left me orphaned and adrift—it was calculation, intention, the same mechanical cruelty that had ruled every moment since they'd dragged Baba from our home in Philadelphia.

I needed to document this, to leave evidence if I didn't survive. I fumbled for the red notebook, its pages softened by sea air, and the makeshift pencil I'd created from the bullet lead. My hands shook violently as I tried to form the letters, my writing a barely legible scrawl:

*Mama ded. Not cartel. Assassination. Fever burnig. Dyiing. Whale bluber but no water. Najma saved me. cant do this.*

The makeshift pencil slipped from my fingers, rolling across the deck as my strength failed me. An unhinged laugh burst from my throat, wild and foreign, echoing over the empty sea before dissolving into tearless sobs. My chest heaved, but my body had no moisture to spare for crying.

Najma surfaced beside the boat, clicking rapidly, her movements animated as she bumped against the hull with deliberate force. The Andalusia rocked with each impact, creaking in protest. She leapt into the air, splashing back down with a spray that reached the deck, then repeated the performance—squealing, clicking, circling with a frenzied energy I couldn't comprehend.

Through my fever, her excitement registered as mockery. Here I lay dying, while she played in her endless ocean, surrounded by all the moisture I craved, her body sleek and strong while mine withered. Her insistent bumping against the boat sent tremors through the wood, vibrations that rattled my aching bones.

Rage followed, a fire in my gut that momentarily burned through the fever's haze. I grabbed an empty water bottle—one of my precious collection vessels, now bone dry—and hurled it at Najma with whatever strength remained in my withered arms.

"Go away!" I screamed, my voice a broken thing, cracking like the boat's sun-bleached wood. "Just let me die, you stupid fucking fish!"

She flinched, genuine recoil in her movement, before diving beneath the surface. The sight shattered something in me, guilt flooding the space where anger had flared. My only friend, my savior, and I'd struck out at her like a wounded animal. I collapsed back onto the tarp, energy spent, shame and fever burning in equal measure.

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The stars emerged as day surrendered to night, a cruel tapestry of light too distant to touch. I tried to find the constellations Baba had taught me—Orion, the Hunter; Cassiopeia, the Queen—but my vision swam, the stars blurring into meaningless patterns.

My gaze fixed on a single bright point that seemed to pulse with my heartbeat. Was it a planet? A star? A hallucination? I couldn't tell anymore, couldn't distinguish between reality and the fever's fabrications.

I thought of the small apartment above Baba's dental practice where we'd lived before saving enough for the house in West Philadelphia. I'd watch stars from the fire escape, mapping celestial bodies for science class, dreaming of becoming an astronomer. Now the stars watched me instead, impassive witnesses to my slow dissolution.

I clutched Baba's photo, its edges curling from salt and handling. "I tried," I whispered to his smiling image. "I really tried."

The fever burned hotter, my vision swimming, the world contracting to a pinpoint of consciousness.

My mind drifted to water, always water, the absence that defined my existence. I'd calculated it meticulously, the numbers scratched in my notebook:

*Day 1–30, 1 liter/day, 30 liters.*

*Day 31–60, 500 ml/day, 15 liters.*

*Day 61–75, 200 ml/day, 3 liters.*

*Day 76–94, 45 ml/day, 630 ml.*

*Total: 48.63 liters, plus dew and fish—maybe 50 ml on good days, 4 liters over 94 days.*

I needed 2 liters a day to live, 188 liters for 94 days; I'd had a quarter of that, stretched thin, my body a desert that had forgotten the feeling of rain.

In the delirium of fever, I thought I felt a cool touch against my forehead—Mama's hand, perhaps, or the ghost of Philadelphia winter against my skin. The sensation was so vivid I reached up, fingers seeking its source, finding only empty air.

I dreamed with my eyes open, seeing impossible things—the Liberty Bell floating on the ocean's surface, Baba's dental chair rising from the waves, Mama dancing on water that turned to glass beneath her feet. More fragments than coherent visions, pieces of a life that seemed to belong to someone else now.

The first drop hit my forehead like a blessing, so gentle I thought I'd imagined it. The second landed on my parched lips, and my tongue darted out instinctively, the familiar yet forgotten taste of fresh water—untainted by salt, by death, by desperation—sparking something primal in my brain.

Rain. Actual rain. Not the meager condensation I'd been harvesting, but water freely given from the sky.

I opened my eyes to see clouds gathered above, their underbellies dark with promise, and Najma watching me, her head raised above the surface as if she'd been waiting for this moment. Had she sensed it coming? Was this what her earlier excitement had meant?

"I'm so sorry, Najma," I whispered, a sob of guilt escaping my throat despite my dehydration. I reached out with trembling fingers, caressing her rubbery head as she nudged closer to the boat. "Please forgive me. I didn't mean it. Thank you for staying."

My hand traced the scars on her snout, the familiar texture of her skin a comfort I'd almost thrown away in my delirium. She held still for my touch, allowing this moment of connection when she could have abandoned me to my fate after my cruelty.

The rain intensified gradually, drops multiplying around us like a percussion building in crescendo. Each one contained a universe of possibility—hydration, strength, survival for another day. I fumbled for the plastic bottles, positioning them with shaking hands to capture every precious drop.

The whale blubber glistened under the rainfall, as if being cleansed, prepared. Tomorrow, with water in my body and renewed strength, I would eat. I would live. I would continue bearing witness to what had been done to us.

The taste of rain on my tongue reminded me of Philadelphia springs, of dancing with Mama in sudden downpours, of Baba's laughter as we raced for shelter. Water connecting past to present, connecting sky to sea, connecting me to hope I'd thought long extinguished.

I tilted my face upward, letting the rain wash away salt and pain, fever and despair. Each drop a tiny redemption, a microscopic mercy in an unmerciful world. I opened my mouth, drinking directly from the heavens, feeling life return to my cells, my tissues, my being.

Najma circled the boat with gentle movements, no longer the frantic energy of before, but a calm presence watching over me. In the rain's soft percussion, I thought I heard a message in her clicks: We are still here.

And for the first time in weeks, I believed it might be true.

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