

Close To The Wind

Grace looks up at the torn, barely-there wisps of what used to be sails, wondering what they would've looked like before; wondering what kind of flag had flown above them. Was this a vessel for merchants? Pirates? Was it a private vessel?

Luckily, the gangplank is sturdier than it looks, but the loud creaking it makes warns her not to linger too long. She doesn't and gingerly, quickly makes her way up without thinking too much about it.

Much chillier here, she thinks. Should've brought a jacket.

Her friends are already running around and being idiots with no regard for their own safety whatsoever.

Well. She supposes she wouldn't consider *all* of them her "friends" if she thinks too long about it. Really, it's just Anne. Charlie's *okay*... The others are annoying and loud acquaintances at best.

The ship's pretty fucking cool though; she definitely doesn't regret coming.

She knows the rest of them only came here to be loud and break shit while they get drunk or high (or both), but now she wishes she were alone to actually *study* the place. Maybe Professor Jennings would give her some sort of extra credit for it (as if she's not already acing his class), or perhaps another push for the college to offer her a better internship.

That was how Anne managed to convince her to come out with these assholes in the first place: "It's, like, *totally* old and spooky. It's absolutely your thing, right?" *If you wanna strip down my chosen major and professional direction to the bone marrow, sure*, she wanted to say.

So, somewhat reluctantly, she's here.

She wants to chastise the boys for their antics already, but holds her tongue—they'll mellow out soon enough, and it's not like a majority of what's here isn't already damaged.

It's hard to tell in the late afternoon light how old the ship actually is, especially to her still untrained 21-year-old eye, but she knows it's definitely older than the twentieth century. The fact that it's still standing—*floating*—in as good of a condition as it is is kind of mind-blowing.

“OW, JACK! You fucking dick!”

“Sorry you can’t handle whippies with a dirty old rope, Charlie. Want Jackie to kiss it better?”

“We all already know how much you like to kiss Vane’s ass, Rackham.”

“Ooo, jealous, Drake? I could do even better things to yours, but it’ll cost ya.”

“Careful, Jack. Frankie here may dress like a rich boy, but he’s broke as hell now. Daddy cut him off after he found the stash of grass in his room.”

“Fuck you, man! We all know that wasn’t mine!”

“Sure, just like that wasn’t your tongue shoving itself down Davis’ throat last weekend at Sig Ep.”

“VANE WHAT THE FU—“

Jesus Christ. Grace rolls her eyes and walks across the deck, avoiding uncoiled rope, glass, and broken bits of wood. Anne is somehow able to ignore the peanut gallery—from exposure or earplugs, who knows—and is standing peacefully, looking out into the foggy gloom of the bay. She turns with an excited smile.

“Gracie! Isn’t this awesome? It gives off ‘ghost ship’ vibes.”

Grace huffs a small laugh. “Yeah, it’s pretty rad.”

Anne wraps an arm around her and pulls her in for a half hug. Grace’s face warms despite the chill. “Told you! You think you’ll do your Scooby-Doo shit while we’re here? I’ll try to keep the guys from doing any major damage but...you know. They just like to let off steam and *then* chill.”

Grace looks over at who is supposed to be considered “grown men.” Frank and Charlie are holding up the ends of one of the bigger planks of wood while Jack winds up to do a horrible, untrained attempt at breaking it—something he probably saw in *The Karate Kid* or a Jackie Chan movie. As predicted, the board doesn’t move and howls fill the air: Jack, in pain; the other two, in laughter.

“I wonder how chill they’ll be while fighting an infection from a seemingly innocuous splinter,” she mutters. “Or a broken bone.”

Anne giggles. “Oh, they’ll be fine. Definitely been through worse, given the house they all live in. That place is a radioactive shit pile.”

“True.”

They look back out to the water and Grace sighs. “Yeah, I’d like to look around, maybe take some pictures to show Jennings. I couldn’t make out what the figurehead is so I’m gonna check that out first.”

Anne gives her one last squeeze. “Okay! Please be careful though, yeah? Don’t hesitate to yell for me.”

“Course. Always.”

Grace half skips up the shoddy, half disintegrated stairs to the raised deck and looks over the railing. The figurehead is still mostly concealed by the bowsprit, but she sees a small area to stand next to it. After pulling on her gloves she always has stored in her messenger bag, she carefully slips through the hole in the railing and lowers herself down.

She can still hear the rowdy shouts and fumbling from up above, but here feels more...private. Secluded. Peaceful. She closes her eyes and takes a few minutes to enjoy the cool, salty sea breeze that she doesn’t get enough of, being an hour inland. She feels connected to something—perhaps *someone*—long lost and alone.

She comes back to herself with a shiver and tests the railing—*Sturdy, thank god*—and leans into it to come face to face with the figurehead.

It’s clearly a horse, despite the rough shape it’s in: it’s splintered something awful, one of the legs and half of the muzzle are completely gone, and there’s evidence of repairs made to it around the neck. It’s possible that whatever restoration that had been done on it was skillful enough to be concealed, but time and age have left it exposed. It was definitely painted, most figureheads were, but there’s hardly any evidence of it now. Something shoots out of the top of the horse’s head and connects it to the bowsprit above it...

A unicorn?

Now that’s fascinating.

A bottle breaks somewhere and anger shoots through Grace’s chest.

This ship, clearly uncared for and simply *lost* for who knows how long, deserves better care than it's getting from the dicks-for-brains currently shitting all over her deck.

She quickly takes some photos of the unicorn the best she can on her phone and turns to take one of the small deck she's standing on. To her surprise, there's a door directly in front of her.

It's very short, considering even *she'd* have to duck down a little to walk through it, and she imagines that, in the ship's prime, the door would've been completely hidden. Now, it hangs precariously on its hinges, making the smallest sliver of darkness visible.

She switches over to video and slowly pushes the door open. The hinges squeal loudly, but luckily aren't too rusted to prevent it from opening. A small gust of cold, briney air breezes past her, making her baby hairs stand on end and adrenaline shoot through her bloodstream.

"Okaaay, that was really weird. Totally not the beginning of a horror movie." She sighs. "God dammit. I'm gonna fucking die."

She stops the video and turns on her flashlight. The corridor is short, both in height and length, and well closed off, but still full of cobwebs, dust, and some sort of wood rot. She pulls her shirt up over her nose and walks through.

There's some truth to Anne's *Scooby-Doo* comment: Grace has been to many weird and spooky places, but most, if not all, of them weren't necessarily "haunted." Usually, bits of the building would shift in the wind or some form of animal would be living there. She's had her fair share of dust, grime, and weird smelling air to not immediately and fearfully jump to the *If-you're-here-with-us-speak* conclusion.

She'd normally chalk up the drop in temperature to being right on the water or the area being enclosed and away from the sun; the uneasy feeling in her gut just her nerves getting the best of her. But she already knows now that'd be a lie.

She feels weighed down by something mournful and almost...hopeless? Despair, maybe. She feels the same way she did at her great-uncle's funeral when she was fifteen: grief surrounded her, but she was so removed from it that it didn't *directly* affect her like everyone else. So she just...sat in it.

They can't stay here. It feels dangerous, but it also feels like they're intruding, because, well...*yeah*. They are.

She quickly exits the corridor and finds herself in a large room directly below the main deck. She doesn't take much time to look around the open space like she desperately wants to. She snaps a couple quick photos instead before running up the rickety stairs.

She emerges from the hatch and the yells from the guys, and now Anne, are suddenly full volume in her ears. The group is dispersed around the deck, with Anne at the wheel. *Like a pirate captain*, Grace thinks. *She'd be a great captain.*

"Holy *shit*, Grace! Where the fuck did you come from?!" Frank shouts and jumps in surprise near her. Everyone turns to look at her and makes other sounds of shock and awe. She ignores them and states, "We need to leave. Now."

"Why the fuck would we do that?" Jack asks. "We just got here and it's a forty-five minute drive back to campus. You fuckin' *scared*, O'Malley?"

"Jack, c'mon," Anne chastises. "Gracie's the one out of all of us who'd be the *least* scared. And her judgement's pretty spot on."

Frank, ever the follower and always up Jack's ass, tacks on, "She's probably getting all drooly and nerdy over this shit and wants it to herself to, I don't know, fuckin'..."

Everyone stares at him as he trails off, clearly struggling. He huffs in frustration. "Oh, fuck off! She just doesn't want us ruining a stupid potential project!"

Grace rolls her eyes and closes the hatch gently.

"No... we're trespassing, it's dangerous, and it's gonna be dark soon. And..I have a really bad feeling about it."

Jack and Frank groan in unison.

"Why'd you even come if you were gonna piss all over our fun, Grace?" Jack sneers. "You could've just stayed at home and masturbated to the poster you probably-for-sure have of Jennings or that blonde fop hanging on your wall, but instead you're here being an absolute cu—*FUCK!*"

"*Eat shit, Jack!*" Anne shouts as Jack rubs the back of his head where she threw a chunk of wood.

"Everyone *shut up*," Charlie bellows. They all turn quiet.

“Why don’t we hang around until sunset, *then* we’ll leave, alright? *Can it, Jack.*” Jack snaps his jaw shut, but continues glaring. “Gracie’s right, there’s no reason to hang around a place like this at night. It’s unsafe enough during the day. I’ll text Davis and we can just run over to Sig Ep if we still wanna get fucked up.”

“We do that *every* weekend, man,” Frank whines.

“Then we’ll go to the graveyard outside of town, I don’t give a shit. But we aren’t sticking around here,” Charlie says with finality.

Anne descends the stairs while Jack and Frank grumble to themselves and each other, throwing dirty looks at Grace, before picking up random broken ship bits to do who knows what with.

“You alright?” Anne asks, rubbing Grace’s shoulder. If asked, she’ll blame the shiver on the cool sea air.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I wasn’t lying, though. This place has weird vibes.”

“I believe you. You wouldn’t leave something like this unstudied otherwise.” Anne gives her a lopsided grin, the kind that brings out her dimple and, somehow, makes the freckles dusting across her nose and cheeks brighten. Grace blushes at the teasing and nods.

Anne grabs her hand and lightly tugs. “Let’s check out that fancy door.”

Grace is led to the door sandwiched between the two staircases leading up to the helm and they stop. The stained glass is now chipped and cracked and has a huge hole in the right corner, as if a rock had been tossed through it, but was clearly once very ornate and beautiful, complete with a fancy red *B* in the middle.

She takes a photo, then Anne asks to take one of her (*B for Bonny, yeah? Meant to be, Gracie!*), then *insists* that Grace take one as well. In retaliation, she shoves her hands into her pockets and gives the best deadpan she can manage...until Anne gives her something to smile about. It’s not hard.

Satisfied, Anne hands back her phone and looks at the window thoughtfully.

“Whaddya think is in there?” she asks.

“Probably the captain’s cabin.”

Anne lights up. “Really?”

Grace shrugs. "Yeah. I only studied some nautical history for a semester, and even then it was really broad, but a lot of the ships' layouts were similar, even the small brigs like this one." She looks around. "Wait, no. I meant brigantine. Maybe. Could be a frigate, too...Honestly, it's hard to tell."

"I thought a brig was, like, a jail on a ship."

"It is. The word comes from the brigantine ship and the brig, being a smaller version of the brigantine, was used essentially as a floating prison—"

"Okay, Miss History Lesson. How about we see some history for ourselves?" Anne wiggles her eyebrows and places her hand on the doorknob.

Grace hesitates. "I-I don't know, Anne..."

"Aw, come on, Gracie. I'm not asking you to *defile* the place. We just wanna look around. *Please?*" She begs, giving the most devastating puppy dog eyes she can.

Damnit.

Grace hides her smile behind an eye roll. "*Fine*. But if I say we leave, we fucking leave."

"Cross my heart," Anne says, physically crossing her heart with her pinky.

She turns the knob and lets the door slowly creak open. An arctic-like draft rushes past them, making them shiver. "Woah," Anne chuckles.

The uneasiness Grace felt before hits her tenfold. She feels her muscles tense and her stomach churns. "Anne...I really don't think, uh..." She takes a stiff step back, clutching the strap of her bag like a security blanket.

"Hey hey hey," Anne says soothingly. She takes her hand and gently pulls her to her side. Grace's eyes widen as she stares at the open door, trying (and failing) to tell herself that the shadows moving in the corners are just a trick of the light.

"Gracie."

Anne grips her chin softly and turns her face until she finally meets her eyes. A dimple and freckles cut through the fear.

"I won't let anything happen if I can help it, okay? We'll be careful." She taps the tip of Grace's nose and winks. Grace does her best to focus on the fire in her cheeks rather than the ice running through her veins.

Anne leans into the open doorway and Grace has to resist the urge to *pull her back*.

"Hello?" Anne calls out, bright and singing.

"*Annie, what the fuck!*" Grace hisses. Anne ignores her.

"Hey there! Uh...Sorry for intruding! My name's Anne. Anne Bonny, just like the famous pirate queen. What a badass, am I right?" She laughs, but Grace can hear the nervousness underlying it.

"This is my good buddy ol' pal, Gracie." Anne looks at her and quirks her head to the empty hallway. Grace shakes her head as if to say *What? Are you insane??*

"Say hello, Grace. It's only polite," Anne whispers.

"*Polite?? What in the hell—*" Anne squeezes her hand and raises her eyebrows.

Grace takes a fortifying breath and a half step forward. She tries to speak, but nothing comes out. She clears her throat and tries again.

"H-hello. I'm Grace. O'Malley." Mostly out of habit, she tacks on quickly, "History and Anthropology double major with a minor in Archival Science." Anne gives her hand another squeeze and continues.

"So, yeah. That's us. No longer complete strangers, right? We don't want to be a bother, really, just wanna look around. Gracie here gets a pretty big metaphorical nerd boner over this kinda stuff—" Grace makes a choking sound "—and I just think it's cool. Real spooky, pretty sure I peed a little when I opened your front door just now."

Grace looks at the overly excitable, weird ray of sunshine still holding her hand and feels herself relax minutely.

"Promise we won't take up much of your time. We just think you have cool shit. I bet it looked even cooler back when it wasn't all dusty and covered in salt, yeah? Or maybe not, what the

fuck do I know? I'm just a dumb kid talking loudly to probably no one to help my friend out and impress her."

Anne is nervously rambling now, but Grace feels much more at ease and she comes into her side even more, squeezing her arm. It could just be Anne's silliness and bravery assuaging her fear, but even the small draft emanating from the doorway seems to not be as cold and bitter anymore. Anne quickly looks to Grace, then turns back to the door and mutters, either to the ether or to herself, "Okay, we're coming in now."

They take the step together into the hallway and freeze, as if afraid that even breathing could set off some sort of a trap—but nothing happens.

They both let out a breath at the same time and Anne giggles. She pats Grace's hand on her arm and whispers, "See? It'll be okay." Grace still has her reservations, but she nods, allowing herself to trust her friend.

Anne looks around and sighs happily. "Alright then! Which way do you wanna go first?"

Grace follows the turn of her head. The hallway splits off to the left and right, then both sides turn after a few feet.

"Uh, right."

"Right-o, Gracie girl!" Anne leads the way, overly cheerful, and they walk down the short corridor. The door opens with a little bit of effort (and an apology to the air from Anne) and they find themselves in a small room that has an oxidized and cracked mirror, a broken table thrown on its side, some dirty towels, a claw-foot tub, and a row of bottles sitting on the floor next to it.

"Huh," Anne says. "A really old bathroom. I'm not sure why I'm surprised. That tub is fucking *sick*, though. I bet a couple of bath bombs in that guy would be *insane*."

Grace finally releases her grip on Anne's arm and walks more fully into the room. She inspects the tub and the bottles quickly before pulling out her phone.

"Woah, hold on," Anne stops her. Grace looks at her questioningly.

"You better ask first, babe. You can't just *take pictures* of someone's private space, you know?"

Grace furrows her brows, just barely ignoring the nickname, while Anne raises hers. She goes to say something, but the silent conversation they have is enough and she nods.

“Er, sorry. I...hope it’s okay that I take photos of your bathroom. Not to be presumptuous, but if this ship is older than photography, then that won’t make sense. Just imagine I’m, like, making a drawing in a split second rather than hours.” She pauses. “Uh. Thank you.” She bows to the open air without knowing why and continues to take photos of the room and its contents. Anne inspects a towel laying on the floor.

“Is it weird that some of this stuff isn’t, like, disintegrated by now? Or just *more* dirty? You said ‘if this ship is older than photography’...”

“Yeah, I’m not sure how old *exactly* of course, I’d need to talk to Jennings about it, but I’m pretty confident it’s older than 1850.”

Anne whistles. “Damn. And it’s just been...floating here? No one’s touched it for that long?”

Grace puffs out a breath and shrugs. “It’s in a pretty open area—not hidden or anything—so I’m just as surprised as you. Probably more so, actually.”

They walk back down the hall, much more confidently, and round to the other branch. They hear the boys making some sort of racket as they pass the open door, but ignore them completely.

Anne waltzes right on into the frigid cabin, while Grace still hesitates.

“Oh, *wow!* This is so fucking cool! Look at that cute little bed nook! *Two* fucking chandeliers?! These people must’ve been like, aristocrats or someone real fancy.” Anne flutters around, unsure what to look at first. Grace takes it all in, feeling the anguish the room is completely cloaked in, then letting it roll off of her.

She continues taking pictures, muttering under her breath all the while. *Just some more, promise it’s not weird, love the flow in here, thank you.* She walks over to a set of doors that looks like a closet. She attempts to open the doors, but they don’t budge no matter how hard she pulls. “Okay, I get it. There’s some things you want kept private. I can respect that,” she whispers.

The windows are filthy, but surprisingly unbroken save a few cracks here and there. In fact, the cabin is the most preserved part of the ship from what she’s seen. All of the furniture is set upright with minimal damage, if just extremely dusty—the colors are muted in the fabrics, and the wooden bits a little split and chipped. The designs are mismatched, but somehow cohesive. It gives the room a sort of eclectic look, like something Grace has seen on Pinterest.

Behind the chaise lounge, there’s what looks like some sort of a piano—*maybe a harpsichord?*—with the keys, understandably, also chipped and cracked and a couple are missing. She gently presses down a key...no sound, not surprising. She presses another further down the board and a very out of tune note rips through the silence.

Anne jumps. “Shit! Don’t do that!”

Grace ducks her head down to hide her amusement. There’s a sheet of paper on the desk with an entire bottle of ink spilled and dried over it, making it impossible to see if anything had been written. *Too bad.*

She walks over to where Anne is: an alcove with a fireplace and a quite frankly *absurd* number of shelves. They aren’t all full and some of the books are littered around on the floor, but this was clearly a well-stocked library at some point.

A goddamn library. Above a goddamn fireplace. On a goddamn ship.

Anne is wide eyed and not quite brushing her fingers across the bindings, careful to not disturb them. Grace is able to make out a few titles along the bindings, but most are too dusty or damaged to tell. It’s absolutely incredible.

“Holy shit, I wish I had my full gear right now. I would love nothing more than to make a list of all of these,” Grace breathes.

They continue inspecting and admiring, when suddenly Anne spins Grace around by her shoulder, pinning her against a wall. She hears her messenger bag and some of its contents hit the floor (*how’d she do that?*) and her face flushes when she realizes how close Anne’s face is to hers.

After a moment, Grace breaks the silence. “Wha...What’s wrong?”

Anne huffs quietly. “Not a thing, Gracie.”

“Then, why...”

Anne’s eyes dart nervously around Grace’s face. “Do you—Do you really not know?”

Grace’s heart rate picks up. “Know what?” she whispers, pretending she doesn’t really know. Anne tucks a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Just how crazy insane I am about you. You’re so—*mmh!*”

God knows how long she’s wanted to kiss Anne, and it’s even better than she’d thought it’d be. Her lips are soft and she smiles into the kiss and something behind Grace’s sternum flares.

They pull back after a (*too short*) moment and Grace keeps her eyes shut a little longer, letting the feeling linger. She looks at Anne and words tumble out, untethered to anything. "Wow. Yeah. Cool. Thank you. That was...wow."

"Shut up, you fucking nerd," Anne giggles and pulls her back in.

She doesn't know how long they stay there kissing—hands wandering, but not too far—just enjoying the moment, as if they aren't in some condemned, antique boat that could crumble around them at any second.

Grace is just about to deepen the kiss again, a promise for *more later*, when someone stumbles into the room.

"Oh, *hellz* yeah. Finally got that stick out of your ass, O'Malley?"

They both break the kiss to glare at Jack, because *of course* it's him. The "pre-gaming" he'd done on the ride over is apparently starting to hit him, paired with the half drunk bottle in his hand of whatever it is he makes in his room. He sways a bit and *jesus*, why does Anne hang out with this guy again?

"Mmm, don' stop on my account. 'M perfectly capa-able of just watchin'. No hands required," he slurs. He holds both hands up as if to prove his point.

"Ugh, you're a goddamn pig, Rackham," Anne says with as much disdain as she can muster, but doesn't move an inch. "We aren't here so you can get off."

He walks over in a drunken swagger Grace is sure he thinks looks sexy, but his hips just look like they're broken. He takes another swig before heavily resting his forearm on the wall right next to them. The smell radiating off of him hits Grace's nose like acetone and she has to resist gagging.

"B'lieve me, Bonny baby, I can get off on jus' 'bout anything." He belches and Grace actually does gag. Anne's face scrunches in disgust.

"That ain't the comeback you think it is, you fucking weirdo."

"Wha' 'bout you, pussy cat? Ya think you could handle this ride? I could show ya a good time." Jack licks his lip as he eyes Grace hungrily and she winces. "Could help ya relax, put a diff'rent kinda stick up that tight little ass."

He moves to touch her face, but Anne latches her hand onto his wrist like a snake and twists hard, her nails digging in. He hisses in pain and she seethes.

“You even *think* about touching my girlfriend again, and I’ll rip that ugly *rat* you call a mustache off your face and hang you from Sherman Hall with your own intestines, *got it?*”

She pushes him and he tumbles into the nearest bookcase, a couple of books falling to the floor. The asshole has the nerve to look surprised, even for a split second. His face darkens and Grace feels the chill return to the air, but she’s not convinced it’s because of Jack.

He spits onto the floor toward them and takes another swig. “Whatever,” he mumbles, then attempts to right himself up. In doing so, he grabs onto the shelves and knocks over even more books and knick knacks.

Grace jumps at a hidden door opening up right next to them and her heart plummets to her stomach. Anne gasps sharply and her eyes widen. She briefly clenches Grace’s arm, but Jack doesn’t seem to notice any of it.

“Yer both kinda ugly anyway, prolly have to find a bag or somethin’ just to...” He continues muttering to himself, periodically raising his voice to throw more cliché insults at them like they’ll care. Anne apparently does, however, especially when it comes to Grace, and starts shooting back at him, the door forgotten. They’re soon in a half drunken yelling match while Grace stands frozen, not paying any attention to them.

A bitter damp wind blows through the cabin from the hidden doorway and the windows darken, turning into a swirling, deep sea green color. It’s hard to tell from across the room, but she swears water is starting to leak through the cracks in the windows.

Oh, shit. We haven’t sunk, have we? No, we would be drowning right now if we had. Oh my god, what the FUCK—

Her breathing gets heavier, suddenly feeling as though the space is too small, too tight, and she sees movement out of the corner of her eye. Black smoke is starting to spill out from the door. It twirls and coils around as though it’s *alive* and takes the shape of something long and thick and writhing, like a tentacle.

“Uh, guys...” Grace tries to say, but it only comes out as a hoarse whisper. Anne isn’t close enough to touch anymore.

The smoke splits and slithers across the floor toward a cursing and increasingly pissed off Jack.

“Guys—” she says louder this time, but that’s when Jack decides to kick over the nearest chair in a rage.

“Jack!”

The warning comes too late.

The tentacles shoot straight out and grab him around the waist and legs and he’s lifted into the air before Grace can even blink.

Anne stands in shock for a moment, eyes as big as saucers. Jack is yelling, but is quickly stifled by another dark appendage while he’s being shaken and twisted this way and that. His bottle falls and crashes to the floor. Anne immediately grabs for Grace, unsure of what to do.

The sounds of Jack’s screams and the howling wind and waves crashing against the side of the ship are muffled, giving way to the sound of an unhurried and hollow *thunk*.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Grace tears her eyes away from Jack to the secret door as the sound gets louder, closer. Smoke billows out even faster and disperses around the room. It balloons a little further and a shadow, tall and broad, *glides* out of it past them in the direction of their struggling not-friend.

The shadow appears to be a person. Although most features are impossible to make out, their hair is long and floating around their head as if they were walking underwater. It matches the pattern of the smoke, which rolls off of their shoulders and back in waves like it's a part of them. They walk slowly, but with a clear—and malevolent—purpose.

A low watery growl rips through the air and Anne screams. Her nails bite into Grace's arm and Grace may now be temporarily deaf in one ear, but she continues to stand frozen, unable to make a sound or move even if she wanted. The growls carry on and she imagines it's what a deep sea monster would sound like if it tried to speak.

Anne's yelling, although she can't make sense of what; Jack's yelling, still muffled; her own brain is yelling, *danger leave now danger*.

Grace sees the chair being righted again by one of the smokey tendrils. The figure continues staring at Jack and the smoke appears to tighten around him.

"Don't! Don't hurt him, please! He's just drunk!" Grace suddenly finds her voice.

The growling stops and things seem eerily quiet for a moment. Jack is pulled marginally closer to the figure, who snarls again, then thrown against the closet doors. He falls to the floor with a pained yelp.

Anne quickly grabs Grace's bag and spilled items, then tries to move them away from the smoke toward Jack. The pair doesn't get far before the shadow turns to them instead.

Grace goes numb. Her brain's connections to her lungs and limbs are completely severed by the bright red glow of the shadow's eyes, the inky black of the rest of their form making them that much more menacing.

"Oh shit fuck dick fucking *shit*—" Anne spits out in a panic, which turns into a scream as she's wrenched away from Grace and held against the opposite wall near Jack.

Grace wants to pinch herself awake and be back in her dorm room, worrying about her project for Professor Jennings' class. She wants to curl up with tea and her favorite Brooks novel, nestled in her bag across the room with Anne. She wants to rewind to just 10 minutes ago when she was making out with her best friend.

But now, she's paralyzed among the worst of the worst of her nightmares and those red eyes are able to pierce right through her and see every fear she's ever carried.

She's panting now and isn't sure if she'll ever know how to breathe normally again. She feels a gentle pressure around her stomach and then she's floating a few inches off the ground toward the figure. She's brought eye to eye with them and is unable to look away, unable to blink, despite the way it stings.

The glow swells and intensifies until all she can see is red. Black spots appear from the overwhelming exposure and tears prick her eyes in pain. She cries out at something burning her hand, but that could be all of her nerves set on fire.

The moment feels unnaturally short and exceedingly long at the same time. It feels like she's experienced a full life in a few seconds, but she's unsure if it's the life of a moth or a sea turtle.

When the redness finally dims, she's back on the ground and being whisked away to Anne, who is sobbing and barely held back by Jack, who is now seemingly sober and holding one arm to his chest awkwardly. Anne grabs her and nearly crushes her ribs.

Grace twists around when she hears the wind and the crashing waves pick up, her eyes latching onto the shadow again. They—*he* stands in the middle of the room, staring at them. The brine churns and foams in the glass behind him; his smoke writhes and coils in increasing agitation.

The trio inches their way closer to the door, avoiding the vapors, when a deep snarl stops them in their tracks. The ceiling rises, lengthening and stretching the room, and the jerking tentacles grow even bigger to fill it out. The chandeliers shake, the tinkling sounds threatening rather than wistful. The glow of the man's eyes brighten into a spotlight directly on them.

LEAVE. NOW.

The tentacles shoot out at them and they all scream.

Jack pushes against the women and trips, barely managing to catch himself before fleeing down the hallway. Anne grabs Grace's hand and yanks her through the door after him.

The main door slams shut behind them as soon as they're clear of the threshold, rattling the glass in the window. Charlie and Frank are almost bowled over by the three of them and start asking frightened questions, which are completely ignored. Jack yells, "*FUCK THIS,*" and all but vaults himself down the gangplank, then sprints down the dock to the car.

The other two guys aren't moving *nearly* fast enough and won't move out of the way. Anne is yelling at them to *Move!* and *We're getting the absolute fuck out of here!*

Grace looks up and sees the sky darkening and the tattered remains of the sails starting to whip around.

"Shit. Let's fucking go, you dumb pricks!"

There's a rumbling below their feet and black smoke rises up between the deck boards.

"Uhhh..."

"What the—"

FUCK OFF.

The voice roars around them like thunder.

"Ooooh my god," and "Yep! Fucking off!" comes from the two men and the four of them are finally down the gangplank and off the ship.

Jack is about two seconds away from throwing a rock through the window to get into Charlie's car, but Charlie soon unlocks it and everyone scrambles in. As he peels out, gravel and dust kicking up behind them, everyone is still yelling and panicking, trying and failing to make sense of the last five minutes.

In between Anne's incessant, desperate kisses across her face, or just *anywhere* she can reach, Grace turns in her grip and looks back at the ship. She spots something not there before, atop the main mast, answering her question:

A black flag, adorned with a skeleton and a flash of red, snapping back and forth in the turbulent, angry wind.