



The Sirens

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THE SIRENS

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For Katie, who inspired this novel and for Jack, who believed I could write
it

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Historical Note

In 1788, a fleet of eleven British ships landed on a shore almost 10,000 miles from England. The ships carried convicts whom the overburdened British prison system could no longer hold. A significant minority hailed from Ireland, which had been under British colonial rule for centuries. Exiled from their homelands, the convicts were put to work to create a new penal colony called New South Wales. Over the next eighty years, British authorities transported thousands of convicts to New South Wales and the nearby colonies of (as they were then called) Van Diemen's Land, Brisbane and the Swan River Colony. In 1901, these and other surrounding colonies united to become Australia.

The First Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, had thrived on the land for millennia before the arrival of those ships. It is estimated that over 250 languages – reflecting distinct nations with distinct cultures – were spoken in Australia prior to 1788. British invasion was devastating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Their lands were taken from them. Many lost their lives to colonial violence and imported disease. Following 1788, First Nations peoples were subject to racist policies that aimed to 'assimilate' them into white Australian society, an attempt to deprive them of their language and culture as well as their land. The effects of this are still felt today.

This is a painful legacy and one that is not mine to write about. Nor is it my place to write about the enduring agency of First Nations peoples and their conservation of language, culture and connection to Country. I would

encourage you to seek out their stories. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, accessible at aiatsis.gov.au, is a good place to start.

Acknowledgement of Country.

Comber Bay is a fictional place, inspired by my treasured memories of staying with family in Batemans Bay, on the south coast of New South Wales. I would like to acknowledge the Walbunja people, the Traditional Custodians of that land, and pay my respects to Elders both past and present.

The ocean has its silent caves

Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'The Ocean'

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

She breathes in time with the sea.

In.

The waves crash against the rocks, frothing through the mouth of the cave. Icy on her toes, her shaking thighs.

Out.

The tide sucks away, leaving offerings in its wake. A glistening rope of seaweed. Pieces of shell, pearled as bone.

She grits her teeth but the pain rips through her – a bright, shocking thing – and the next breath is a scream.

Another contraction, her cry swallowed by the thundering waves. She knows she is safe in her dark cave, with its slick rocks and its steady drip of salt. But the sea is hungry and it must be fed.

She places a shaking hand between her legs, feels the baby's skull with its bloodied caul.

Now.

She lifts the fabric of her dress, bunching it into her mouth, biting down hard on the cloth, her body gathering itself together. One more push and she howls, her body split open until it is empty, spent, and the child is in her arms. She touches the tiny starfish hands; the half-closed eyes; the shell pink lips.

She allows herself this one, precious moment. And then she rises, trembling, her child mewling at her breast.

Below the entrance to her cave, the sea churns over the rocks, waiting.

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LUCY

MONDAY, 11 FEBRUARY 2019

Hamilton Hume University
Broken Hill, NSW
Australia

900 kilometres inland

It's the scream that wakes her.

The room smells of must and sleep. She can feel the rapid beat of a pulse, the tender cords of a throat. Fingernails rake at her hands.

A grey dawn filters through the slats in the blinds, and in its light Lucy sees Ben below her, his eyes bright with fear. A blood vessel has burst in his left sclera, forming a red star. She stumbles back from the bed.

‘Lucy,’ he splutters, one hand clawing at his neck. ‘What the—’

The words choke out of him, his voice strangled.

Strangled. Her hands on his neck, the bulge of his eyes.

She'd been strangling him.

He sits up in bed, switches on a lamp. She bucks away from it like an animal. There is movement outside, in the corridor. A knock at the door.

‘Ben, mate? Are you all right? I thought I heard—’

She moves slowly, as if through water. Her pulse hammers at her throat. The knocking intensifies; Ben is coughing now. Calling for help.

The press of the door at her back. She grasps the doorknob with sweaty fingers, uses it to ground herself. The door is already unlocked, the faulty dead bolt jangling. She wrenches it open, pushes past Nick, Ben’s roommate, and runs down the corridor up the flight of stairs to her own room.

Once inside, she leans against the door, breathing heavily as she struggles to process what just happened. Her dorm room is pin-neat as always, the books in careful piles on her desk and bedside table. But the bedclothes are rumpled, the air stale. Her sheets feel damp, as if she’s sweated through them.

She tries to draw the events of the evening back to her. Not willing to face the canteen, she’d skipped dinner; soothing her anxious stomach with ginger tea in her favourite mug brought from home. Then she’d put on a podcast and settled in for an early night, hoping the distraction would vanquish thoughts of Ben, and what he’d done.

There’d been a dream, she remembers now: cold water licking her skin, stones digging into her feet. The scrape of rock against her skull. A man’s hot breath in her face, his fingers digging into her flesh – fear warring with the desperate need to fight, to survive—

And then she’d woken to find herself straddling Ben’s chest, her hands clawed tight around his throat. Horror sweeps through her, numbing her fingertips, her lips.

She’d been sleepwalking. Something she has never – not once in her life – done before.

She looks at her hands, watches them tremble. Had she *wanted* to hurt Ben – to kill him, even – after what he’d done to her? Or had it been the dream, which lingers still like a bad taste in her mouth – the gnaw of fear,

that primal need to fight, to survive? It was as if some limbic part of her brain had directed her to his room, a puppet led by its master.

A panicked glance out of the window tells her that the sun is rising now, turning the sky pink. She sees a dark blur of movement in the quadrangle: a uniform with neon lettering. A campus security officer. Ben – or his roommate, Nick – must have called after she fled.

She imagines what he'll say: *I woke up and she had her hands on my throat – she was trying to kill me.* Her thoughts whirl; she tries to slow her breathing, but finds that she can't. The panic rises and rises, an awful heat in her blood.

There'll be an investigation, she's sure of that. She'll be suspended, possibly even expelled. God, could they get the actual police involved? Could she be arrested – charged – with assault?

Everything she's yearned and worked for. Gone. She pictures Ben: bruises blooming around his throat, the gouge marks from her nails in his flesh. *She* did that. Even if she doesn't remember it, even if she wasn't awake.

But who would believe her, especially after what happened?

After all, they've already taken his side.

Sweat dampens her armpits, the urge to flee rising inside her.

But where can she go? She can't go home to her parents. That would mean telling them that she, Lucy, their *good girl*, attacked someone. And, worse, it would mean telling them *why*, telling them what Ben had done. No, she could never. But then, who? Who will help her, provide refuge while she works out what to do, how to fix things?

And then the answer comes to her. She changes quickly, scrabbles inside the small cupboard for an overnight bag. Underwear. Clothes. Wet wipes. Moisturiser. Laptop. Laptop charger. A notebook. She packs with shaking fingers.

She opens the drawer of her desk, retrieves a battered postcard, runs a fingertip over the address scrawled on the back.

Cliff House, 1 Malua Street, Comber Bay.

There's only one place she can go, one person who might understand.

The road stretches on endlessly in front of her, merging with the horizon. Around her there is nothing but empty gold scrub, miles and miles of it. Dusky pink corellas – her mother's favourite bird – burst from a withered tree as she passes.

There are no other cars. She is alone.

She reaches to the passenger seat for her iPhone, wedges it between her thighs as she calls her sister. After several rings – Lucy holding her breath in the silence between each one – the phone clicks.

'Jess?' she says, hope catching like a burr in her throat. But then her sister's pre-recorded voice comes bright and terse down the line.

'Hi, you've reached Jess Martin. I'm unable to come to the phone right now—'

'Fuck,' Lucy whispers as she hangs up.

Her eyes well with tears, blurring the landscape in front of her.

She tells herself that it's all right. That Jess will answer eventually, that she'll know how to help.

Won't she?