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ANYA
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LIGHT
ABOVE the
OCEAN

AMELIA GIUDICI



ANDERSEN PRESS

PART ONE

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She hasn't come home.

The thought pulsed through Anya like a heartbeat.

She hasn't come home.

She hasn't come home.

Her mum always came home at 9 p.m., creaking open the bedroom door to kiss her forehead goodnight. Anya would wait up for her, only ever pretending to be asleep. But tonight she hadn't returned.

Anya strained, desperate to hear the soft metallic scrape of a key in the lock, or the muffled tread of footsteps. But there was nothing. Just the distant howl of the wind and the rain and the sea.

Her mum worked all alone on a small boat. Floating above the waves, she conducted experiments late into the evening. Anya had only ever glimpsed at the contraptions that she used – they were all thin, wiry things that, catching the light, would begin to vibrate. Beyond this, her mum's work was a tight-lipped secret. Whenever Anya tried asking her about it, she would always just smile and wave her hands, as if brushing the questions away.

She hasn't come home.

Anya couldn't bear it. She threw off her duvet, making her way over to the large window. Drawing back the curtains, she looked out. The sea was a black and moving mass, whipped up by the strong winds. Nose pressed against the glass, she tried to make out more, scanning for the figure of a boat, hoping to see the happy blink of its light on the horizon. But she couldn't see anything.

Anya's unease deepened, hardening into a knot of panic. Was her mum in danger? She turned from the window, looking around. She needed a plan. Grabbing a thick yellow jumper from the floor, she pulled it on over her pyjamas. Then, marching to her wardrobe, she rifled through a jumble of items. Her fingers brushed against her favourite cardigan. Her mum had made it, knitting together soft threads of blue and green and burnt orange. Anya had chosen the colours with Imani, her mum's best friend, during one of their many day trips together. Anya now pushed the cardigan aside, selecting her waterproof trousers and anorak.

She hasn't come home.

Anya raced down the stairs, two steps at a time. She went through the living room, past the kitchen, and then out into the hallway where her wellington boots were kept. She tugged them on over her bedsocks.

Anya hesitated. She could still turn around. But then she thought of her mum, cold and alone out at sea. She couldn't waste any more time. Screwing up her courage and bracing

herself for the weather, Anya unlocked the door, pocketed the key and stepped out into the night.

The wind was sharp against her face and the rain spat down at her. Cutting through the garden, Anya made her way out on to the worn coastal path and began to wind her way along it. Taking a sudden right turn, she stepped out towards the very edge of the cliff. The black sky was electric. The wind, stronger now, battered against her raggedly. Anya grimaced, lowering herself down on to a set of hidden stone steps. They were wet and so she reached out for the old iron railing, wanting to steady herself. It burned with cold. She jerked away, cursing herself for forgetting her gloves. It was too late to turn back. Bunching her hands up under her jumper, she continued on with slow and careful steps, making her descent to the craggy cove below.

Even before she'd reached the hard sand, Anya could see that the white boat was gone. The boat wasn't really theirs; it belonged to Janus, the organisation her mum worked for. It was expensive, with electricity and a small room on board. Anya had watched many times as her mum set out first in the wooden rowing boat, before reaching and then docking at the white boat. She would climb aboard and then turn back, waving goodbye. Anya would watch as the boat sailed off, growing smaller and smaller, turning into a speck of white on the horizon. On a clear night, she'd be able to see the bright dot of light from her window and know that her mum was safe.

Looking out now though, Anya couldn't see anything. A grey sea fog was rolling in, sweeping over the cresting waves, smothering them and obscuring everything from sight. Anya was wet and cold and alone. She walked closer to the water, frantically searching for some sign of her mum. The storm heaved around her, crackling with thunder and rain. She was desperate, the threat of tears stinging her eyes. She just wanted to know that her mum was safe. She just wanted to see her. She wished for it so hard that, when her eyes did finally settle on a faint glow out in the distance, she thought that she might be imagining it.

Anya blinked.

The light was still there, blurred by the fog. She closed her eyes again, shutting them tightly and counting to three. The light remained. It was clearer than before, although its shape and size were hazy.

Why was her mum still out there?

It was late. Far too late to still be working. It didn't make sense. Fear splintered through her. Was her mum in trouble? She imagined her, injured and alone, unable to steer the ship. Or perhaps she'd fallen asleep and was now drifting dangerously out to sea.

Anya had to try and save her.

She looked sideways, glancing at the lone remaining boat. It was her boat, a birthday present from her mum. She'd rowed it many times, in good weather and bad. She'd crashed only once, capsizing in a storm. A long, thin scar now gleamed

across her left cheek. But even then, she'd ultimately been fine. The boat had been easily repaired and she was still confident on the water.

Besides, she wouldn't have to row both legs of the journey. She just needed to reach her mum, dock at the big white boat and climb aboard. Then they would be together, and they could come home together, and this whole miserable night would be over.

Deep down, Anya knew that she was being foolish. But she was so tired and so cold and all she wanted was to know that her mum was safe.

Fingers trembling, she untied the rope.

2

Waves crashed against the boat, splashing in cold water. But Anya was a strong rower, steadily withstanding the push and pull of the ocean. She struck her oars into it, again and again, heaving the boat forward.

Encased in a thick sea fog, Anya could no longer make out land. She could only see the dim glimmer of light ahead, beckoning her on.

The fog . . .

There was something wrong with it.

It lacked its usual dampness, vibrating instead with a soft warmth. But Anya couldn't quite hold on to this thought and it slipped softly from her mind. She didn't even register the shift in the wind, which had begun blowing her in the right direction, pushing her onward, propelling her towards the light.

The light.

It was all that she could think about. Clear and oval shaped, it beamed at her from out of the mist. The closer she got, the calmer the sea became. Even the sharp bite of the cold had begun to thaw.

There was no sign of her mum. No sign of the white boat. But Anya didn't notice. She couldn't. Her mind was simply filled with the light.

Transfixed, her grip on the oars slackened. She stopped rowing. Yet the boat continued on, drawing her nearer and nearer.

The light was a window of pure white, hovering above the ocean. Anya was right in front of it now. She was so close that she could feel its heat, could feel the crackle and beat of electric energy. She was so close that she could touch it.

And so she did.

Anya reached out and placed her hand against the light.

There was no blinding flash. No sudden reaction of any kind. Instead, Anya felt herself start to fade. A deep, warm joy travelled through her. A sense of total contentment. She smiled to herself. And then she was gone.

3

Something was wrong.

The sky was still dark, but the storm had passed and the air felt lighter. The sea, now calm, lapped softly against the boat. Anya felt a rush of nausea and hurled her head overboard, throwing up. The tang of it stung her throat.

Her mum.

There hadn't been any sign of her. Instead, there had only been –

Only been –

Anya's mind went blank.

There had been something else, she was sure of it. She'd encountered something in the middle of the ocean.

But what?

She couldn't think.

Couldn't remember.

It was as if someone had reached inside her head and scooped out the memory.

The memory of –

She *knew* that there was something. She could feel it, just

out of reach, perched now on the tip of her tongue. And then even that – the awareness of an absence – left her.

Anya blinked.

She looked around, freshly aware of the black gleam of water. What was she thinking? Her mum wasn't here. It wasn't safe.

She took the oars, slotting them back into place. She needed to get home. Anya began to row, heaving methodically, rhythmically, just as her mum had taught her. The boat cut through the sea with a steady ease, wind whipping through her mess of brown hair. She focused her sights on the familiar rocky cove; moonlit and glinting, it beckoned her home.

Hitting wet sand, Anya jumped out, landing in the ghost of a wave. She hauled the boat a couple of paces up the beach before tying it to a buoy, anchoring it back to the land. And then she ran, reaching the bottom of the steps, hauling herself up them.

Something was wrong.

She couldn't explain it, but she could feel it: something was deeply, desperately wrong. She needed to get away from the sea. She needed to get home.

Now on the coastal path, Anya's legs began to burn. Her breath was short and sharp. She could see the dull outline of the house ahead, blunt and square, pressed against the edge of the cliff. The grey weathered stone looked almost black in the darkness.

And then, turning the final corner, she saw it: the kitchen light was on, casting a soft beam through the night. Her heart leaped. Her eyes fixed on the outline of a figure, visible through the window for just a moment before moving out of sight.

Someone was home.

Anya quickened her pace, sprinting up the path. Dislodging the key from her pocket, she jammed it into the front door, swinging it open. ‘Mum!’ she shouted, hurriedly working off her boots, throwing her anorak on to the floor. ‘Mum!’ She raced down the corridor and into the kitchen.

But it wasn’t her mum.

‘Anya?’ a woman said, turning to face her. It was Imani, her mum’s best friend. ‘What are you doing?’ A thin line of concern creased her forehead. ‘I thought you were in bed.’

‘What?’ Anya said, her face flushing hot. ‘No, I was out looking for—’ She looked desperately at Imani. ‘Mum didn’t come home.’

‘I know,’ Imani said softly. ‘We still haven’t found her.’

‘But she should be back by now!’ Panic seared through Anya’s body. It felt like she was about to either faint or explode. ‘I was waiting – I was waiting for so long. And the storm was so loud! So I went out to look for her – please, don’t be angry with me. I couldn’t see her. I couldn’t find her anywhere.’

‘You went out tonight?’

‘Yes. I know I shouldn’t have. But, Imani – Mum didn’t

come home. I haven't seen her since this morning, I just—'
Her anxiety burned, clasping her lungs.

'This morning?' Imani's voice was sharp.

'Yes, before school.'

'OK,' she said, crouching down. 'Breathe slowly now. Breathe with me.' She took hold of Anya's hand, squeezing it. 'I'm going to make you a hot drink.'

Anya watched as Imani moved around the small kitchen, locating each item with a fluent ease. It didn't make sense. How could she remain so calm? 'I don't—'

'Here we go,' Imani said, pressing a mug of hot chocolate into her hands. 'Now, I'm just going to go upstairs.'

'But—'

'Drink up; it'll make you feel better. I'll be just a moment.'

The liquid was deep and rich, but not sweet enough. Not like her mum made it. Anya's heart lurched. She felt awful: weak and tired and desperate. She drank more, forcing it down her throat, drinking until it was all gone.

'Anya,' Imani said, coming back down the stairs. She looked different, her face tight with a fresh worry. 'I'm going to step out to make a phone call, I'll be just outside. You stay here so I can see you.'

'OK.' It felt like she'd lost the ability to say anything else. She was exhausted now, her limbs heavy and her head dull. She got up to wash the mug, drying it and placing it back in the cupboard. Something still felt wrong. *Off.*

Turning back around, Anya surveyed the room. It looked as it always did: mottled white walls and a low, sloped ceiling. They lived in an old fisherman's cottage, everything packed tightly together. The kitchen pressed into the living room, where two cobalt sofas sat facing each other. Atop them lay bold patterned cushions, brightly woven throws and—

Her cardigan?

Anya stood up, staring at the bundle of blue and green and burnt orange. Her favourite cardigan was on the sofa, sprawled across the leftmost arm.

Earlier, hadn't it been upstairs, in her wardrobe?

Walking over to it, she took the soft material in her hands, tracing her mum's carefully knitted stitches. What was it doing down here?

The sound of the door made Anya flinch. Spinning around, she saw Imani step back into the kitchen.

'I've just spoken to your mum's boss,' she said. 'They're going to come and pick you up. Something unexpected happened while she was out working tonight. They want to speak to you about it in person.'

'Is she OK?'

'I don't know.' Imani gave her a pinched smile. 'I really hope so.'

They waited for a long time without speaking. Anya sat, contained in her own weariness, while Imani stood watching

her, fiddling absent-mindedly with her necklace. It held the golden print of a tiny scallop shell – the double of the one Anya's mum always wore. When the doorbell finally rang they both started, as if surprised at being disturbed.

Imani greeted a woman at the door. She was dressed smartly, if blandly, in a dark navy suit, her blonde hair slicked back in a tight bun.

'Hello, Anya,' she said, entering the room. 'My name is Shelby Brown and I work with your mother at Janus.' Her tone was placid, laced with a banal friendliness that Anya immediately distrusted.

'Is she OK?'

The woman smiled, her round, white face flushed pink from the cold. 'That's what I need to talk to you about. I know this is all quite strange, but you have nothing to worry about. You just need to come with me back to Janus.'

Anya looked over to Imani. 'I don't—'

'I know that this is scary,' Shelby said, leaning in closer. 'But we're going to sort everything out.'

'Imani?' Anya said. 'Can't you come too?'

Imani pressed her lips together, glancing hesitantly at Shelby. 'I'm sorry but I can't. I need to stay here.'

'Why?'

She paused again. 'In case your mum comes home. I need to be here.'

'So why can't I stay too?'

‘They’ll explain once you’re in the car.’ She walked over to Anya, squeezing her shoulder tight. ‘I know it doesn’t make sense right now, but you need to go with them. It’s for the best, I promise.’ She reached down, touching the cardigan still clutched in Anya’s hands. ‘Do you want me to hold on to this for you? I know it’s your favourite.’

‘No,’ Anya said, hardening her grip. ‘I’ll take it with me.’