

The Unincorporated Woman

Prologue

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The old woman stood on the foredeck of the steel hulled fishing boat breathing in the fresh salt air. She was not quite 70 and her vision wasn't what it used to be but she could still appreciate the magnificence of the California coastline. She stared out at the houses lining the cliffs off Half Moon Bay. Swaths of homes had been burned to the ground while others remained pristine—if not a bit overgrown. Still others were in various stages of dilapidation. Though she was a safe distance from the shore itself she did note the massive, building swells rolling into the bay's once famous surf break.

But something was missing. *Right*, she thought, *midday on a weekend and not a single surfer out.*

She sighed but took satisfaction in the fact that no one would notice her small, modified fishing trawler drifting aimlessly out to sea. At least they wouldn't notice until her plan had been executed, hours removed from any unlikely rescue mission. And by then it wouldn't matter. She'd be safely buried miles offshore with only the local sea population as witness to her desperate act. If anything they'd find the boat drifting out to sea, unattended and abandoned—just as she'd planned it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the squawk of a seagull drafting the trawler.

*What a beautiful sight.*

She took another deep breath and smiled at the glory of it all.

*What am I doing here?*

She was suddenly frightened, looking around in dismay. She hated boats. Hated the ocean.

She grabbed the rail to steady herself and noticed a large, smooth casket just a little forward of stern. It was held in place by some large rubber dowels on the deck and was attached to a hydraulic hoist mechanism. The entire casket was connected to and shrouded by a number of heavy chains that swayed to the asymmetrical rhythm of the

ocean. The woman noticed that the casket had a number of languages scrawled across its surface. She read the Chinese writing first, then the Latin then the Hebrew. She realized she could read the writing but had absolutely no idea what it said.

*I need to be in there*, she suddenly remembered. *Go...Go now.*

She looked back once more at the magnificent desolation and made her way to the casket. There was a large button protruding from a console next to the casket. It read, “Press to lift.”

She did.

The casket hissed open. It looked quite comfortable. *Everything is where it should be*, she thought then slowly climbed in and lay down. As soon as she was prone a small robotic arm unfurled from an inner compartment. It contained a rectangular control panel with three round buttons. The seagull that had until now contented itself to fly above the floating spectacle, suddenly decided to land on one of the ship’s protruding antennas.

The woman noticed the bird and smiled. *How lovely.* But for the sudden, off-kilter jolt of a sizeable wave she may have lay there gazing for sometime.

*Press the red button. Press...the red...button.*

She pressed the button.

The casket cover began to close on top of her. She began to panic. Her heart started to race. *What...what am I doing in here?*

At precisely the moment her panic set in a gentle mist began to fog the still open casket. She breathed it in deeply and let the sedative work its magic. She then noticed that the chamber contained interior lights. She would not be enshrouded in darkness after all. There was still work to be done. The casket sealed itself with the same familiar hiss but this time accompanied by the sound of multiple seals closing. The outside world was now gone. All that was left for her now was the console—still directly in front of her.

*Press the yellow button. Yellow...yellow...*

She pressed the yellow button and immediately felt the casket lift up off the deck. She could feel and hear the hydraulic system doing its job. The attached chains creaked in protest as they tightened under the heavy load.

The seagull stepped skittishly across the antenna array, watching as the hoisted casket slowly moved into the center of the boat where a trap door had opened itself up

revealing the ocean beneath. The casket came to a stop directly over the exposed pit, swinging to and fro—a macabre pendulum subject to the whim of wind and sea.

The woman let the swaying sensation calm her frazzled nerves. There was still something to do but what was it? The morphine mist was soothing but not enough to put her out. That she knew would come later so then what...what?

She knew her life depended on the answer but for the life of her could not remember. The seagull watched as the water began to slowly fill the deck of the boat.

*So tired now, can't think...but...must.*

As she drifted off into the morphine induced sleep the boat with the casket still attached filled with water and began to sink. The seagull squawked loudly at the loss of her resting place and flew off as the ship with casket still attached dropped below the surface.