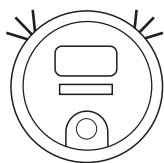


THE LOST
SOULS OF
BENZAITEN



Kelly Murashige

**SOHO
TEEN**

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CHAPTER ONE

I IMAGINE A first appointment with a new therapist is never easy. However, it is about eight million times more difficult when you don't talk.

In my defense, this doctor has been forewarned. My parents called ahead of time. They told the others beforehand too, but I'm hoping this therapist will be smart enough to know when he asks me, *And what brings you here today?* my only response will be to slowly lift my eyes to his face and stare at him like I'm trying to suck out his soul.

That being said (or, well, unsaid), as soon as the door to his office opens, I shoot to my feet, then start to sit, then change my mind and hover in an awkward squatting position like I'm about to lay an egg in his waiting room.

He blinks, his expression unreadable. After a few excruciating seconds of silence, he says, "You must be Machi."

I chew my lip. It's good to know I'm as socially incompetent as ever.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he says. "I'm Dr. Tsui. Would you like to come in?"

Not really, but I don't have a choice.

I follow him into his office, casting one last backward look at the exit like I'm about to be imprisoned for a crime I never meant to commit. I mean, it's not *illegal* to stop talking, is it? Why *can't* I plead the Fifth for the rest of my life?



“Welcome to my office,” Dr. Tsui says, closing the door behind me.

I can practically hear Angel’s scoff.

What a dork, she would say.

I think Sunny would like him. *He seems nice. Compassionate. You need someone who understands you without making you explain everything that brought you here.*

But I can easily explain what brought me here.

They did.

The walls of Dr. Tsui’s office are purple. Not a deep, claustrophobic mauve but a calming shade of lavender. To the left, light filters in through the window blinds. A trio of figurines sits on his desk in the corner. Made of porcelain and painted with muted colors, they look like triplets. They wear their hair in flowery buns, the blossoms light pink and purple. Each woman holds a musical instrument, her expression placid as she plays a song no one but her sisters can hear.

I stop in front of the two identical plush chairs placed in the center of the room, then lift my eyes to Dr. Tsui, waiting for him to take a seat.

His smile is kind. “Choose whichever one is calling your name.”

I try not to frown. So he just lets his clients pick whichever chair they want? He’s constantly switching from one seat to the next, as if doctor and patient are interchangeable?

I bite the inside of my cheek, my temples throbbing with the beginnings of an overthinking headache. If I sit in the chair he usually takes, whichever one that is, he’ll think I’m trying to undermine him. But if I take the one all his patients choose, I’ll be just like the other wrecks who come to his office, weeping over breakups and narcissistic mothers and the universal yet crushing burden of being alive. And God forbid I switch seats from session to session. That would tell him I’m

the kind of person who bounces between two chairs, two roles, two identities, never knowing who I really am.

Maybe I just need to sit down.

I perch on the edge of the closest seat, careful not to let my shoulders brush the back. I don't like being touched. Not by people. Not by things. Not ever again.

Taking the other seat and picking up a clipboard from the table, Dr. Tsui regards me through his thin, rectangular glasses.

I scrutinize his expression. If my seating decision has displeased him, he doesn't let it show.

"I've heard you are, at the moment, not willing to communicate verbally."

I nod, a bobblehead in a tacky gift shop bought on a whim and forgotten in the car.

"You have a whiteboard, though," he says. "Is that right?"

Another nod. I carry it everywhere I go. By now, a year into my silence, it's a part of me. Every time I step outside, it's tucked away in my bag, bumping against my side like the world's most pathetic metronome.

"I also asked if you could fill out the intake form," he continues. "Did you happen to bring that today?"

I nod again. At this rate, I'm going to give myself a neck ache.

I guess I should be used to it by now. When I first went silent, I didn't even have a whiteboard. I just nodded and shook my head. But the only people who ever interacted with me, aside from my long string of therapists, were my parents. Eventually, they stopped asking questions.

Reaching into my bag, I pull out the thin, cerulean folder I bought before my freshman year. I thought I was going to fill it with my chemistry notes and study guides and graded essays with the words *GREAT JOB* written at the top. But I'm not in school anymore.



“That’s a nice folder,” he says. “Very blue.”

I don’t say anything. I mean, yeah, no kidding, but even if I hadn’t stopped talking, I still wouldn’t have responded. What could I have said? *Thanks, I bought it myself?*

I give him a tight-lipped smile and hand him the intake form. “Thank you,” he says. “Would it be okay if I read this now?” I nod, and his eyes fall to the papers.

INTAKE FORM: Dr. Tsui

Patient Name: Machi

Date of First Appointment: June 3

Narrative (What brings you to my office?):

Hi. My name is Machi. I’m seventeen years old. I have listed my address and phone number on the bottom of the sheet, as requested. I found you through online searches. Or my parents did. Sheryl, my previous therapist, gave me some referrals, but every time I tried to look up the names, I started to spiral. I don’t take change well. Every time something has changed, it’s been for the worse.

That’s probably not a good thing to say—write—to a new doctor. It doesn’t sound very hopeful, does it? But then again, if I were hopeful, I wouldn’t be here.

I’m a student, but I don’t go to a regular high school anymore. I do my classes online. It’s frustrating when the online programs tell me I’m wrong for putting $(f(a + b) - f(a))/b$ instead of $[f(a + b) - f(a)]/b$, but that’s a price I’m willing to pay.

You asked me to state, in my own words, what brought me here. When I used to write to Sheryl, she said she felt like I was holding back.

I mean, she didn't say it like *that*; she said something like *You know I'm always here for you, Machi, no matter what you tell me*, which was so sweet and comforting, it made me want to blurt out all my secrets, from the little things, like the time I spit out a piece of stew meat in a napkin and threw it away because my mother went through a *Cooking Mama* phase and burned everything she touched, to the one big thing: what really happened to make me stop talking.

I didn't get to tell her, though. Not everything. She left before I could.

So instead of giving you the diplomatic answer as to why I'm here, which is that I'm dedicated to bettering myself and becoming a functioning being in society, I'm going to be honest: I'm here because I have to be.

I go to doctors because it's what my parents want. I've always caused them so much stress. Losing the will to speak didn't help. And going to doctors also means *paying* for doctors, which puts more stress on them. According to them, the money is less important than my mental health, but that only makes it worse.

Sheryl said it's best not to think about it that way. *What we put out into the world, whether it's voiced or written or simply thought, has power.*

Her words, not mine.

That was the one thing I didn't like about her: her optimism. Visible in everything from the cross-stiches—JUST BREATHE and HAVE YOU SMILED TODAY?—hanging on her walls to the bouquet of cake pops set in a mug on the table between us. Her cheeriness was downright grating in our early sessions, but I



grew to tolerate it. I never did take a cake pop, though. That would have felt like a step too far. Like I was just taking and taking and taking.

Now she's gone, and there's nothing left for me to take.

Anyway, going back to your prompts: Yes, I have been to doctors before. There was Sheryl, obviously, but I saw some others before. They didn't help.

The second doctor I saw, for example, displayed all his diplomas in his waiting room, a nonverbal way of saying *I AM VERY IMPORTANT*. Clearly. The man had gone to Harvard. But all he did was observe me with startlingly light eyes. When he finally spoke, he said, *Tell me about all the things that made you hurt so much, you stopped talking.*

I didn't know how to answer. How could I? Every time I tried to write, he would shake his head like I was disappointing him, and I would sink just a little lower, shame burning at the corners of my eyes. So instead of responding, I used our session time to examine his room. Everything was beige, from the chairs to the walls to the desk and the little inbox perfectly aligned with the left corner. An emergency kit hung on a hook above his head. It was the old-fashioned type, a white metal box with a red plus sign. I imagined if it ever fell from the hook, it would conk him on the head, which, granted, *would* be quite the emergency. We lasted two sessions, which is, coincidentally, how many weeks' worth of food and water you should store in case of a *real* emergency.

All the therapists I've seen tried to get me to recall the worst parts of my life. But the problem isn't that I've forgotten; it's that I remember.

I'm an only child. My parents have no history of mental health diagnoses. They're still married. Happily, I hope. They're also, as you know, not here because they're back in my mother's home state, where they lived before they had me. My maternal grandparents recently passed away, so my parents are getting things settled.

I don't have friends.

I don't have any problems with crime, drugs, or alcohol. I somehow doubt people admit they do, especially to doctors like you. For whatever it's worth, though, I'm being honest here.

The rest of your questions are optional, so I hope it's okay if I don't answer them. I think this was enough for you to read. Am I sitting silently while you're skimming through these notes? Probably. What else would I be doing?

As my appointment with Dr. Tsui nears its end, the clock ticking toward the hour, Dr. Tsui says, "I've enjoyed getting to learn more about you."

Doubtful.

"I know it's our first meeting," he says, "and I understand this has been difficult for you."

I stare at the wall. He already knows how I feel about Sheryl's abrupt departure. How I felt like I was so, *so* close to telling her everything that had happened with Angel and Sunny. How I even occasionally let myself think about the good times, if only because Sheryl was so focused on the positive, it made me want to be more like her.

How her leaving made me feel like every bad thing was happening all over again.



“Coming here today was a major step forward,” Dr. Tsui says. “Would you be okay if I issued you a challenge?”

What are you, five? I can almost hear Angel saying.

“Well, it isn’t *just* a challenge,” he says. “It’s also a gift.”

Great. I just met him, and I’m already taking from him, just as I did with Sheryl.

Reaching into a shoulder bag slumped against the table—I bet he set it there so I couldn’t discern which seat is actually his—he pulls out a notebook. I try not to look too interested as he holds it out.

“This is for you,” he says. “You aren’t obligated to write in it, but if you ever want to share some of your thoughts with me, on your own time, without having to scribble on your whiteboard, you can use this.”

I take the journal, feeling its weight in my hands. A yin-yang symbol the size of my palm adorns the front cover.

“Oh, and one more thing.”

Of course.

“Before our next session,” Dr. Tsui says, “would you be willing to go on a little adventure? Visit someplace you’ve never been before? I would recommend someplace relaxing. A place where you could spend some time around people, even if you don’t speak to them.”

I pick at my nails. I’m not exactly the adventurous type. The most daring thing I’ve done recently is eat yogurt with yesterday’s date printed beneath the BEST BY sticker.

“I prepared a list of places you could explore. You can find that on the front page of the notebook. Forgive my handwriting.”

See? imaginary-Angel says. *A dork.*

I don’t know, imaginary-Sunny says. *I think he’s just being nice.*

Okay, great. I’ve started hearing my former friends’ voices in my head. But I’m sure a little trip to—I open to the notebook

and glance at the first line—a *small, hole-in-the-wall coffee shop* will fix me right up. Because a good espresso will make me all better. Espresso to heal the depresso, as they say.

“Would that be okay?” Dr. Tsui asks. “Again, you don’t have to write in the journal, but would you be willing to visit one of those places?”

I bite down. My teeth clink like ice cubes in a glass. I don’t want to go anywhere. But I promised my parents I would *try* to get better. Compared to what my mother’s going through now, stopping by one animal shelter or coffee shop is nothing.

I don’t want to go anywhere, though. Not as myself.

I imagine waking up as someone different. Waltzing into a bookstore, leaning on the display, and asking the workers for all their recommendations, a grin on my face and a sparkle in my eye. Maybe if it were that easy, things would be different. Maybe I would be happy.

I let out a breath, still staring at the page, painfully aware of the silence. I wonder what Dr. Tsui is looking at. Me, I guess, but he’s bound to get bored after a second or two. I’m not particularly interesting. Not the kind of girl people write songs and poems about, or the one people take photos of on the street because there’s just something so intriguing about her.

Angel was that kind of girl. Sunny too. While Angel was visually striking, her confidence palpable and impossible to ignore, Sunny had a beautiful quietness to her. A captivating sort of poise. I would find myself looking at them sometimes, thinking I was lucky to have them.

Until I wasn’t.

I look up at Dr. Tsui. Balancing the notebook on my knee, I nod.

HOME, I TEXT my parents as I unlock the front door. The off-white paint slapped across the doorframe has begun to



crack, peeling off like drooping petals from a pistil. My father keeps saying he'll deal with it soon, but considering he's in a completely different state for his in-laws' dual funeral and his daughter is at home eating expired yogurt and having her first appointment with her seventh therapist, I think the door is pretty low on his list of priorities.

I've just stepped into the apartment when my mother sends back a thumbs-up. She's usually much more verbose, the type to send huge, blocky messages that take up my entire phone screen, but I know she's busy—and possibly still upset with me.

In a lengthy email I wrote and deleted at two in the morning the day before my parents left, I tried to explain I had decided to stay home not because I don't love them, or because I want to spite my grandparents, or even because death and packing are two of my greatest fears.

I just couldn't stop thinking about how my first time visiting my grandparents' town would be for the funeral, because my grandparents had died and I hadn't even been there, and even once I arrived, I wouldn't be able to talk. If we ran into one of my grandparents' friends, what would I say?

Well, nothing. I would say nothing.

How would I act? Would I have to hold up my whiteboard? Would my parents do the explaining for me, their heads bowed like they were taking on the weight of my sins? At the funeral, people would whisper about me. *There was always something "off" about her. Those poor parents. Their family is such a trainwreck.*

Then there's the racism.

My phone buzzes. My father has sent a heart, likely to offset the curtness of my mother's thumbs-up.

When I first went quiet last year, my parents would cry and hold me too close, saying, *We love you, Machi. Please tell us*

what's wrong. It made me sick to see them upset, so I closed my door and tuned them out, my head full of so much noise.

If they knew why I stopped talking, I don't think they would love me anymore.

I perch on my bed, open the notebook from Dr. Tsui, and spend about ten minutes trying to convince myself to visit one of the places he suggested. But I just can't stop thinking. Of my grandparents and my parents and that toxic town where my mother grew up, a cesspool of crooked convictions and backward beliefs. Of the funeral I will not be attending because I am a bad daughter. Of Sunny. Of Angel. Of what we once were and what we could still be. Of how meaningless everything is because we aren't.

I don't know where to go. Just looking at Dr. Tsui's list makes me sick. I mean, really? A fabric store? What am I going to do? Bundle myself in layers of cotton and polyester to sweat out all my sorrows? Or I could go to the animal shelter, watch a bunch of sad animals wait and wait to get chosen, only to find them there again the next week, and the week after that, and the week after that because some of us just aren't wanted.

I've never had a pet. My parents said our apartment was messy enough without an animal shedding all over the place. One of the neighbors has a cat, though, and I swear I hear her robot vacuum cleaner beeping, humming, and singing at least four times a day. A few months ago, I fell asleep in the living room with my head set against the wall separating our unit from hers. My dream-self stumbled through my old school, cramming for an exam I hadn't studied for, and the robot warbled beside me, letting out an apologetic chirp every time it got underfoot.

As afternoon bleeds into evening, then into night, I abandon all hope of finishing my homework. The assignment from Dr. Tsui and my various essays and responses for my online



classes will just have to wait until tomorrow, when I'm *not* tumbling down a Yelp rabbit hole.

Yelp. How pathetic. Of all the sites I could have gotten addicted to, I had to choose the one where people can leave scathing reviews of all the things they hate. It's a good thing *I* don't have a Yelp page.

But if I had one, no one would care enough to say anything about me, good or bad.

Silence hurts. Indifference hurts. It all hurts. And running around town, hopping from cafés and bookstores to animal shelters and cultural centers and checking off each item on Dr. Tsui's list isn't going to change that. *Nothing* will change that. Nothing will change ever.

I tighten my grip on Dr. Tsui's list and rip the page from the notebook. I could tear it in half right now. Tear it once, then again, then again until nothing is left.

Vvvrrrrr. Zziip.

My eyes flick to the wall. On the other side, the neighbor's robot vacuum cleaner comes back to life, summoned to serve its one and only purpose.

Breathing out, I set the list on the old, tattered loveseat, grab my canvas bag and whiteboard, and head out with three words echoing in my mind: One. Last. Try.

CHAPTER TWO

THIS ISN'T THE first time I've turned to divine intervention. Since my life fell apart, I've made the trek to two churches and two Buddhist temples.

I've yet to say a single prayer.

There was nothing wrong with those places of worship. Each was beautiful, painted white or red or a rich brown. The colors of home. But every time I stepped off the bus, my knees shaking, I would only see the people. All the people. At the churches, they were standing with their hands raised and their voices lifting like doves to the skies. The temples were less crowded, but that only made things worse. Everyone there knew what they were doing. I just stood on the sidewalk, a pale, five-foot-three aberration.

At the second temple, which I visited after my first and last session with the third therapist my parents forced me to talk to, I spotted a little boy with his parents, their heads bowed. Twenty feet separated us, but I could see his hands balling into tiny fists as he squished his eyes closed to boost the strength of his prayer. I imagined he was praying for his sick grandmother, his precious Nana, who went to every single one of his soccer games—until the day she started coughing. She was his first loved one to fall seriously ill. There he was, battling all these new, turbulent emotions, and there *I* was, some interloper wearing a backpack with a small bell key chain hanging from



the zipper. If I got any closer, the bell would ring, and from that day forward, he would hate the sound of jingling because it would remind him of the time that strange girl invaded a sacred space in his time of need. If his grandmother were to pass away, Christmas would become a total nightmare for him, and upon moving into a new home as an adult, he would rip the doorbell out of the front door with his bare hands just to avoid the sound. His partner would ask, *What's gotten into you?* and he wouldn't know how to explain his hatred of bells and how it all started because of me, that weird, quiet girl who could never figure out what to do with her hands.

But I'm sure the fifth time's the charm.

I look up at the shrine I've chosen. It isn't in such disrepair that it attracts urban legends and those who chase them, but it's not pretty enough to catch people's eyes and leave them breathless. The torii is at least fifty feet tall, but it's faded, the usual bright red-orange peeling to reveal a pale salmon undercoat. The gate hasn't been maintained for what looks like years.

Good.

I mean, not *good*. I'm not *glad* a place of worship has fallen to ruin.

My grandparents used to love visiting shrines when they stayed with us. That was the sole thing they admitted they didn't like about their own town: it didn't have any shrines or temples. Why would it when my grandparents were essentially the only Japanese family around?

They never visited this particular shrine, though. I don't think anyone has. It isn't listed on most shrine directories. It doesn't have a marker in Google Maps. It doesn't even have its own Yelp page. That's the whole reason I tumbled down the Yelp rabbit hole in the first place: I was looking for a place of worship no one would ever think to visit. Which means I might just be able to make this prayer alone.

On tiptoes, I peer around the edge of the gate. It's eight at night and deathly quiet. There are no families. No children. No individuals with hands clasped and heads lowered.

After placing my boots just off the stone path, I bow and enter. I picture myself sinking into the center of the Earth with every step, but the pavement holds me, unforgiving beneath my socks. They're my favorite pair, a cartoon penguin face printed on each heel. My parents got them for me for Christmas a few years ago. I never wore them around Angel. I was afraid she would hate them. Or worse, she would love them, and I would wear them down to bare threads.

I stop at the large wooden box beside the altar and bow. My heart knocks against my chest, a prisoner dragging a chipped mug along the bars of my ribs.

My parents and I are almost entirely unfamiliar with Shinto beliefs, so I had to look up how to pray at a shrine, sitting in my darkened room with one leg hanging off the edge of my bed, my laptop balanced on one knee.

It feels like a small betrayal, doing all this research only after my grandparents' deaths. If I had really cared about the racism they faced, I would have embraced my culture while they were still alive to appreciate it. I wish they could have lived with us instead of spending so much time trying to convince us to move back. Maybe then, I wouldn't have to rely on internet strangers to educate me.

Maybe then, they wouldn't have died alone.

I press the pad of my thumb into my coin. According to tradition, I'm supposed to offer a five-yen coin. A nickel's the closest thing I've got. It isn't even a *good* nickel, corrosion leaving the edges white and light-green. This was all I could find, though, and I don't know if anyone's listening anyway.

The shrine's hanging bell has begun to deteriorate, rust



running along the insides. But when I ring it, the chimes are sweet and clear: *clang, clang, clang.*

I bow my head to make my prayer: *I wish—*

There are a lot of ends to that sentence: I wish I had just sucked it up and gone to the funeral with my parents because at least then one aspect of my life wouldn't be a trash fire; I wish I hadn't ruined things with Angel and Sunny; I wish . . .

My eyelids drop. I listen to the stillness. I'm not expecting to hear a flourish of bells or the heavenly voices of angels as my prayer is lifted to the skies, but I keep my eyes closed anyway. It's not like there's anyone to see. Not here. Not at home. Not at Sheryl's office. There's no one anywhere.

"Did someone call for Lady Luck?"

I stiffen at the sound of an unfamiliar voice, my brain short-circuiting before I can even open my eyes.

I thought I was alone.

Breathe. I just have to breathe. If Sheryl were here, she would tell me to think of three happy facts to calm myself down.

One: Otters sometimes hold hands when floating down a river.

Two: Cows have best friends.

Three: I do not hold hands with anyone and do not have best friends.

Well, Sheryl would say, at least you got TWO happy facts.

I exhale, open my eyes, and turn.

There's no one behind me.

Rotating on my penguin sock, I make a complete circle. I see nothing but the wooden offering box, a smattering of thin trees, and, in the distance, the washed-out torii.

"Hora!" The voice sounds like it belongs to a young woman. "Up here."

I tilt my chin upward, the moon shining high above me.

A figure is perched on a tree branch like a snowy owl, her

long white skirt a ghost flowing in the breeze. I start to follow the swathe of white up to a face, but before I can inspect it closely, the silhouette leaps from the tree. When it lands—that was, like, a twenty-foot jump—there’s a girl in front of me, her irises a mishmash of gold-leaf fragments.

She cocks her head to the side. “Are you going to answer my question?”

I watch her with a wary gaze and shake my head. She must be a shrine attendant. A miko, I remember they’re called. I don’t know why one would be here when it’s late and nobody is praying. Well, nobody except me.

The girl doesn’t look like a miko, though. Instead of a red hakama, she wears a plain white dress, almost like a nightgown. She’s pretty, especially with the gold contacts, but her face is young. She could be my age.

“You’re so quiet. You should be singing my praises.” She lifts her chin and puts her hands on her hips. “I very much enjoy music, I’ll have you know.”

I hope she doesn’t think that makes her special. Everyone likes music. Sunny did, naturally. It was her life. But Angel did too. At the peak of one of her experimental phases, Angel said, *God, I wish I could take this electropop and stab it into my veins.* Typical Angel, really.

“Why, beautiful being,” the girl says, pitching up her voice to, I assume, mimic what she thinks I sound like. Hint: I do *not* sound like Minnie Mouse. “Where did you—a well-spoken, stunning, *incredibly* graceful individual—come from? And why should I be singing your praises?”

“Well,” she continues, dropping her voice back to its usual clarion tone, “let me tell you. I have no idea why you would show up here, of all places. This shrine has been abandoned for years. Years and years. Like, probably longer than you’ve been alive. How old are you?”



Old enough to know the rules of stranger danger.

“I’m going to guess a teenager? So yeah, longer than you’ve been alive. I mean, people have stopped just to see what’s here, maybe thrown in some money. Trash too, which is *very* rude. Once, I got a lollipop, still in the wrapper and everything, but it was blue raspberry. Yuck.”

I just look at her. She can’t seriously be saying people pray to *her*, as if she’s the actual patron of this shrine.

“I heard you,” she says. She takes a seat on the wooden offering box, her dress draping over the slats. I watch her arrange her skirt over her knees and realize her leap from the tree should have shattered every bone in her legs. “When you prayed to me.”

A small chill rustles along my skin. There’s no way she actually heard my prayer. If she had, she wouldn’t be traipsing around the shrine grounds in a nightgown and poking fun at my voice, which she’s never even heard.

I study her. Her long, dark hair has been pulled back into a ponytail, but a small section falls to frame her face. Her bangs part slightly in the middle and end just before dipping into her eyes. Her thin eyelashes curl upward. Her expression exudes confidence. There’s nothing to indicate she’s joking. No surreptitious smirk. No hint of malice. I’m sure she’s kidding, though. She has to be.

“Nothing to say?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“What is *with* you?” She leans forward. Her eyes are such an unnatural color, flashing gold whenever she moves. “You can talk, can’t you? From what *I* understand—which is a lot, as I am actually extremely intelligent, even among the gods—the problem isn’t getting mortals to talk; it’s getting them to shut up. I mean, you should hear the kinds of prayers I get. Sometimes, I just want to be like, ‘For Hotei’s sake, get to the *point*.’”

I stare at her. She has to see the irony in that statement, right?

“But,” she continues, “I see nothing physically wrong with you.”

My throat tightens around words I’ll never voice.

I’ve heard that one before. There *isn’t* anything physically wrong with me. That’s what all the doctors said.

“You should consider taking up weight training, though,” she adds. “Your arms are small.”

I frown. Her arms seem just as slender as mine, though the flowiness of her sleeves makes it difficult to tell.

I shake my head again and start heading back down the stone path, walking along the edge. I don’t know who this girl is, what makes her so intent on getting me to talk, or why she seems to be expecting something of me when I have nothing to give, but I don’t care. I made my wish. I’m done.

“Where are you going?” she calls out.

I keep walking. My socks are going to be filthy after my trek down this dusty path. Poor penguins.

“Machi,” she says.

I stop. My feet press into the edge of the stone path.

Her ballet flats make no sound as she moves along the center of the path, right where the gods are meant to walk.

How could she possibly know my name?

When she stops beside me, I turn, scanning her face for some recognizable feature. She must know me from somewhere, though I can’t imagine where. It can’t be from school. I haven’t gone in over a year. Now I’m just another blurred face in the periphery of my former classmates’ memories, some girl whose name they never learned.

“I am Benzaiten, one of the Seven Gods of Fortune,” she says. “This is my shrine.”

Okay, now it’s definitely time to go.



I'm about to reach the torii, my socks crunching against the stones, when she says, "I wish to become one of those round robot vacuum cleaners."

I freeze. The wind picks up, flirting with my hair. I wrap my arms around myself and pivot on my heels.

"How do you know that?" she asks, her voice high and mocking again. "I told you already, silly child. Your prayer went to me. I heard it, up in the spirit world."

This girl is delusional and in need of help. I would email Sheryl, but she's not around anymore. I guess I could contact Dr. Tsui, but considering I spent the entirety of our first session convincing him I'm *not* out of my mind, I'm not sure I should type out an email and go: *Hey, I wasted the entire afternoon trying to muster up the courage to go to one of those places you suggested but got so overwhelmed by the calamitous state of my life, I wound up going to an obscure deity's even-more-obscure shrine, where I made a desperate prayer, only to be confronted by a girl who keeps insisting she's a goddess. This is Machi, by the way. You know. Your new client. Please help. Also, thanks for the notebook.*

So yeah. Maybe 911 would be better. Or, like, 911@gmail.com. If I *called* 911, the dispatcher would only hear my Darth-Vader breathing and this girl's inane rambling.

I put my hand to my pocket and take out my phone. Does 911 have a text line?

A sharp pain like carpet burn runs beneath my fingers. As I suck in a breath, I do a double take at my now-empty hand.

"Is this what phones look like in this day and age?" The girl stands five feet away with my phone, too far to have snatched it from my grasp without my noticing. Her golden eyes flick to me and dance with amusement. "Do I have your attention now?"

I storm over to her and extend a hand. I don't understand what's happening here, and frankly, I don't care anymore. I

shouldn't have come. This, like so many other things in my life, was a big mistake.

She shakes her head. "I'm not returning this until you talk to me."

I swallow my anger and swipe for the phone, but she switches it to her other hand. "Listen, I came all the way over here just to see what could have led you to make such an unconventional request." She waves her free hand, ignoring my attempt to take my phone. "Inspiration for fine arts? Sure. More harmonious family occasions? Yes. The meet-cute to out-cute all meet-cutes? Can do. But a wish to be a vacuuming automaton? I had to see you for myself."

I reach for my phone again.

"If I give this back to you, will you tell me what you're thinking?" She waits for my nod. "All right, but if you're lying, prepare for divine punishment."

She deposits my phone in my hands and monitors my movements as I unlock my phone, open my notes, and type out a message. She taps one foot and hums a song I don't know, her voice full and warm like honey.

The moment I hand her my phone, she reads the message aloud: "I don't talk." She drops her hand to her side, her lips pursed. "I *know* that. Why not?"

I shake my head. She's not the first person to ask—but she *is* the first to think she's a goddess.

"Then tell me, on this weird tippy-tappy device, why you would ever want to be a robot vacuum cleaner."

I take my phone and type out my answer, trying to hide my annoyance. I came here to get away from people. Away from everything. So of course I wound up stuck in a shrine with a chatterbox who refuses to let me go. *I'm tired of being human.*

I stare straight ahead as she reads my message. I don't want to see her expression. Don't want her to see mine.



She raises her eyes to me. Speaking just a little slower, like she wants to be sure we're understanding each other—which we're not—she says, “And you think asking to become a robot vacuum cleaner is going to fix that?”

I mean, yeah? Everyone loves those little round things. They're treated like humans, given names and showered with praise when they finish cleaning, but no one expects them to be anything more than what they are. They weren't built to mingle or get along with fellow machinery. They do what is asked of them, and that's it.

I don't mind cleaning. I like it. I could do that for the rest of my existence. I would be a lot happier than I am now.

The girl lies down on the offering box. Now I hope she *is* the actual goddess Benzaiten. Otherwise, her blatant disrespect is most definitely invoking the wrath of the gods.

But what if she's telling the truth?

I know how that sounds. Goddesses don't just appear in the regular world. I'm not even sure they exist. When my grandparents made us take them to shrines, I stayed in the car, watching them from a distance, and wondered what they were asking for. If they had just moved here, they could've had everything.

But they stayed, and now they have nothing.

“What's so bad about being a human?” the girl asks. “It seems so amazing.”

I shake my head. Being human is a lot of things, but *amazing* is not one of them.

Then I shake my head again, harder. I don't know what I'm thinking. This girl is human too.

“What about a do-over?” She swings her legs off the box. “I can't grant your wish. We don't work like that. I can, however, help you learn to appreciate the human world and find your voice again.”

I cross my arms. I don't need to appreciate this world, and I don't plan on ever using my voice. Even if this is a hoax, I'm not jinxing anything by changing my prayer.

"Here," she says, holding up my corroded nickel.

I glance at the offering box. The slats are too narrow for her to have stuck her hand in there, and I didn't see her open the lid with a key.

She tosses the nickel my way. I manage to clap it between my palms, which, given my lack of coordination, is quite the accomplishment.

Shaking my head, I pocket the coin and take out my phone. Once I've typed out my message, I hand it to her.

"I don't want that prayer." She rolls her eyes. "I'm not playing around here. Even if I *could* make you into a robot vacuum cleaner, I wouldn't. So I'll tell you what: Redo your prayer, the way I suggested. Give me until a certain day, and if you aren't happy . . . I'll see what I can do about your robot vacuum wish."

I shuffle my feet and swipe my finger along my phone, only to almost drop it as she rockets to her feet.

"Tanabata," she shouts.

God bless you, I think to myself.

"It's the Star Festival. It's celebrated on a lot of different days, but because I'm one of the Seven Gods of Fortune, I'm saying it's on the seventh day of the seventh month. Seven, seven. I'll remember that way. You can hold me to it. Okay?" She wiggles her eyebrows, her hair shining under the light of the moon. "Deal?"

No. No deal. I don't want her to edit my prayer. It's *my* prayer. And it doesn't even matter anyway because *this isn't real*.

I shake my head.

The girl frowns. "Machi."

I shake my head again, harder. Then, pushing the nickel



deep into my pocket, I pivot on my heel and start walking away.

“Machi,” she calls out. “Come on. Give me a chance.”

I don’t slow down. As I leave her behind, I feel the most disgusting sense of satisfaction. For once in my life, I get to be the one to walk away.

Just as I reach the bus stop, I catch a flash of dark blue in the corner of my eye. I whip around, preparing to run from the girl.

But when I turn, no one is there.

And the nickel is still in my pocket.