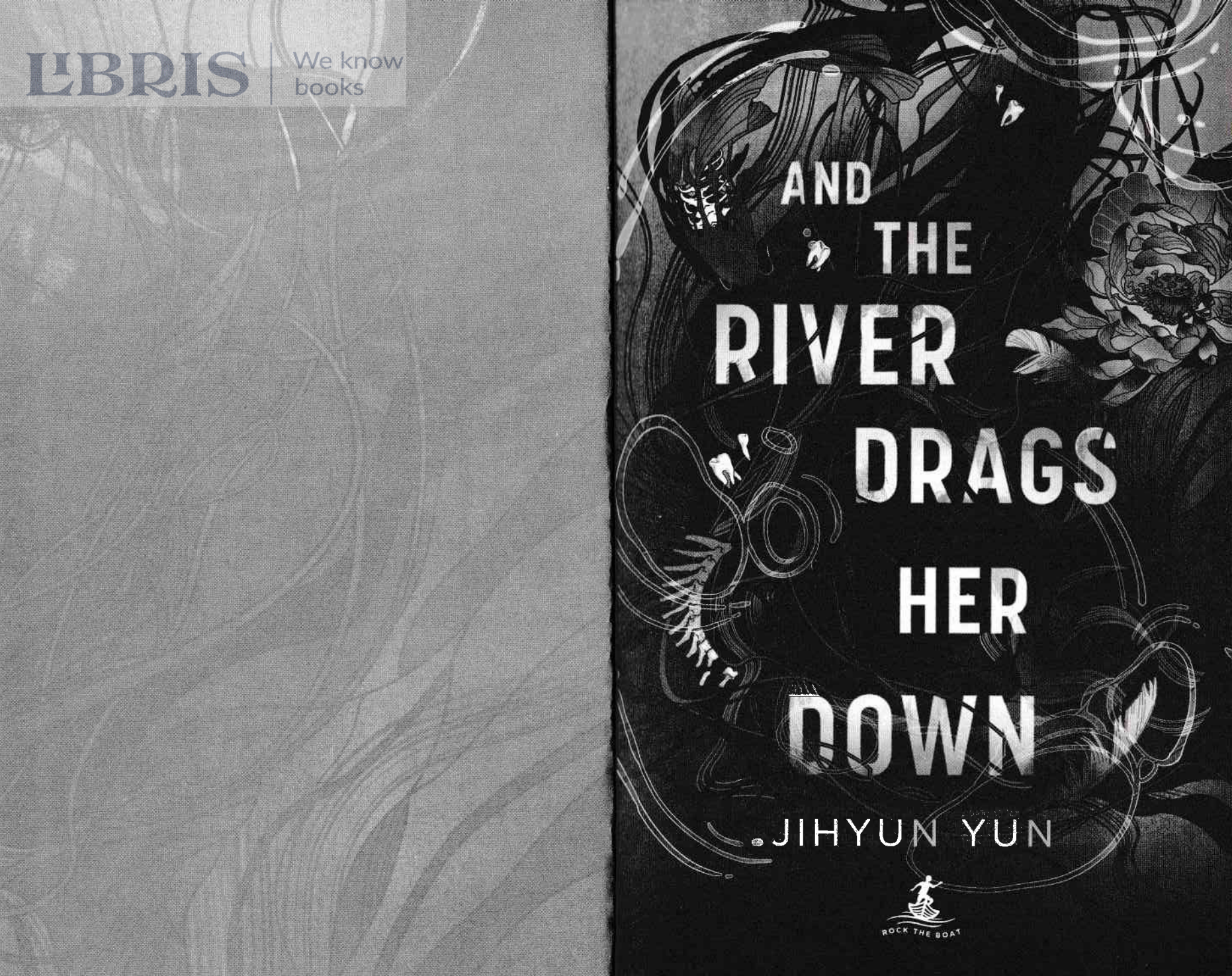


LBRIS

We know
books



AND
THE
RIVER
DRAGS
HER
DOWN

JIHYUN YUN



PROLOGUE

Sister, of the hours before I died, I remember little. Only the watercolor blur of the aspens made livid with wind. Our small town overcome with Queen Anne's lace and other invasive species so beautiful no one cared to tame. I remember my feet stuttering on the trestle-bridge tracks I'd balanced on countless times before, arms outstretched as if to take flight.

I fell instead.

My breath steamed white before my face. It was only after my head hit the rain-glutted river, after my hands failed to find purchase and I was tugged swiftly under, that I realized I might not survive.

Water killed me before cold could; my lungs, an overfilled vase. Thank you, lord, for letting what couldn't be painless at least be quick. Search teams trawled the river, but I'd been carried away too far. It took days for me to be found, blue and swollen, snagged across a distant bank's rocks. Online, the boy

who came across me said he thought my mass of rib-length hair was a tangle of beached seaweed until he saw the rest of my body.

Every so often, a photo of me postmortem crops up across forums to be ogled like the spectacle that all untimely deaths inevitably become. But I was loved. In the Korean way, our family wept at my wake for two nights and three days. You rejected all food and rice wine offered until you weakened and were carried out like a doll.

My funeral was small. Our family took me home in a celadon vase embossed with white-deer filigree. Made a makeshift altar above the fireplace with a photo of me smiling at something beckoning from just beyond the frame.

But this doesn't mean I never woke up again. Sister, I hear you, feel your hands in the dirt, searching.

I will answer your call—I'll return.



PART I

Girl



Despite her best efforts, the rat was dead.

Soojin knew it by the way Milkis didn't leap toward the cage door the moment she entered the room. Normally, the sound of her pawing the newspaper shavings or scuttling down the ramps was an omnipresent music. But this evening there was only perfect, unwelcome silence.

She found Milkis in one of the hammocks hanging from the top tier of the cage, body curled like an apostrophe. She had not been dead long. Rigor mortis hadn't set in yet, and her pink nose was still damp to the touch. At least she had died painlessly, unlike last time, when her mammary tumors grew as large as almonds from her underbelly.

Soojin pulled the rat into her palm. Milkis was not a beautiful animal: unusually large for her species, with white fur grown patchy from skin conditions, eyes wet and protruding like pomegranate seeds. But she was cherished, and would be back soon.

After donning latex gloves, Soojin laid the rat on a lined plastic tray and cut the tail off with a dissection scalpel swiped from biology class. It yielded beneath the blade easier than expected. A small, wet snap, not so different from cutting through the spine of a cutlassfish. Then she was transferring the severed length to a ziplock bag. This was what she would use to call Milkis back. The rest of the body must not be returned to the ground.

Though they had not had a chance to get large, the growths were in the rat's belly again, waiting to turn malignant. Burying a sick body revived the ailments. Best to work with a healthy cut or from scratch, which is to say bone. But the tail was immaculate. It would work well.

Soojin swaddled the body in tissue and placed it into a shoebox for the pet cemetery's hearth. The blood where it was severed spread crimson ringlets through the white, and she swallowed hard against the familiar sickness rising in her throat. The crude surgery finished, she held her quivering hands together, digging her nails into the wrist of her scalpel hand, waiting for the sharp pain to steady her.

At only seventeen, Soojin Han was no stranger to death. She had seen Milkis expire and rise countless times, but this would be *her* first time resurrecting anything alone. Her sister, Mirae, though only a year older, had been the bold one who could calmly stomach anything and so had always taken the bloodier tasks upon herself. *Close your eyes*, Mirae would say, and by the time Soojin opened them again, the grim division would be done. The healthiest body part neatly excised from the rest, ready to be fed to earth and fire, respectively.

Last fall, Mirae drowned in Black Pine River, which wended

its way through their small town and beyond it. Soojin still glimpsed her sister everywhere: Mirae at the sink, humming as she rinsed suds off dishes. Mirae in the golden-hour light, brushing her hair by the window, screen popped out, feeding strands to the wind. Mirae, named after the Korean word for *future*, which she would never possess. The intervening ten months between her death and now had mitigated nothing. Soojin still felt picked at by grief's carrion birds.

A tap on the wall startled her. Her father stood by the door, eyeing her warily.

"Knock-knock," he said, aiming for levity and missing. How anyone could make *knock-knock* sound like a grave missive, Soojin would never know. He cleared his throat but did not cross the threshold, opting instead to lean on the doorframe, arms folded across his chest. His awkward body language irritated her.

It hadn't always been this way. Just a year ago, Soojin, Mirae, and their father would lounge in front of the TV, laughing at game shows. They would cajole him into midnight drives to the gas station for shitty taquitos and Coke slushies. Their small family unit had felt tight and impenetrable. But after Mirae's death, everything changed.

"Leaving tonight?" Soojin asked. Her father's face was gaunt, darkened with uneven patches of stubble like dapples on a horsehide.

"Yeah." He nodded. "The house is stocked up. If you need anything, call. I'll be home every weekend."

Their home was in Jade Acre, a tiny resort town afflicted with too much beauty, nestled between miles of woods and towering bluffs, the sea such an uncanny shade of blue it was

like diving into the iris of an eye. The summers were long and sultry and asphyxiated with tourists brandishing money like green artillery.

For a few months, all was generous: the fruit-bearing trees, the nesting birds, the shallow bays where tourists paid heftily to dive by day for three endangered red abalones and illegally snuck in by night for more. But in the off months, the town became dreary and isolated, taxed by rain that beat the landscape into mulch. A waterlogged softness grew into everything, and the townsfolk rarely left.

Father was one of the rare leavers. Every year, once the tourist months ended, along with the modest stream of income from the family's bed-and-breakfast, Father packed his bags and drove three hours east to the city of Bragg Hills to work for his cousin's construction company. The long commute too difficult to manage, their father stayed with his cousin during the week and made his way back to Jade Acre on the weekends.

It wasn't ideal. You either made enough during tourist months or spent the rest of the year scraping. When Soojin's mother was alive, she had wanted to leave Jade Acre for that reason. Han's Bed & Breakfast was unsustainable. Every year they put away a little less. But Father had dug in his heels.

How can we sell the house our girls grew up in? Wasn't this our dream?

When Mother died seven years ago in a car wreck, the possibility of leaving died with her. No one wanted to leave the home where the memories of Mother still lived, and now of Mirae, too. Soojin felt them lingering everywhere in the house. Her loves, curled in the window alcove and inside each door-frame like endless questions.

"Will you be okay, Soo?" her father asked. This would be the

first time she'd be left completely alone. After Mother passed, when Soojin was ten and Mirae was eleven, the sisters still had each other. They adapted to being latchkey kids—even grew to enjoy it at times. The freedom to sleep when they wanted, eat what they wished, and feign adulthood as they imagined it. But this time Soojin would have no one.

"Dad, I'm not a kid," she said. "I'll be fine. And besides, I won't be alone." She showed him what she held.

"It's that time again already?" he asked, recoiling slightly from the severed tail.

Her father worried his lip, rubbing at his jaw in a way that told Soojin he was debating something in his head. But whatever it was, he quietly dismissed it. Instead he repeated what he'd told his two daughters so many times before.

"Make sure no one sees you."



The magic would become a family heirloom, passed down through the blood of their women. But at the beginning, there was wreckage and a famine-struck village.

It was a cursed season of a cursed year. All winter, hailstorms battered the land and would not go. An unnatural freeze shocked the earth well into summer, singed the finally germinating seeds with frost. Then, when the cold abated at last, a spate of earthquakes rippled through their suffering peninsula, destroying whatever crop the weather had failed to cull.

With no harvest, the villagers slaughtered their livestock down to the last emaciated sow, sparing nothing of them, not even the bones.

Or so they thought.