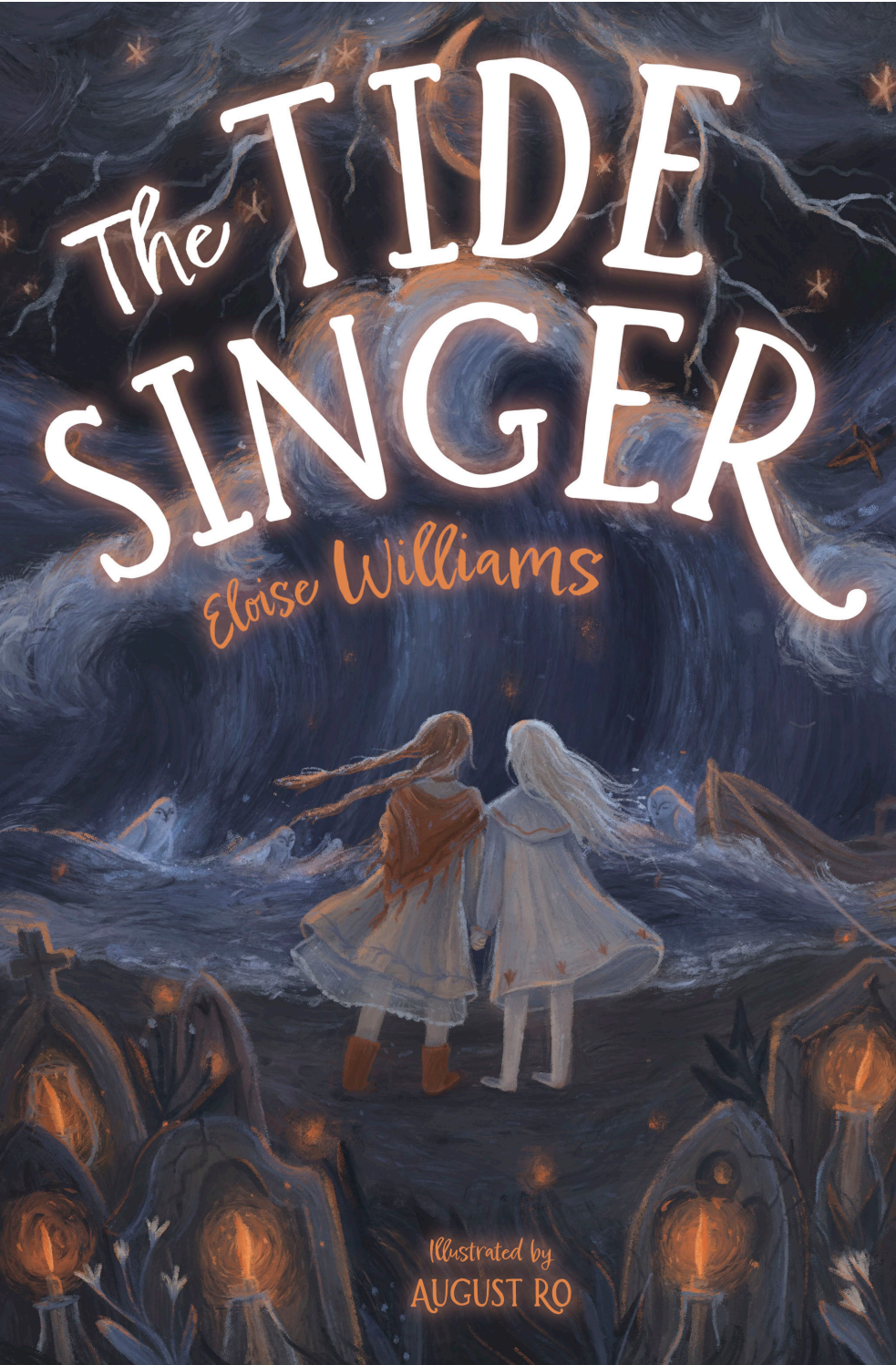

The TIDE SINGER
Eloise Williams
Illustrated by
AUGUST RO

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For Jo

CHAPTER 1

1895 – Carregton Crow

Our family have owned the funeral parlour in Carregton Crow and been the cemetery keepers for as long as history can remember. They're important jobs. The town is small and everyone knows each other, so we all feel the loss when someone dies.

There are no bodies in the parlour today, so I'm free to make candles without being surrounded by dead people. At least when they are here Da weights their eyelids with coins, and I'm used to it – I've been around dead bodies since I was a baby. Still, it is good to have room to roll and melt the wax without being crowded.

It also means I can curse when I sting my fingers on hot beeswax, without fear of being heard by someone coming to pay their respects.

The warm smell of melting wax fills the air. I think proudly of how Da and I make sure people who have passed over are treated well. After the dead have been photographed with their family, we bring them to the parlour and lay them out gently. Da builds their coffins to size and I put ornaments and keepsakes in with them, then lay an embroidered cloth over their body. There is a neat pile of cloth on a shelf by the window waiting to be decorated with initials and patterns of stitches.

We take the coffins to our island cemetery by carrying them down the coffin tunnel. It leads from our back yard to the harbour where our boat is moored. The tunnel is narrow because smugglers dug it by hand many years ago, so we have to be careful not to bang the coffins against the edges.

As we sail to the island, I make conversation with the coffins, telling them what kind of day it is. I know the dead can't hear me, but it comforts their families to know that I do it, as letting go of a loved one is hard.



We bury them on the island and I leave blessings and candles at their graves so their resting place will look beautiful. The candles I'm making now are to replace the ones on the island that have been eaten by mice and other hungry animals. I feel proud when I think of the hard work and care Da and I have put into making the island a gentle place despite the worst of weathers.

Thinking of the storms makes me shudder. We have had so many and they have caused so much grief and devastation. Several local fishing boats have been lost, along with the men onboard.

The storms have been happening so often that everyone talks about the legend of the tide singers. People want an explanation for the relentless bad weather.

The tide singers are said by some to be an evil sea people who charm storms with their singing. They draw sailors in the wrong

direction to destroy boats on the rocks. It is said that the tide singers hide in the waters around the cemetery island, but I don't believe a word of it. People like storytelling and exaggeration here in our town, where the losses at sea are plenty and there is no one to blame. Thankfully the last few days have been calm. I saw the fishermen setting out again this morning beneath a clear sky.

Peace fills our small parlour room while the day outside sings its song of gulls, clattering feet and hooves on cobbled stone. I love this time alone – humming and candle-making in the soft yellow light.

"Morwenna!" a woman's voice shrieks from outside. It rattles the window and my bones, and I spill wax on my wrist. I manage not to curse, as I know who it is before I even look up. She would give me a good cuff around the ear if she heard me swear.

Mrs Bussell enters the parlour as if she owns the place. "Where is your da? I have news of the utmost importance."

I don't rush from my work, because Mrs Bussell has very important news every day. She has made it her job to spread gossip since she was widowed. I need to be polite despite my peace being ruined, because she is the oldest person in town. Respect for our elders is hugely valued here. If you fail to mind your manners, you never hear the end of it.

I rise slowly. "Good afternoon, Mrs Bussell," I say, making my voice sweet and light, despite being irritated. "I will fetch my da for you."

Da is making repairs to the harbour door of the tunnel. I go out to the back yard, stand at the end of the tunnel, then cup my hands and yell into the tunnel's mouth. I hear my voice echo and echo.

"Mrs Bussell is here to see you, Da," it goes, echoing further and further until it fetches Da up from the dark depths.

"How delightful," Da says, popping like a cork from the darkness. He pushes his glasses up his nose and the glint of the lens hides his real expression. I know that he would always be polite, no matter what he was thinking, but sometimes when he is irritated with Mrs Bussell, I can read his real thoughts in his eyes.

We squeeze into the parlour, Mrs Bussell taking up much more space than us as she flusters and swishes. Then we wait as she wrings her hands dramatically.

"Well, Mr Jones," Mrs Bussell begins. "I want to tell you this news, but I am concerned it may be too fearful for your weak heart."

Da smiles. He is a kind man, kinder than me by far. "Mrs Bussell," Da says, "I would love

to hear the news of the town, and my heart is as strong as an ox."

"What I have to tell you is serious, Mr Jones," Mrs Bussell says. "Please do not gossip it, for it is shared with only you."

Mrs Bussell shares her secrets with only us, then goes door to door to share them with everybody else. She takes payment from everyone for her news. It is her livelihood. It would ruin her if people ran around tattling tales faster than she did.

Mrs Bussell's face is aglow with delight, for there is nothing she likes more than to deliver bad news. She pauses dramatically, then whispers, "People have reported hearing eerie singing again."

My chest pounds suddenly. I'm almost certain I have heard strange songs in the air beyond midnight. They were bewitching, unlike anything I have known before. Enchanting



sounds that made me want to go down to the sea in the moonlight. I had told myself the songs were part of a nightmare or the place between waking and dreams.

"Miss Howells heard them last night as she took in her washing from the line," Mrs Bussell

went on. "And Mr Evans reported them while he was fishing before dawn."

Da nods and I lean in to listen to each detail. We swap glances. For once, Mrs Bussell's gossip is fascinating. We don't believe in the silly tales of the tide singers, but we are interested in discovering where the stories came from. We know that the storms are caused by atmospheric pressure and weather conditions from far across the sea, not created by mythical creatures.

But the singing? That I cannot work out. Was it my ears playing tricks on me? The wind howling across the shore? I must have imagined it. There is no other explanation. And yet Mrs Bussell says that others have heard it too. How can that be?

"That'll be three farthings," Mrs Bussell says, and holds her palm out. When she has told you her gossip, there is no way you can escape

payment. Da has learned this by emptying many coins from his pockets over the years.

Once paid, Mrs Bussell leaves.

Da returns to his work and I return to mine in the parlour. The day moves into darkness. I've heard about the tide singers for as long as I can remember. There have been many reported sightings, but only ever by people who are alone. Someone battling a storm at sea, or seasick and likely to hallucinate. Those who have been at the ale have often seen them too.

People describe the tide singers so differently. Three-headed monsters with shark eyes and hair of eels. Beings made from the wisps of clouds and the swirling salt spray of the sea. Skeletons that dance on the waves, holding lanterns in their bony fingers.

Da and I have discussed the sightings often and shaken our heads at the vast differences in the descriptions of the tide singers. But the

singing? I'm almost sure in my heart that I heard it too – no matter how I try to dismiss it.

I get back to making my candles to try to distract myself from the creeping uncertainty. I sprinkle poppy seeds into wax and add wicks. I find myself humming a strange tune I did not realise I knew.