

IRIDESCENT



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For my family and friends. I love you.

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CASSANDRA'S MAP



PREFACE



I stared at the water in front of me as I inched my way toward it, the sand damp under my toes. A sunray shone against my skin as I looked out at the rose gold sunset. The light hit the waves at just the right angles, sending the entire ocean into streams of gold, orange, and rose-colored confetti and ribbon.

I loved the sea—how one disturbance could send a thousand ripples in all directions, how light could change it in an instant, and how it was never one color. I loved that it sounded like it was breathing as it exhaled when it came across the sand and inhaled as it flowed back toward the water. And what I loved most of all were the animals that I knew lived inside it.

As the water rushed toward my feet, it seemed like the water would touch them, but suddenly it retreated, leaving white foam in its place. The sun had finished its descent into the horizon, and I finally let the water hit my toes as I felt the rush of a wave against my feet. The water was no longer

rose-colored or gold; it had turned to a deep blue, mirroring the sky above me. The water was warm and smooth. I sighed a moment, feeling the wind in my hair and the water against my feet, but when I looked down, my toes were as blue as the water beneath me.

PART 1



THE SHEDD



*I*t all started at the Shedd Aquarium, my refuge and home growing up. My aunt Jan worked there as a marine biologist, and I spent my childhood studying and looking at the beautiful, colorful fish. Looking into the tanks was like looking into an entirely new world, and I wanted to learn everything I could about it.

There was only one other person in my life that loved the ocean and animals as much as Jan and me: his name was Brandon, and we first met at the Shedd when we were eleven.

The aquarium was about to close for the evening, and I was looking into the circular tank near the front of the building. I was writing notes about some of the fish that lived inside the tank, noting the number of stripes they had or the way they swam—I liked to study them.

I put my notebook down a moment as I watched a father and son waiting anxiously to get in.

“Sorry, but we’re closing in twenty minutes. There’s

nothing I can do,” the worker said. The dad and son looked at each other a moment.

“We came all this way,” Brandon’s dad said. “Do you think we could go in just for a little bit?”

“Please, sir? I really want to see the belugas,” Brandon said.

“I’m sorry, but I am going to have to ask you to leave.”

Brandon’s eyes had an earnest look in them, and then they drooped. I couldn’t help going over there to help them, and I found myself saying to the worker, “Actually that won’t be necessary. I’ll give them a tour myself.”

The worker shrugged apathetically while Brandon’s eyes filled with excitement. He quickly ducked underneath the stanchion, and I couldn’t help smiling.

“I’m Kate.”

A crooked smile lit up Brandon’s face, and it made me feel warm inside. He had golden-colored hair and forest green eyes. If I looked close enough, I imagined I could see a tree frog or a chimp.

He stuck out his hand, and I shook it, noticing that his hand was slightly sweaty.

“My name’s Brandon. And this is my dad,” he said, pointing to the man next to him who introduced himself as Mr. Fischer. “Can we go now?” Brandon asked.

“If we hurry, we’ll be able to pet the stingrays,” I said. “But we have to run—it’s going to close soon!”

“You kids go ahead. I’ll meet you there,” his dad said with a soft chuckle.

We took off in a sprint. He beat me there, panting and smiling at me.

“Is this it?” he asked.

“Yes, look,” I said.

He leaned over the small pool of water and watched as

the gray rays flapped their fins like birds as they zoomed through the water.

“Why are you wearing gloves?” he asked as we pet them.

“Oh, um...” I said.

But he suddenly walked around toward the other side of the pool. I didn’t give him an answer, but he didn’t ask me again.

We walked all over the Shedd Aquarium. He looked into the tanks in amazement, reading each description underneath them carefully and asking me lots of questions.

I had seen a lot of kids pressed up against glass, looking in at the animals. But they were often busy talking to their friends or shuffled along quickly by their teachers, so they never stayed at one tank for very long. Brandon was different. I had to nudge him along to get him to look into the next tank, and I was glad I finally had someone my age to talk to about the aquarium.

After a long tour, I led Brandon toward the beluga whales. It was deserted in the aquarium by now. Brandon’s dad was on a phone call at the café, and only the staff were here.

We walked toward the whales, and I noticed there was one perched under the surface of the water. Brandon leaned over the edge of the glass and looked down at her. I recognized the whale as Shelly.

“Come on. We can go downstairs and see them,” I said.

“No,” he said, looking at her. “Maybe it’ll come up.”

I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone was standing near us. When I didn’t see anyone standing around, I came up next to Brandon, and I whistled, showing off a trick I knew. The whale came up, and Brandon put his finger out and touched the beluga on its head with excitement. We both burst out in laughter.

"Hey, what's going on over there?" I heard one of the staff say. I turned around, and a staff worker had just come around the corner.

We ran, knowing we'd broken the rules, and I could hear Shelly whistle behind us, seemingly telling us to run as well. Brandon was faster than me, and he was already further down the hall. I ran as I tried to spot where he was, and I found him standing near a tank.

He turned around when I approached, and a wide smile stretched across Brandon's face. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before, and the warmth that went through my heart in that moment is something I knew I'd never forget.

"Come look," Brandon said. "I wanted to show you earlier, but we had to run."

He grabbed my hand, and we ran back toward where the belugas were. *Why was this boy holding my hand?*

The lights began turning off in the aquarium one by one until the only lights left on came from the blue hues of the aquarium tanks.

We stopped at the edge of the hallway to make sure there was no one around. When the coast was clear, we ran back to the ledge of the tank.

"Look," Brandon said as we approached. He let go of my hand and pointed at the long window in front of us that overlooked Lake Michigan.

"There are so many stars," I said. Chicago had such horrible light pollution; how were we able to see the stars tonight?

"Yeah," he said, laughing a little as we looked out the window.

"Let's get closer to the window," I said. "Come on!"

We ran up to the side, and Brandon smiled slightly as he looked out the window.

“See that? It’s the Big Dipper. But I think it kind of looks like a fishhook.”

“Yeah, I can see it,” I said, a smile forming on my lips as I watched the glistening stars in the dark night sky.

“We can go to the planetarium tomorrow,” he said, grinning as he turned toward me. “Then I can show you what stars *really* look like without all the light around. Do you want to go outside by the café so we can see them a little better?” he asked.

I usually avoided the outside part of the café because it was so close to the lake. Inside, I didn’t notice it, but when I was outside and near a large body of water, I tended to feel pulled toward it. I was glad I didn’t feel this way around the tanks of the aquarium.

Before I could answer him, I heard, “Brandon,” in the distance. It was Mr. Fischer.

Brandon shrugged and brushed his hands through his wavy hair. “Bye,” Brandon said with a crooked smile. “I’ll meet you at the planetarium tomorrow at four. Does that work?”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Kate,” he said, and he jogged off toward the sound of his dad.

I looked on after him and saw him and his dad laughing. His dad looked behind him and smiled at me, and I watched as they slowly walked toward the exit. That was the last time I ever saw his dad. He only visited Brandon once in a while, and so for many years, he stayed with his foster mom.

I walked back toward the belugas. Shelly was still near the surface.

“Did you like my friend?” I asked her.

She whistled a couple of times.

“Yeah, he seemed nice,” I said.

She stayed by the water, likely wondering if I'd sing tonight. Sometimes, when the other staff had gone home and it was just Jan and me, I'd sing a little for the whales.

She waited a few moments, but then she dove back into the water and swam off. I turned around to look at the stars one more time. I had never really noticed how beautiful stars were until this day, and I thought of Brandon's awe as he looked into the night sky.

Brandon rushed into my life like a tidal wave—fast and without warning. And after meeting him, everything changed.

Brandon and I spent almost every day together after that, and we became best friends immediately. I had felt so different from the other kids my age, but with Brandon, I felt like I had finally found a friend who understood me.

I loved walking next to the tanks with Brandon and volunteering to feed the animals with him. But one of our favorite things to do was the running competitions we did after the aquarium closed for the evening. We'd designate a certain tank as the finish line that day, and then we'd sprint through the aquarium. I didn't usually win those competitions. I only won the ones Brandon let me win...I'm about as fast as a snail. But I didn't care if I lost; I loved running. It was the closest I'd ever come to flying, and I hoped that if I kept practicing, I'd get better at it.

While we spent most of our time at the Shedd Aquarium, we usually went to the planetarium once a week. Brandon loved learning about space, and he always brought his telescope on camping trips. While I was more knowledgeable about the ocean, Brandon was more knowledgeable about the stars. According to him, he was the astronaut, and I was the sea girl.

Thinking back, I guess we liked glass a lot. We spent most

of our time looking through it—whether I was making silly faces at him while he was diving through the tank’s glass or pressed up against Brandon’s telescope gazing at the stars.

We were best friends. And the three of us were family. His foster mom was nice enough, but Jan, Brandon, and I spent almost every day together. Jan even let him use the guest bedroom as his own.

Brandon was there for me when my parents weren’t, and the memories that I had with Brandon were some of the sweetest and best ones of my life. And that’s why I just cannot wrap my head around what happened next.

* * *

EVERYTHING CHANGED IN AN INSTANT. It was the worst kind of change. The change you can’t prepare for.

* * *

JAN TOOK me out to one of my favorite Italian restaurants. I sat at the table, drumming my fingers and thinking about what Brandon and I were going to do later that night. I was a little anxious to get out of there. Brandon was diving at the aquarium, and then he was going to text me and let me know what we were going to do. We had such little time in the summer left. Senior year was starting in a couple of weeks, and I wanted to pack in as much left in the summer as we could.

“Kate, there’s something I need to tell you,” Jan sighed, tucking her brown hair behind her shoulder. She was looking down at the dark, wooden table, not quite meeting me in the eye.

“Sure, what is it?” I asked, sipping my lemonade. I felt my

phone vibrate in my pocket, and I pulled it out. There was a text from Brandon.

“Well, a job opened up at the Monterey Aquarium. We’re going to be moving back to Santa Cruz.”

Shock hit me first. Then the lemon juice went sour in my throat. I wanted to throw up.

“What?!” I exclaimed. “Chicago is our home! What about the aquarium?!”

“They’ll find someone new to fill my role. This job—it’s my dream job. I’ll be getting a promotion, and we can move into a bigger home.” She looked nervous, and her soft brown eyes were drooping.

“But I like it here,” I said. Then I paused for a moment. “Okay. We’ll just have to convince Brandon’s foster mom that Brandon is going to come live with us. We’ll be good to go.”

“Brandon’s not going to come,” she said, fluttering her eyelids a couple of times in stress.

Emotion rushed into me, and my head began to spin. I felt like the walls were crashing in on either side of me.

“How could you do this?” I cried. “Brandon is family. He’s going to be crushed. How could you?”

“Kate, you are going to college in a year anyway. You guys can still visit.”

“Visit?! Visit how?! California is on the entire other side of the country.”

“Kate, you know I love you. I’m sorry, but I can’t run away anymore. It’s time to move back.”

“Run away? This is my home.”

The food came out, and we both sat in silence. My phone vibrated again in my pocket—Brandon was texting me again, asking me where to go.

In an instant, my life was gone. Everything and everyone

I knew was going to be gone—the Shedd, my friends, Brandon. We all knew that when college came around, we would have time to say goodbye. But I was completely unprepared for this.

I tried to keep it together, but I excused myself to go to the bathroom.

I walked in, my head still spinning. I splashed water on my face and threw my table napkin on the ground in frustration. I kept hearing my phone vibrate, but I felt frozen. I couldn't respond. I couldn't face him or this new reality.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and finally mustered up the courage to look at my phone. My hand was shaking a little as I took my phone off the dark marble countertop. A small amount of water had splashed on it. I wiped the water off, and then I checked my phone.

I had missed five text messages from Brandon and a phone call. I sighed and put the phone up to my ear as I called him. I hesitated as I heard him answer the phone, knowing that everything was going to change. I listened to him talk about his day, trying to get a word in unsuccessfully.

When I finally was able to get in a few words, I said, "Brandon, we need to talk. Come meet me at my house."

The next few days rushed by in a fuzzy blur. Sitting down with Brandon and telling him the news was almost unbearable. The look on his face when I told him we were moving was etched into my brain almost as much as the smile he used to give me.

He didn't say much after that. After I told him, he stood up and went into the guest bedroom to pack his things. My tears were spilling over. How could Jan do this? Brandon was like a son to her. Or at least I *thought* he was.

And it was a blur packing up my room and watching my life disappear into brown boxes with four corners and a

taped seal. It was just a complete whirlwind, and it was all happening so fast. I didn't have weeks to say goodbye. I had only a few days.

Saying goodbye to my friends was difficult, and they were completely shocked by the news. But there was one goodbye that was harder than the rest. No, it wasn't harder. It was painful, and truthfully, excruciating.

On the day of the move, Brandon and I met up. I had been dreading this moment since the day of the restaurant, and I felt completely numb. He was waiting for me on the curb. His hands were in his pockets, and he looked anxious. He leaned forward on the balls of his feet, and then leaned back with a sigh.

I somehow made my way toward him, even though my legs were shaking and felt like blocks of cement. I stared at his white tennis shoes at first, and then I looked up. Brandon didn't look well. He had blue bags under his eyes, and his hair was disheveled. It didn't look like he'd slept in days.

We stood face to face and both just kind of stood there, shocked and in silence for a few moments.

"Goodbye," Brandon said, breaking the silence. The corners of his mouth were turned down, his shoulders slumped.

"I don't want to leave," I said. It was all I could manage.

"You have to go now," he muttered.

That optimism that he kept with him constantly was gone now. He looked so sad, and it made tears stream down my face. I wanted to yell at Jan and tell her to leave without me. I wanted to take Brandon and run away. It didn't matter where. But not apart. Anything but apart.

All that seemed to come out was, "I can't lose you. I can't lose my best friend."

He leaned in and said, "I'm going to be much closer than

you know. I promise.” I closed my eyes as I dug my head into his shoulder, feeling his warmth. We stayed like that for a few seconds. I didn’t want that hug to end. I just couldn’t let go.

“I’ll miss you, Kit Kat,” he whispered. My stomach sunk as he began to loosen his arms. I wanted to cling on tighter, but his arms had suddenly fallen to his sides. Reluctantly, I let go, and a piece of me fell behind with him. I tried to reach out for it, but it had buried itself in his heart.

“I’ll miss you too,” I said. And just like that, Brandon disappeared out of my life as fast as he rushed into it, leaving me in fewer pieces than before.

BRANDON



She was elusive to me, slipping away. It was like trying to catch a fish with bare hands. No matter how hard I tried to hold onto her, I just couldn't.

THE LIGHTHOUSE



We stopped in Colorado on the way to Santa Cruz to visit an old friend of Jan's.

My hair blew in the wind as I rode horseback in the mountains. The views were stunning, and I'd never seen anything like this before. Purple mountains and beautiful blue spruce and green pine trees dotted the land. But not even these views could help what I was feeling inside. I was hurting. Bad.

My mind had been preoccupied with Brandon the entire week. Each night, I cried from the loneliness of being away from him. As the miles increased between us, so did how much I missed him.

I slid off the horse I was riding and pet its soft mane, watching as a patch of hair glistened in the sun. I could feel her breathing in deep, long sighs. It reminded me to take a deep breath. As I exhaled, I thought about what my future was going to look like.

Things had felt so planned before. Brandon and I were applying to the same colleges, and I had sent in my college

applications already. Our plan was to go to college together, and then we'd settle into the same town, wherever we wanted to go. Now, I didn't know what those plans looked like. I can say this: moving to California right before the last year of high school was never something I had planned for.

We were finally back in the car, and I mentally said goodbye to the horse I had ridden throughout the week. Jan and I had no more stops left.

I lay down in the back seat, and I stared up into the sunroof. I could see the stars in the sky through the glass, and I realized I'd never seen stars like these before—not even in Wisconsin where we used to take Brandon's telescope on camping trips.

There were so many stars. If Brandon were here, I knew he would make us stop the car to go out and look at them. I took my phone off the seat, took a picture, and I sent it to Brandon, hoping that this would be enough to warrant a response from him.

An hour passed, and then another one with no response. I put my phone back on the seat and crossed my arms. Brandon hadn't responded to a single text message or phone call this week. We probably had not gone a single day without talking to each other since we were kids, but I guess he needed space.

"Come look," Brandon said, pointing at the telescope.

"What is it?"

"Shooting stars," he said. "Look at that."

I scooted toward him, and I looked in the eyepiece of the telescope. I could see white streaks darting through the sky like two strokes of a paintbrush.

"They must be friends," I said, smiling.

He laughed. "That's what I was thinking."

"You can be the one on the left. I'll be the right one," I said, showing him.

He laughed and looked in. "No, you'd be the brighter one. I would be the one on the right," he said.

He suddenly looked at me and smiled that crooked smile of his.

It was the smile that woke me up.

I sat up suddenly, my hair stuck to my face. Brandon was gone, but the picture of him smiling at me with that beautiful golden-blond hair and forest green eyes lingered for a moment. I wished he was here.

I brushed my blonde locks to the side of my face and sighed a moment before looking out the window again. I knew we weren't in Colorado anymore—I could see the ocean.

We pulled up to a navy blue house with a porch running along the front. The yard looked like it hadn't been mowed for weeks, and the for-sale sign was still up. I turned to look around and saw that the lawns on the street were filled with green trees including a mix of tall palm trees and oak trees, among others. The street was quaint; it was a quiet and pretty neighborhood, and I watched as a few kids went by wearing rollerblades and helmets.

"We'll have some yardwork to do," Jan said with a large smile as she got out of the car. She left the door open as she practically ran toward the house with excitement.

I opened the car door and looked up at the house in front of me. Jan had fulfilled her promise. It *was* bigger than our Chicago apartment.

I pushed Jan's car door closed before I headed toward the house. I walked up the steps onto the porch, and I hesitated at the foot of the door. *There was no going back now.*

I exhaled, and reluctantly, I stepped through, trying to hold back tears as I went into the house.

The floor was hardwood, and the walls were a plain beige. It all felt so...ordinary. Jan was on the phone with the movers in another room in the house, and I walked into the kitchen. The cabinets were a little chipped, and the wall-paper was frayed slightly, but there was a window that over-looked a quaint, green backyard.

As I looked around, my eyes hovered over the refrigerator. Back at home, Brandon used to drink soda and crack jokes in the kitchen. I could picture him opening the refrigerator, giving me a wink, and then searching for a soda. I warned him that soda wasn't good for him, but it didn't ever seemed to stop him. If he were here, I'd let him drink as much soda as he wanted without peeping a word about it.

"Finally," I heard Jan say.

I walked back toward the front of the house. Jan had opened the door as movers began placing our boxes in the house in small towers. Jan was laughing and nodding as she pointed toward where the boxes should go.

"Would you like to come help out?" Jan said.

"I'm going to look around."

"Go right ahead," she said. "You can pick whichever room you want."

I walked up the stairs, and I noticed that some of my boxes were already in one of the bedrooms. As I walked in, I smiled.

The room was huge. The floors were a light alder wood, the walls were white, and a large bay window spilled rays of light into the room, which made the room have such a bright and airy feel to it.

I dropped my backpack and went straight for the window, cranking the handle to open it up. The smell of the

sea instantly wafted through the room, and it was a welcoming scent.

I sat on the floor as I looked out the window. The sea was only a couple of miles away, and I could see the coastline from here. Somehow, it seemed to gesture me toward it. I wanted to go and see it, but I knew that going to the beach wouldn't be a good idea. I didn't want to get too close to the ocean.

I heard a knock on the door.

"Hey, Jan," I said.

"The movers are already gone," she said. "But a few of your boxes are still downstairs. Can you get them?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks. I'm going to head over to the aquarium."

"Already?"

"I just want to go and introduce myself to some of the staff over there. I won't be gone long. Will you be okay by yourself?"

"I'll be okay," I said.

She hesitated in the doorway and then waved as she disappeared, and I was left alone with only the boxes for company.

I stared at the brown boxes and stood up as I went toward the first one. I tore off the seal after a few tries, and I peeled off the tape that was now stuck to my hands before beginning to unpack.

I tried to go quickly as the emotions rushed back in. Unpacking felt like surrendering. Unpacking made the entire process seem that much more real.

While I was opening up a box, I came across an old picture book that I hadn't seen in years. I knew instantly what was inside of it. It was something precious, old, and unfortunately...forgotten until now.

I flipped through the pages and found the map quickly. It was my mother Cassandra's map. I opened it up, and I noticed her distinguishable handwriting immediately. The strokes were long and curvy, like a wave.

The map was mainly of North America, with circles in different places, her notes next to them. She had circled Hawaii, Chicago, Florida, and Alaska. And then my eye caught something. There was a circle in California as well with a note next to Santa Cruz. *Where the light shines. Keys.*

What did that mean?

I looked at the other notes as well. Next to Chicago: *X marks the spot.* Hawaii: *A ship that holds my heart.* Alaska: *The White Queen.* And next to Florida: *Oil.*

I was pretty sure that the notes were clues and that there was something I needed to find at each of these places. Brandon and I had tried finding the one in Chicago when we were younger, but we gave up on the map quickly when we realized we couldn't travel to all those places. I had placed it in this book until now.

I felt a renewed interest as I read the note. Maybe if I followed the clues of the map, it would help me learn more about my mother.

I put the map down and leaned back into the box and found the picture of my mom. It was the only one I had of her. We had left rather fast from Santa Cruz twelve years ago, and I was told there wasn't a lot of time to take many memorabilia. But at least I had this photo of her.

I habitually searched my face to find something of hers. I wished that I looked like her.... We looked so unlike you couldn't even tell we were related. My mother was dazzling. She had voluminous, dark brown hair, olive skin, and blue eyes. Her cheekbones were chiseled, and she looked like a supermodel. But I think it was her smile that was special.

My features were more delicate than hers, and I had fairer skin. My eyes were green-blue, and my fine light blonde hair hung straight down with little volume. But I had to have something. There had to be *something* of my mother in me.

I sighed and looked down at the map one more time. I knew that this would be my opportunity to find out more about her. And, hopefully, myself.

I scanned the note next to the spot that was circled and read the note again. There was an address, and it appeared to be a lighthouse. That would explain the first part of the note. But what did keys have to do with anything?

My phone interrupted my thoughts. I looked down and gasped at the text from Jan.

Bought a new car. The Jeep's yours, she wrote.

I raced down the stairs and saw the keys on the kitchen counter. I called her to thank her. After I hung up the phone, I grabbed the keys, and I ran outside.

The old green Jeep looked entirely different to me now. It may have had a coffee stain or two, a few ripped seat covers, and one too many trips to the car shop for repairs, but hey, I had wheels.

I grinned as I went toward it, opening the door, and sliding inside. I heard a buzz from my phone, and when I glanced down at it, I expected it to be Brandon like a reflex. But it was just Jan telling me to be home for dinner. She must have figured I'd want to try out the car.

I backed out of the driveway and thought about saying goodbye to Brandon. I tried to push those thoughts away and wondered how he was doing.

But maybe he had moved on. I tried not to think that way, but part of me couldn't help it. I just didn't understand why he didn't want to talk to me. When we were

upset, we were the first person that either of us would go to.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I would go to the lighthouse. That would be a good distraction; I needed to get my mind off of Brandon. And despite my earlier protests about going to the beach, I wanted to find out more about my mother.

I rolled down the windows to let in the sea salt breeze as I drove, taking in the views of Santa Cruz. As the lighthouse came into view, I saw the bluest water I had ever seen. It was the first time I'd seen the ocean in years.

I parked, and I opened the car door as a gust of wind whipped through my hair. The scent of the ocean was stronger than the breeze near my home. It smelled mostly of salt, and it made me want some pretzels.

I went to grab my bag when a girl with long, honey-colored hair walked past me. She was wearing a navy wetsuit and carrying a red-and-white-striped surfboard. She did a double-take, and a smile stretched over her freckled face. She seemed familiar somehow.

"Hey, are you Kate? Jan Peterson's niece?" she said, looking at me with kind, blue eyes.

"Yeah, how did you know?" I grabbed my bag and shut the door behind me as she continued to talk.

"It's Kristen! Do you remember me? We used to have playdates when we were little. Our dads were really good friends."

I did remember her, I realized. I knew her face seemed familiar. I turned around.

"We used to come down to the beach together when we were little, right?"

"Yes! I can't believe you're back," she said, placing her surfboard down and running up to hug me. The hug was a

bit of a shock, but the comfort was much needed. "Are you going to be starting at Meadows?" she said as she stood back to pick up her surfboard.

"Yeah, I start on Monday."

"Cool. Would you mind recording me surfing today? I'm training for some competitions that are coming up," she said, motioning toward the water.

The lighthouse could wait, I guess. I was hoping to just get in and out of that lighthouse so that I wouldn't have to be around the pull toward the water too long. But this would be another good distraction, I realized.

"Sure," I said, taking her phone. I'd go to the lighthouse straight after.

"Thanks so much," she said as she ran toward the sky-blue water with her surfboard.

I began following her, and I gasped. The pull toward the water was stronger than I'd ever felt it. It was like the water was trying to push me into it. I tried to put my feet in the sand to stop it, but I began to feel dizzy and sick. I was in a battle with the water, and right now, it seemed to be winning. I knew this was coming, but I didn't expect it to be so strong. I sat down on the warm sand and closed my eyes. Fear was washing over me.

Jan said I had a condition where I had to avoid getting in the water. And...I couldn't swim. If I let the pull control me, I could drown.

I began scooting away from the ocean, slowly. At first, it was like backing up into an impenetrable shield. It took strength trying to back away from it. But as I scooted backward, the pull started to let up. I sighed in relief as I opened my eyes again and looked out at the water. Did everyone feel this way around water?

I spotted Kristen paddling out, and I remembered that I

was supposed to be recording her. I held the phone up as I squinted. It was really sunny today, and I wished I'd remembered to wear sunglasses.

I watched as she bobbed up and down in the waves like a buoy, searching for a good wave. Not before long, she was paddling. She charged the wave like a pro, hopped onto her board effortlessly, and glided down smoothly, but not before she turned and snapped off the top of it, sending droplets of water into the air like sparks.

She made it look so effortless. As she surfed the waves, she looked so free. Like she was flying or something, like nothing was holding her down in the world. It was just her and the wave that propelled her forward. I wanted that. I wanted to be free too.

After about a half hour, Kristen began paddling back toward the shore. When she could stand, she placed her surfboard under her right arm and walked toward me.

"The water's a little cold today," she said as she approached. She bent down and scooped up a yellow towel and began drying off her hair.

"Here," I said, handing her phone back.

"Thank you," she said as looked at the replay. "So, what are you doing at the beach today?" she asked, still looking at her phone.

"Actually," I said, turning around to look at the lighthouse. "I wanted to check out the lighthouse. Have you ever been?"

"No, I haven't. Mind if I come with you?" she said, looking up and putting her hand over her eyes to block the sunlight.

"Not at all."

We both walked toward the lighthouse, and when we got closer, she placed her surfboard in the sand. On the front of

the door, a weathered old sign hung on the door that said “Lighthouse Tours Now Open”.

I pushed the door open and saw a middle-aged man sitting in a chair staring out the window. He looked like an old sea captain with a white-and-brown-speckled beard. He had this dazed look in his eyes as he looked out toward the sea, and I wondered what he was thinking about.

“Hey, where can we sign up for a tour?” I asked, moving toward his desk.

“You can look around,” he said, without moving from his chair, his eyes still fixed on the water.

I caught Kristen’s eye, and she shrugged. I looked around briefly and noticed there were bookshelves full of papers, historical documents, and artifacts. The walls were white, and there were numerous paintings of the ocean. I knew I couldn’t search down here for anything while the man was watching us. I wasn’t sure he would have noticed, but I wanted to go upstairs just in case.

We headed up creaking stairs, and at the top, we looked out the long window in front of us.

“Wow! Look at that,” Kristen said, staring at the waves that were growing in size. They were choppier than they had been even moments ago, and they’d taken on a dark blue color. “That storm came so fast. I didn’t see many clouds out, did you?”

Maybe that was what the man had seen.

“No, you’re right. It was clear before,” I said. The sky in front of us was growing dark—storm clouds seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. As I looked out at the sea, I noticed a boat heading out toward the open water, almost as though its captain hadn’t noticed the approaching storm. It was strange.

Suddenly, I jumped as the man from downstairs came up behind us, looking out at the clouds.

"Mermaid weather," he muttered under his breath. "You two better get out of here. The storm will be on us in a few minutes. And it looks like it'll be a nasty one."

Kristen and I made eye contact, and we hurried down the stairs, the floorboards creaking loudly underneath us. When we opened the door, I realized he was right. It was humid, and the air seemed to be hugging us as we went toward the car. Wind was blowing sand into my eyes, and I really wished I'd brought sunglasses now.

"Do you need a ride?" I said.

"That would be great!" Kristen said as we ran toward my car.

Kristen threw her surfboard in the trunk, and rain began pouring down just as we climbed into the Jeep. The rain was pelting on the roof of the car, and I began to hear the initial rumblings of thunder.

"I know that man," Kristen said as we began driving. "He used to be a well-respected biologist. He worked for the aquarium, actually."

"Used to be?"

"He went a little crazy a while back and kept going on about some kind of sea creature that he saw. Nobody believed him. He wanted to be interviewed, but people thought they'd save him the embarrassment."

"What kind of sea creature did he see?" I asked.

"My dad wouldn't say," she said.

The rain was coming down so hard now that we had to shout to hear each other for the rest of the car ride. When we got to her house, she ducked out of the car and began running in the rain toward the front door with her hand over her head.

"See you soon!" she yelled. "Thank you!"

I waved at her. It was nice to think I had already made a friend, but I thought about the man and what he said.

Mermaid weather. What did he mean by that?

I drove toward my house and parked the car when I saw a figure standing on the sidewalk near my house. The rain was pouring down sideways. It was hard to see outside, but then lightning flashed, and I saw a familiar face. A *very* familiar face.

It couldn't be... could it?!

"Brandon!" I said, running out of the car. He turned toward me and put his hood up.

As soon as he put his hood up, I realized it wasn't him. Embarrassment hit me like a tidal wave. I muttered an apology and darted inside, my cheeks burning from embarrassment even through the rain.

I ran upstairs and grabbed a towel to start drying off my hair as tears began pouring down my cheeks in small rivers. This move was really taking its toll. I missed him so terribly.

The feelings I tried to block were all tumbling back in now. I brushed the tears off my cheeks, and I hugged my stuffed sea turtle, Charlie, as I debated whether I should call him.

I made the decision to call him and felt a glimmer of hope as I listened to the phone ringing on the other end. Suddenly, it went to voicemail, and more tears slid down my face. Disappointed as I was, it felt good to hear his voice in his message.

I looked out the window at the gray sea and became lost in thought. I watched lightning strike the sky and jumped at the roar of thunder that followed.

The voice message had stopped, and I was now recording a message.

"Please call me back," I blurted out. "I'm so sorry, and I miss you so much. Call me back soon, okay?"

I pressed the end button and realized how sad I sounded. I placed my head in my hands as the tears continued. I sat there a few moments; then I stood up and went to the bathroom to splash water on my face. I thought this year was going to be so good. Brandon had already asked me to the homecoming dance, and I'd even gone out and bought a dress for it.

I headed toward one of the boxes and found the silky blue dress. The silk seemed to leap off the dress as I ran my fingers across it, and I picked it up and hung it in my closet. I'd told Brandon that he needed to wear a blue tie since my dress was blue. I hoped he hadn't bought the tie....

I sighed and wiped a few lingering tears off my cheek, and I crossed the room to sit at my desk. I looked around at my new room. My floral, blue bedspread and white, fluffy pillows sat on my bed in the middle of the room. I'd hung up long, blue curtains on either side of the bay window, and a small, lavender rug ran across the floor, ending at my desk.

I turned to watch the rain patter against the windows. Droplets dripped down the glass as though they were teardrops, but there were no tears left in my own eyes.

Jan knocked on the door.

"Hey, Jan."

"I just wanted to see how your first day here went," she said, pulling her brunette hair into a ponytail. "I see you still have some unpacking to do," she said, gesturing to the half-open boxes scattered in the room. She was soaked from the rain.

"It was fine," I said. "I saw Kristen Johnson. Did you know the Johnsons?"

"Of course, I know the Johnsons. They were really helpful

to us the day of the storm,” she said, and then she suddenly had a dazed look in her eyes.

“Jan?”

“Yes, honey?” she said. Jan acted like this sometimes when we talked about that day—the day of the storm.

“Did you ever know a man that worked in the lighthouse?” I asked her, changing the subject.

“Yes, Dr. Keys works there. We were very close,” she said. I looked up at her, and I noticed her eyes welling up.

Keys. I was supposed to be looking for a person, not a set of keys.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She then snapped back into reality. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’m trying to find out more about my mom,” I said.

Jan sat down on the bed and looked at the floor. “I’m sorry I don’t talk about your parents more often. And I know I didn’t give you a good explanation as to why we’re here. The truth is, I was tired of running. Of running away,” she said as the tears began spilling over.

She then looked up at me with the saddest look.

“Oh, Jan,” I said. I went over and hugged her.

“You’re so kind. You’ve always been so kind,” Jan said, wiping her tears. “Even when I don’t deserve it. I know how much Brandon meant to you. How much he meant to both of us,” she said, “But I was tired of running away, and I knew I had to come back here. This is my home, Katrina. It’s always been my home.”

“But Chicago with Brandon was *my* home,” I said as I gave her a tissue.

She dabbed her eyes and took my hands. “Kate, one day I know you will understand why we moved back. But for now, would you like to start volunteering at the aquarium? We

really need help over there, and maybe it would be a good distraction while you settle in.”

“All right. Sure, why not,” I said, smiling slightly. But I was smiling more for her than for me. It seemed to encourage her a bit, and she straightened up.

“Good night,” she said as she left the room. I watched as the golden knob turned as she closed it, and then I sighed and climbed into my bed, pulling up the floral blue covers up to my chin.

Keys—I was going to have to go back and talk to him.

THE AQUARIUM



When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in my bedroom. I walked down the hallway of an aquarium and looked around at the fluorescent blue tanks. I could hear the sounds of the rain pattering against the roof.

In the first tank, schools of fish were swimming, and as light hit their scales, they burst into hundreds of colors. They followed each other rhythmically and methodically, as though they were one large fish.

I turned to my left and saw jellyfish floating. I watched as they moved slowly, their heads puffing up in one big inhale and then releasing as it drove them upward, their tentacles floating along with them. Their tentacles were long and stringy, wrapping up in each other almost like a knot. I wondered how they didn't get tangled.

The sea turtles were in the next tank...they were majestic. I looked in, and I saw one moving toward me, noticing my presence. I put my hand against the glass and looked into the sea turtle's eyes. The turtle put his pale green flipper against

the glass too. I smiled, but the turtle's eyes showed a warning in them. He raised his flipper and pointed to the right.

As if on cue, the glass began shattering. I whipped around and watched as gallons of water flooded the ground with a loud clattering of the glass and a swooshing of the water.

Fish flowed out with the water and began flopping about on the ground, but they weren't the only ones in trouble. Soon, the glass walls around me were shattering, one by one, and I was swept off my feet as the water came gushing down.

I grabbed onto a railing and stood up, running toward the front doors. I rattled them to try to get them to open, but it was no use. I was locked in. I screamed and lunged myself against the doors, giving them one last try. It didn't work, and I was losing my footing as the water began to rise.

I turned and waded through the water—I had to make it to the stairs. I gasped as I watched a large pufferfish floating across the top of the water.

When I made it to the stairs, I grabbed onto the railing, and I began climbing. The stairs were filling quickly, and I clutched the railing as hard as I could. However, as the top of the staircase came into view, I noticed something far more terrifying than before: sharks.

Their tank had burst, and sharks were flopping into the shallow water that was quickly becoming deeper. I grew dizzy watching the water swirling around me. When I looked up, a large shark was headed toward me. Its open mouth displayed massive, sharp teeth, and I screamed and closed my eyes as the water swallowed me whole.

I woke with a start, gasping for breath. The rosy light of the sunrise shone into my room. The aquarium was gone. The shark was gone.

I lay there in shock for a moment, my hands gripping my

covers. That dream was so vivid. It felt *real*. I sat up and began unweaving the blonde braid that I had slept in and walked along the creaky, wooden floor toward my bathroom, my legs shaking a little.

When I looked in the mirror, I noticed my hair was in waves from the braid and my blue-green eyes looked a little red. I splashed water on my face and began brushing my teeth. I closed my eyes for a moment and pictured the water swirling around me.

It scared me. Drowning scared me.

KEYS WAS right about the storm. Tree branches littered the ground, and I noticed a few of them had crashed into some unlucky cars. I backed out of the driveway, careful not to hit any branches on the way out. I had a stomachache as I headed toward the aquarium. The dream was still lingering, and so was the fear I felt from it.

When I walked through the front door, Jan motioned me toward her and gave me a very brief tour of the facility. She moved quickly, and I didn't have a lot of time to look into the different tanks—she was more focused on showing me where the offices and the kitchen were.

"So you can start on the first tank up there. It's the otters. They need to be fed," she said when the tour was finished.

I brought the food bucket upstairs and went to the tank, watching as the sea otters splashed around. When I approached them, they seemed to wave hello to me. I smiled as I watched them play with their toys in the water and float on their backs.

"Hey, guys! I have urchins and mussels for breakfast today. Mmm," I said. The otters came over as I began tossing the food in the water.

For the first time in what seemed like a long time, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was happy to be back at an aquarium and felt at home with the animals.

As I watched the otters, I noticed two of them holding hands. Nature was always full of beautiful surprises like that. I've always loved how otters held hands. I know some people don't think animals are capable of love, but from what I've seen, I'd have to disagree.

I smiled again as I watched them, and then I went to do my next task.

I was walking down the stairs after spending time with the sea otters when I noticed some sharks in a tank. I recognized sevengill sharks and dogfish sharks. My stomach squeezed a bit as I walked past them, but then my heart raced when I saw it—the great white shark. I had obviously missed this part on my tour.

Why was there a great white shark here?

The shark seemed to notice me and began swimming closer until it bumped the glass.

Did I just see what I thought I saw?

I looked for signs of shatter in the glass and began stepping backward. The shark didn't bump the glass again, but it seemed to still be staring at me.

I heard someone come up behind me, and I tripped and fell into arms.

"Hey." I was met with a crooked smile. "I'm Matt," he said, laughing as he helped me back on my feet. He had dark brown hair and strong arms. I looked at him, confused as he held out his hand.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine." I said, pulling myself together. "Kate," I said as I shook his hand.

"I started last week at Meadows. Did you just move here,

too? I haven't seen you there." He looked a few years older than me.

"I start on Monday, actually."

"Oh, cool. Where are you from?" he asked.

"Chicago," I said, peering over at the shark again. He was still there, swimming back and forth near the glass. "Since when does an aquarium have a great white shark?"

"It's only going to be here about a month," he said.

"Do you work here?" I asked, looking back at him.

He turned a little so he could see the shark. "Just part-time," he said. "On weekends and Tuesdays. Lacrosse practice is on Tuesday mornings, so it works out."

I was distracted by the shark, so I missed what he said next. "What?"

"Are you related to Dr. Peterson, the marine biologist?" he asked again, louder this time.

I suddenly felt very rude. "Yes, she's my aunt."

"Hmm, that's strange," Matt said, his eyes focused on the great white. "The shark is displaying predatory behavior. Scared?" he said with a slight smirk.

"No."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, I'm scared," I laughed.

"Well, I'm going to get back to work," he said, taking my food bucket. "Go check out the kelp forest if you haven't seen it already. It's pretty cool. And don't worry about the shark." He then walked closer to the tank and said, "Really cool to see a great white this close."

Yeah, right.

"It was nice to meet you," Matt said.

"Ditto," I replied.

I could hear him laughing behind me. I took a last glance

at the great white shark before walking away, and it seemed to flash its razor-sharp teeth at me.

I turned around and headed toward the kelp forest, glad that I was getting away from the shark. I briefly saw this on the tour, but I didn't get the chance to really appreciate it. I was amazed at what I saw. There was nothing like this at the Shedd. The kelp forest went up two stories. Fish and other critters swam through the thick, shimmering plant. It was truly stunning to see.

This would be a really good hiding spot, I thought. If I were a fish escaping a predator, this would be the first place I'd hide.

I paused at the glass as I looked inside, but only for a moment; I had to keep working.

My day was filled with all sorts of tasks. I mopped the floors for the shower that the divers used and helped prepare food that they could use the next day—some jobs were more fun than others.

When I finished my tasks, I saw someone diving. It was Matt.

He was feeding the sharks with another diver, and when he saw me, he waved. I waved back. As I turned to leave, he gave me the stop sign, so I went back toward the kelp forest to wait for him. I wanted to look at it again, and I was again amazed at the beauty of the tank.

Matt showed up a few minutes later, his hair soaking wet. He smiled at me and smoothed a little bit of his hair to the side.

"Thanks for waiting," he said, and I noticed he smelled like peppermint.

"How do you have so much experience hand-feeding sharks?" I asked him.

"I have my ways," he said, smirking.

"Well, I'm impressed. You looked like a professional."

"Thanks. Hey, there's something I want to show you," Matt said. We turned from the tank, and he led me into an office.

The office was carpeted in a pale blue color, and a dark oak desk sat in the middle. There were multiple gray file cabinets sat in the corner. Matt pointed to a wall that was covered in medals and achievements the aquarium had acquired over the year.

"Is that your mom?" he asked.

I moved closer to the wall. My mother's name was written underneath the picture.

"Recognized for Outstanding Achievement in Marine Life Biology," I read.

I looked at Matt, and he smiled slightly. My mother was smiling and holding up a small, red crab in her hands. In the next picture, she and Jan were smiling and standing together. They looked so happy.

My eyes blurred slightly as tears crept into my eyes. I blinked a few times to hold them back, and I thought about what Jan had said about coming back here. She didn't want to run away anymore, and now I understood why. This was her home. And as I was staring at that picture of my mom, I realized that I wanted to be here. I wanted to be close to her.

I was suddenly guilty as I thought of Brandon. I hoped he knew how much I missed him, how much I wished he were here. How, deep in my heart, I knew it had broken when I left. And how it hurt even more not hearing from him. Tears began to burn my eyes as I felt so many emotions looking at that photo. If only I could reach out to him in that moment.

"Hey, are you okay?" Matt asked quietly, slowly letting go

of my hand. I had wrapped my hand around his, and I felt my cheeks heat up.

"My parents passed away when I was a kid," I said.

"Oh, man. I'm sorry," he said, running his hands through his hair, uncomfortable. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye for a second and blinked a few times, trying to hold back tears.

"She was really pretty," I said.

"Yeah, she was."

"There was a storm," I told Matt, seeing a flash of sadness in his eyes. "I don't remember it really, but apparently it was a big one. A hurricane appeared in a matter of minutes. My parents had gone out on a boat, and when the storm passed...they only found the boat," I said quietly.

"Kate, I'm sorry." He looked sad, and he leaned on the desk. We stood there in silence for a few moments.

"I think I'm going to head out," I said. "Thank you for showing me that."

"Can I give you a ride or anything?" he offered.

"No. I drove. I'll see you at school," I said, smiling slightly. He smiled back, but he looked a little guilty.

When I got home, Jan was already there, standing in the kitchen cooking. I came in and sat at the table as she brought out our dinner. It smelled really good. She made spaghetti with marinara, my favorite.

"What did you think of the aquarium?" Jan asked as she twirled some spaghetti onto her fork.

"It was good," I said. "The shark was a little surprising, though."

"Yeah," she said. "It surprised me, too. But it won't be here long. How are you?" she asked. "I saw you talking to Matt. Does he go to your high school?"

“Yeah.” Then I paused a moment and said, “I understand why we moved back now. I saw a picture of you and mom.”

I stood up and went toward Jan to hug her.

“I love you, Kate,” Jan said as she held me close. “Your mother would be so proud of you.”

“I love you, too.”

FIRST DAY



Over the weekend, I went to church with Jan. I was surprised by how fast Jan seemed to be fitting into the town again. Some of her old friends came up and hugged her and then me. I heard a lot of “Wow! You’re so grown up.” These people remembered me more than I did them.

In Chicago, while I was growing up, Jan made sure I went to Sunday school every week before church, and we prayed together every Tuesday night. Jan told me once that prayers are powerful, and that they help to fight against the evil in this world. My faith has always been a very important part of my life, and I try to make decisions that reflect that faith.

The night before school started, I prayed like I did every night before I went to bed.

I climbed into bed and wondered what the next day would bring and what school would be like. I knew it wouldn’t be the same without Brandon. Nothing felt the same without him.

When I walked into school the next morning, I was reminded of how much I missed being at my old school in

Chicago. I opened my new locker and stared into the undecorated space. It was a blank slate and nothing like my locker before. I decided not to decorate it at all; I placed some of my books down and shut the door.

I went to the dean's office and waited to be called in for my meeting to go over my schedule. It was warm and stuffy in here. A fan was rotating quickly on the ceiling, but it didn't seem to be helping much.

A lady with bright red lipstick finally called my name, and I went up to her desk.

"Miss Lisa Weber will see you now," she said.

I nodded, and I felt my stomach flip as I went toward the office. Lisa was waiting for me in there. She was a very thin lady and wore her blonde hair in a tight bun. She seemed friendly and motioned me to sit.

"How are you liking Santa Cruz?" she asked.

"It's good," I said.

"We don't get many transfers for their senior year. How are college applications going? Have you thought about college yet?" she asked.

"Yes, I've already applied."

She looked a little shocked, but she nodded in approval. "Wonderful. Can I ask where? What are you planning on studying?"

"Marine biology. I've applied in Boston, a few places in California, Miami, and Florida," I said.

"Well, we have a wonderful program here in Monterey, which is close to Santa Cruz. Let me know if you'd be interested in learning more about that."

"Okay. Thanks," I said, smiling.

"Here's your schedule," she said, handing me a slip of paper. She smiled and said, "If you need anything, let me know. I know transferring can be difficult."

“Thanks.”

She motioned me to the door and smiled at me as I left.

I felt like a fish out of water as I looked out into the hallway. A sea of students crowded the halls with the passing of the period. I scanned each of the faces, hoping I’d see Brandon. I don’t know why I was looking for his face, but high school just wasn’t the same without him.

Students were pushing into me from behind as they hurried on to their class. I didn’t remember people being this pushy, but maybe I was just a little stressed.

I leaned against a locker as I scanned my class schedule. Psychology first, AP Biology, History, Lunch, P.E., Calculus, AP Chemistry, and then English.

The first few classes went by quickly. But in History, Kristen and I locked eyes as she walked toward the classroom.

“Hey, Kate,” she said, giving me a side hug on our way in. “Come sit next to me.” She introduced me to some of the classmates who seemed friendly. But as soon as I sat down, I could hear a couple of girls whispering and asking one another about me.

Kristen and I filed out of class after it ended, and she said, “Hey, some friends are meeting me outside for lunch. Want to join us?”

“Sure.”

“Great! I brought my lunch, so I’ll meet you out there.”

I saw her walk out of the building, and then I headed toward the cafeteria. I could smell the fried food as soon as I walked in, and I headed straight for the lunch line. Matt was standing in line, and I walked toward him.

“Hey!” I said, walking up to him with a warm smile.

“Hey, blondie. How’s your first day going?” he said, grinning.

“Good so far,” I said as I filled my plate up with salad. “Do you want to come outside with me? I’m meeting some friends.”

“All right,” he said. I waited while he piled his plate to the brim with two hamburgers, salad, pasta, and a brownie.

He put the brownie in his mouth as we walked toward the cafeteria doors. He backed into the door, opening it with his back, and nodded, the brownie still dangling out of his mouth.

I spotted Kristen, waved, and went to sit down next to her at a wooden picnic table. The lawn wasn’t mowed very well, and the green grass climbed a few inches up the sides of the table. The sun was shining today, and it was warm. It felt good to be in the sun and outside.

Matt went right over to a boy with a medium build, and they shook hands. “Good to see you, man,” he said to Matt.

“Hi,” I said.

Kristen introduced me to Helen, a short girl with brown curly hair and glasses.

“Everyone’s been talking about you,” she said with a laugh. “So, tell me: is it true that you have a boyfriend from home?”

“No, there’s no boyfriend,” I said. I wondered if she meant Brandon. He was not my boyfriend.... I hoped at least he was still my friend.

“Okay. If you say so,” Helen said with a huff as she looked at her phone.

“Ready for the game tonight?” the boy asked Matt.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure the coach likes me very much.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” he said, slapping Matt on the back and then turning to sit down.

"Sam's a co-captain of the lacrosse team," Kristen said. "Sam, this is Kate. Kate, Sam."

"Hey," I said as he flashed me a brilliant smile. "Who's the other captain?" I asked.

Helen giggled and blurted, "Jared O'Connor."

"I'll point him out to you at the game. He's fast. Like, really fast," Kristen said. "And he's very popular."

"Yeah," Helen agreed.

"Anyway, I have news. I'm going to surf Pipeline in a competition coming up," Kristen said.

"I wish you wouldn't," Sam said with a frown. "You know it's dangerous."

"I can handle it. I'm trying to qualify for the Champions Tour, and this is my chance," Kristen said as she opened her smoothie bottle.

"Okay," Sam said uneasily.

"Have you ever surfed before?" Kristen asked me. "I meant to ask you back at the beach the other day."

"Um, no. I've actually never been swimming before," I said.

I think Kristen knew about what happened to my parents because she looked down at the table suddenly. I had a feeling she understood.

"Don't you want to learn? I mean, you work at an aquarium, right? How could you not know how to swim?" Helen said. Matt gave her a dirty look.

"No, but I like going to the beach," I said.

"Kate, I know this is a lot to ask, but would you mind helping me record sometimes after school?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

I wasn't sure about it, but I wanted to become friends with Kristen, and I thought this would be my chance. And

maybe if I was around the ocean enough, I could get used to that feeling when I was around it. Maybe it would go away.

"Thanks," she said, smiling. "We're going to the game after school today. You want to come?"

"Yeah," Sam said.

"Okay. I'll come."

The rest of the day passed by pretty smoothly, and after school, Kristen walked with me to the parking lot.

"Ready for the game?" she asked. "Helen and I will meet you there?"

"Sure. See you soon."

We met up in the parking lot at the field outside of our cars. As we walked up the bleachers, the student section was already packed with people chatting and laughing, and we had to squeeze ourselves in a space near the top.

"Sam's starting!" Kristen said, pointing at him. I squinted and saw him on the field stretching, waiting for the game to start. The sun was beating down on us, and I sipped from my water bottle as we waited for the team to line up on the bright green turf.

The referee tweeted his whistle, signaling the start of the game. The players moved quickly, the ball zooming as they passed it back and forth. They ran up and down the field fast, and suddenly, the student section erupted. The ball was in the net, and the other players were patting number thirty-two on the back and yelling.

Apparently, our lacrosse team was pretty good. We were only ten minutes into the game, and we had scored three times. All by number thirty-two. I read the last name on the jersey—O'Connor. Every time he scored, the cheerleaders seemed to cheer extra loud, and Jared would flash the student section a smile.

"That's Jared, isn't it?" I noticed his auburn hair looked bronze in the sunlight.

"Yep," Kristen said. "He and Sam are the best on the team."

"What's he like?" I asked Kristen.

"He's actually really nice. I had a class with him last year." Then she smiled. "He's clearly confident," she said as he smiled up to the crowd after scoring.

Helen cheered and clapped extra loud next to me, and the entire stand began clapping for him. I could tell he liked the cheering, but then as he looked up into the crowd, our eyes met.

Wait...was he looking at *me*?

As he squinted up at me, a ball flew by him.

"What are you doing?" one of the players yelled.

He backed up and looked away, running back to get set up for the game.

What just happened?

I looked over at Kristen, but she was looking at her phone, and Helen was watching the game as if nothing had happened.

The rest of the game went by without another look from Jared and ended with a score of ten to one. We walked down the stairs of the bleachers and waited next to the fence for Sam and Matt. I looked onto the field and saw Jared take off his goggles. When he turned around, we locked eyes—I was suddenly aware that I was staring at him.

I quickly looked away as Sam walked up to us. He had on a toothy grin, and Kristen and Helen gave him high fives. Matt was lingering behind them, scowling, but then he walked toward me.

"Are you okay?" I asked Matt.

"Coach wouldn't put me in the game," he sighed, taking off his goggles.

"Why not?"

"Beats me."

"Who's the coach?" I asked Matt.

"Jared's dad, Mr. O'Connor."

"Oh...well, maybe you could talk to him about it," I said.

"Yeah, maybe," Matt shrugged. "It's fine. I'll show him in practice that I'm better than he thinks."

"Sam and I are going to get some ice cream. Want to come?" Kristen asked.

I nodded, and we headed across the street to the shop. When we went inside, the decor reminded me of an old-fashioned diner. There were red booths and a jukebox playing fifties music in the corner.

We ordered at the counter and sat down in a booth in the far corner.

"Would any of you want to come camping with me in a couple of weeks?" Kristen said as the waitress handed us our ice cream.

Camping? I liked camping, and I hadn't been since the last time I went with Brandon. I tried to force the thought of him out of my mind.

"I'll go," I said. Helen and Sam looked at the table, not saying a word. "Does nobody like to camp around here?"

Sam shrugged. "The woods near the campsite are haunted."

Kristen averted her eyes, looking slightly annoyed with this suggestion, and Matt's eyebrows furrowed as he turned to Sam.

"Haunted?" he asked.

Kristen looked at Sam, and it seemed like they were having some kind of silent conversation. Kristen sighed.

“A girl went missing around there many years ago, and nobody has seen her since,” she said. Then she saw the look on my face and said, “You’re not going to chicken out, are you?”

“No way,” I said, feeling my stomach tighten.

CAMPING



On the day of the camping trip, we piled into a school bus and rode to the edge of the forest. Kristen was wearing a black windbreaker, and she wore her long hair down. I was wearing a light blue jacket and a pair of jeans with some hiking boots.

Our English teacher, Mr. Thompson, was the trip supervisor. He lectured us about the history of the forest, told us about the different animals we might encounter, and cautioned us about the potential dangers of camping. After promising to be careful, we got off the bus.

I chatted with Kristen as the tour guides arrived. They introduced themselves, and to my surprise, the guides were Jared and his brother, Steve. I recognized Jared's auburn-bronze hair, and up close, I could see his sharp jaw and blue eyes. Steve was a little taller than Jared with brown hair, a chiseled jaw, and brown eyes.

Jared was wearing Timberland boots with a pair of hiking pants and a light jacket over a dark gray henley. He began

reading off a list of yet another set of rules for the hike. As he was talking, our eyes met.

Had he caught me staring again?

My cheeks flushed red, and I could feel them burning, but he gave me a quick smile and turned back to his paper. He said the campsite was about seven miles away—that was a little further than I had expected.

We got in a single-file line and followed Jared into the forest. I held onto my backpack a little nervously as we walked along the tree-lined trails, and I looked up at the large trees. They were massive, and they only seemed to grow in size as we went deeper into the forest.

The woods were teeming with life. I watched as a few birds flew overhead. The birds flew through a few sunrays that were filtering through the leaves, and I could see a quick flash of blue feathers as they went through the light. Soft, velvet-looking moss climbed up the sides of trees, weaving their way upward, and green leaves fanned out, glowing slightly from the sun that wanted to peak through.

The hike was difficult. There were multiple tree limbs and stumps, and I had to be careful not to trip. After a few miles, my legs started to hurt. I wanted to sit down, and I was very hot.

“I’m tired,” I sighed to Kristen, whispering. “I didn’t realize how out of shape I was.”

“Here. I brought some trail mix,” she said, grabbing a bag of trail mix out of her backpack. “I’m getting tired, too.” She poured some of the trail mix into my hand.

As the day wore on, the forest became thicker and thicker, and my backpack felt heavier and heavier. By mile five, I felt like I’d been run over by a truck. I was the slowest in the crowd, and Kristen and I were in the very back.

I leaned up against a tree and took a sip of water. I was exhausted.

Kristen noticed how tired I was and covered for me. "Hey, can we take a quick break?" she asked Jared.

Instead of looking at Kristen, Jared and Steve looked at me. I think they realized I was the one who needed to stop.

"Five-minute break," Jared told everyone.

I sighed from exhaustion and took a seat with Kristen on the nearest rock. "Thanks for that," I said. I looked over at Jared. He was standing with his arms crossed, talking to Steve.

"You like him, don't you?" Kristen asked, seeing my gaze.

"I don't even know him."

I didn't. But there was just something about him I really liked. Besides his piercing eyes. And his hair. I hadn't seen eyes like that since Brandon. *Oh, Brandon...*

"We'll see," she said, laughing. "Now let's go; it looks like we're heading out."

After the break, I felt much better, but thankfully, we stopped a few more times to drink some water. I wanted to take off my jacket, but I didn't want to be bitten by mosquitos or ticks.

Every once in a while, Jared and I would catch each other's eyes through the hike. I always looked away quickly, but when we approached the campsite, we met eyes again, and he smiled. I shyly smiled back, noticing my cheeks were burning slightly in embarrassment.

The sun was setting, and I walked with Kristen toward the campsite. It was an open area with a fire pit and a bathroom. I was relieved that we'd finally made it.

"I'll be right back. Save me a spot next to you?" I asked Kristen.

“Of course.”

I went to the restroom and splashed water on my face, sighing in relief as I felt the cool water meet my skin. When I walked out, I saw that Mr. Thompson and Jared had started a campfire. Everyone else was setting up their tents.

I was about to take a step forward when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I took a peek over my shoulder—Steve was standing under a tree, trying to light the cigarette that was hanging from his lips.

“You’d better be careful with that,” I said. “You don’t want to start a forest fire.”

The cigarette caught the flame, and the tip glowed orange. “Thanks, I had no idea,” he said, rolling his eyes.

He blew out his smoke in my face. “You’re new. What’s your name?”

I felt stiff. “Um, Kate,” I said, backing away.

“Well, Kate, I hope to see you around more often.”

He took a step back from me, and he took another drag from his cigarette. I tripped over a branch as I turned away from him and walked toward the fire. On my way, I stepped in a large puddle, and suddenly my leg tensed up. It only lasted for a second, but the sensation was strange. When I turned around again, Steve looked at me with a surprised expression on his face. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at me, and then he averted his eyes. He took another drag from his cigarette, and then he threw it on the ground, and put it out with his boot. Then he walked off.

I looked down at my leg to see what had happened, but it looked fine. I turned and noticed that something was smoking slightly. I walked toward it. It was the cigarette, and a moment later, it had caught a small flame.

A heap of water was thrown suddenly at the cigarette, and when I looked up, Steve was glaring at me.

I turned around as he stared. I was startled, and I walked away quickly from the cigarette. I wasn't sure what had just happened. Why was Steve glaring at me?

I felt a little dizzy as I walked away from him, and I began setting up my tent. I set up the tent rather fast, having done it dozens of times before.

"Hey, are you okay?" Kristen asked as I sat down on one of the long log benches that surrounded the fire after I finished. "Your face is so pale."

I looked around to see if I could find Steve, but he was nowhere to be seen. Jared, on the other hand, was passing out marshmallows.

"What do you know about Steve? Jared's brother?" I asked her.

Before she could answer, Jared came and sat down on the other side of me. Kristen's eyes widened.

"Marshmallow?" Jared asked.

"Sure," I said, taking one out of the bag. I looked up at him and stared into his blue eyes. They were beautiful.

He smiled at me then and placed a couple of marshmallows on my stick.

"You need two for a good s'more," Jared said. "Here," he said, handing it to me.

"Thanks," I whispered. I put my marshmallows over the fire, slowly turning them brown.

"I haven't seen you before," Jared said as he began roasting a few marshmallows for himself.

"Yeah, my aunt and I just moved in a couple of weeks ago."

"Where are you from?"

"Actually, we're just moving back. I lived here until I was five, and then we moved to Chicago."

"You're from Chicago, huh?" he said, laughing softly. "The Windy City." He smiled, his teeth flashing white as he took his marshmallows out of the fire and carefully placed them on his graham crackers.

He was so handsome.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"It's Kate," I said, watching him put the chocolate on top of the marshmallows, forming a huge sandwich.

"I'm Jared."

"So, why are you in charge of these hikes?"

"I volunteered, actually. Steve and I like to hike these woods."

"What does your family do?" I asked.

"My dad's a vet and works for the Native Animal Rescue. He helps rehabilitate wild animals."

"That's neat," I said, smiling faintly. "I love animals. Do you ever get to work with him?"

"Yeah, all the time," Jared said.

"I volunteer at the aquarium in Monterey. My aunt works there."

"You'll have to come to the Rescue sometime," Jared said. "Nice to meet you, Kate." He stood up, taking a bite out of his sandwich, and walked toward the other side of the fire to sit with his brother, who had finally joined the circle.

I looked at Kristen, and she raised her eyebrows.

"It's going to rain!" I heard one of my classmates say. I looked up, and they were right. Storm clouds had rolled in.

"Good thing I brought the tarps," Mr. Thompson said as he began passing out tarps to put under our tents. "Share them," he added. "And come back and grab some garbage bags to put your belongings in during the storm."

I hurried to pack up my stuff with a garbage bag, and Kristen and I put a blue tarp underneath our tents.

"You might want to stay inside your tent since it's dark now. If the rain stops early, we can make another campfire, but otherwise, I'd recommend staying in your tent to stay dry. You may visit the bathroom facilities, but do not go wandering around the woods in this weather or at night. Good night," Mr. Thompson said.

"Oh, they were going to play a movie," Kristen said, frowning. "Do you want to lay in our tents and talk?"

I climbed into my tent and turned on the flashlight. I put my head on my pillow, and I wrapped a blanket around me as I listened to the rain, watching as drops of water hit the orange tent. Kristen and I talked for hours it seemed.

"It's freezing out," Kristen said. "I'm glad I brought all these extra layers."

I wasn't cold at all. In fact, I didn't really seem to ever get cold.

"That's cool that you're volunteering at the Shedd," Kristen said. "I heard they have a great white shark. Is it true?"

"Yes, I saw it," I said, remembering my encounter with the shark.

"That's really cool," she said. "I'm exhausted. I'm going to go to bed. Good night, Kate."

"Good night," I said, and I closed my eyes as well.

I woke and looked at my watch—I'd been sleeping for an hour. I was overheated, but it didn't take me long to figure out why. The campfire was going again.

I sat up and went outside to refill my water at the drinking fountain. There were puddles along the way, so I made sure not to step in those. As I was filling up the water bottle, I could hear footsteps approaching.

"I saw you talking to the new girl, Jared," I heard Steve say.

"Yeah, she's pretty cute, don't you think?" Jared said. I didn't want them to see me, so I ducked into the nearby trees.

"There's something weird about her, though. I don't know what it is, but I don't like it," Steve said, waiting for Jared to fill up his water bottle.

"Dude, you're crazy. You've been super stressed out lately. You need to loosen up."

"Just stay away from her, okay?"

"I think I'll see whoever I want to see," Jared said and walked off. Steve lingered, and I stepped on a branch. I heard a big CRACK, and I tried not to gasp, putting my hands over my mouth. Steve turned, puzzled, and started walking closer toward the trees. I closed my eyes and took a few steps back, hoping he wouldn't see me. I waited in silence like that for a few moments, and then I opened my eyes.

Steve had walked away, and I sighed in relief. But why would Steve say something like that?

I went back to my tent and unzipped it so that I could see the sky. As I looked up at the stars, they were glowing brightly—they were so beautiful, and I found the constellations just like Brandon and I used to do.

And then it hit me. It had been weeks since I last heard from Brandon. He hadn't answered any calls or texts, and he wasn't posting on his social media.

He really had abandoned me. Left me. I knew that I had upset him, but he made me a promise, and he broke it as soon as I left. I thought our friendship was special, and I never expected this from him. A single tear slid down my cheek, and I quickly swiped it away.

But then there was a creeping thought. What if he was

gone for good? What if the last time I would ever see him was our goodbye?

I went to the bathroom to cry in private, but when I opened the door, I saw a young girl crying. She looked like she was maybe fourteen.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I'm really cold, and I forgot my sleeping bag," she said, sniffing. She had her hands in the sink, and she was running the hot water to try to warm up.

"Here, come with me. I'll give you my blanket. You can sleep in my tent, too, if you're feeling scared."

"Thank you," she said, wiping her eyes. "Do you think that story about the girl who got lost in the woods is true?"

"Is that what you're scared of?" I asked her. She nodded.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. Don't listen to those stories. These woods aren't haunted." She didn't look convinced, but that seemed to calm her down a little bit.

"Are you okay to go outside now?" I asked her. She nodded.

Jared and Steve were by the fire when we walked out. They were sitting next to a girl with a pixie cut.

I caught a few sentences of their conversation.

"Mike Thompson's missing," Steve said. "I knew something was wrong."

"We'll check it out tomorrow. We'll let the Coast Guard know what's going on," Jared said.

The Coast Guard?

The girl and I quietly walked back to my tent together, trying not to be seen. I felt like I had listened in on something I wasn't supposed to hear.

Jared and Steve noticed us, and Jared walked over.

"Hey, it's late. You should probably get back to your tent

—it's a lot safer in there. You never know what could be in these woods."

I looked at the girl, and her eyes went wide. He had probably scared her further.

"Okay," I said, and I walked off with the girl before he could say anything else. "Here you go," I said to the girl, giving her my blanket when we reached my tent. "Here's my jacket, too. You need them more than I do."

"Thank you for helping me," she said. She hugged me and left to go back to her tent. She smiled and waved and then disappeared into her tent.

I zipped my own shut. I lay and looked at the top of it. It felt cozy in the small space. I was exhausted, and I fell asleep quickly as I listened to the sounds of grasshoppers and crickets.

I woke up suddenly. When I stared up, I realized I was not looking at the top of my tent. I could see the night sky. And worse, I was laying on a branch.

I rolled over and looked around me. There were no tents where I was. I wasn't at the campsite.

I scrambled to my feet and felt mud caked on them. *Gross.*

I looked around, trying to pinpoint where I was, but I was clearly lost.

I could hear water trickling nearby, and I went toward it. Fear was slowly setting in.

The ground became mushier as I walked toward the river, and when I reached it, I noticed a pair of dirt-covered sneakers near the water. I reached down and picked them up.

"Hello?" I called, my voice echoing through the night. "Hello?" I said again.

Nobody seemed to be around, but there was a canoe in front of me. Had somebody brought me here in it? I looked

in the canoe and saw my headband. Then I came to my senses. I'd better run.

I put the sneakers on. I knew it wasn't sanitary, but it was better than running barefoot.

I tied the laces as my feet sunk in the mud, and then I took off in a sprint. The shoes were much too big, but they helped protect my feet against the large branches on the ground.

As I was running, I looked at the ground and stopped.

I could see human footprints, but they weren't of bare feet. It was definitely some kind of shoe. I looked down at the bottom of my shoes to see if they matched. But no—they weren't the same shoes. I knew the footprints were fresh because of all the mud, but I wondered. Why would there be footprints here and my headband in a canoe? Did the two go together? Would following the footprints be the smart thing to do? Was it even related?

I realized I didn't have a better plan, so I began following them, and I ran through the woods.

After a few miles, I paused for a few moments and leaned my head back on a tree. How was I *miles* away from camp? What happened? Maybe following the footprints wasn't a good idea.

My heart was racing, and I was shaking. I needed to calm down. To calm my nerves, I began quietly singing—something I loved to do but rarely did. My mom used to sing to me when I was little, and I sang the words of an old song as I closed my eyes.

My heart rate was finally slowing down, and I knew that I'd be able to keep going. I took a deep breath and continued walking, brushing a few branches away. Whoever's footprints had been here, they had not taken the trail. So, my

journey was one filled with large tree stumps, lots of weeds and ferns, and low-hanging branches.

As I was ducking underneath a branch, I suddenly heard wind rustling in the bushes. I stopped singing immediately—I could hear the sound of feet squashing in the mud.

I panicked. I needed to find a place I could hide. And fast. I crouched behind a nearby bush, and I held my breath, trying not to make another sound.

As I sat there, I could see dark brown fur peeking through the gaps between the branches. I put my hand over my mouth, trying not to scream as a water bottle rolled toward me. The initials read MAB.

I reached down and picked it up, but the animal was moving, and so I tried to stay as frozen as possible.

Suddenly, I heard a large roar. My feet moved faster than I could process what was happening, and I found myself face to face with a massive brown bear.

I screamed and stood back for a second—the water bottle was my only form of self-defense, and I held it out in front of me, my arms shaking. I didn't know what to do. I backed up slowly, looking into the bear's eyes. But they looked calm, not angry, and possibly sad.

I slowly lowered the water bottle down, wondering why the bear looked like that. But then the bear roared, and it began moving toward me. I closed my eyes, preparing for the worst, when I felt someone move in front of me. The bear was on the ground wrestling...a person?!

I stepped backward, lost my footing, and fell into a small ditch. I screamed out in pain—my arm was throbbing.

“Run!” I recognized Jared's voice instantly.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. He was wrestling with the bear. And he was *winning*.

“Stop! You'll hurt it!” I screamed.

But then I saw the bear push Jared toward the ground.

“RUN!” Jared yelled again, this time with more ferocity.

I screamed, dropping the water bottle on the way. I ran, unsure of where I was going. Was I even going in the right direction?

But then I saw smoke, and I knew I was close to camp. I could hear the birds chirping, and I knew that it would be sunrise soon. I ran toward the camp, but as I approached, I started to feel dizzy.

But what about Jared? Please stay awake, I tried to tell myself. But it was no use.

I stumbled toward my tent, trying to stay awake, but as soon as I entered the tent, I passed out.

I could hear voices, and I blinked my eyes open slightly. My eyes widened as I started to remember what had happened last night. *Was it a dream?*

But then I peeked down and saw that I was still wearing the dirt-covered sneakers. It definitely wasn't a dream. And if it wasn't...then...Jared. Where was he? Was he okay?!

I came out of my tent, but then I sighed in relief. I spotted Jared talking to Steve. We made eye contact for a moment, but then he looked away.

I looked back into the forest. What happened to the bear? What even *happened?*

“Hey, are you okay?” Kristen asked. “What happened to your arm?”

I looked down at it and saw a huge bruise.

“It happened last night, I think,” I said. I then remembered falling.

Her brown eyes widened in concern. “What happened?”

Mr. Thompson approached the two of us. “Enough chit chat. We're leaving in five minutes, and neither of you is packed. Let's get a move on.”

I looked at Kristen, and she went into her tent to pack it. I turned around to pack my own stuff.

I reached for the garbage bag from the night before. I opened it up, and I noticed a piece of paper at the top. It was a phone number followed by a note.

CALL ME IF YOU NEED ME.

—JARED.

THE STORM



On Monday morning, I sat up quickly, my stomach in knots as I thought about the day ahead. I closed my eyes and sighed as a few of my blonde locks fell on my face.

Today, I was going to have to face Jared.

After the trip, I replayed the camping trip again and again in my mind. None of it made sense. I thought about how I had woken up in the middle of the forest, my miles-long trek back to the campsite, and especially the incident with Jared. He had wrestled a six hundred-pound grizzly bear and succeeded, somehow.

The only things reminding me it wasn't some kind of dream were the shoes and the note.

I don't know why I was holding onto the shoes, but they were the only evidence I had from the incident. I had inspected them yesterday, hoping I'd find initials or something, but I didn't know who they'd belonged to or why they ended up there. But were the shoes even related?

I wanted answers, and so today, I was going to have to find Jared—I needed an explanation.

THIS WAS IT. I took a deep breath and headed into the cafeteria, scanning it for Jared or his brother. When I didn't see either of them, I sighed. I'd have to find Jared later.

I saw Matt sitting in his usual spot and walked over to the table. I took off my cardigan and looked into my bag. I'd forgotten my lunch.

"Here, you can split this with me," Matt said, handing me half of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Thank you," I said, looking up at him. I gasped. He looked terrible. He had a large black eye, and the left side of his face was blue.

"Matt, what happened?!" I asked, scanning his face. The bruise covered most of it.

"It was nothing," he said, taking a bite of his sandwich and ruffling his hair a little bit.

He then looked at my arm, his eyes widening with concern. "What happened to you?" he asked, his fingers brushing the bluish-purple bruise on the top of my arm.

I knew it didn't look good. I slid my cardigan back on so no one else could see it and frowned, staring at the little holes of the table.

"It happened on the camping trip. I'm okay," I muttered.

"Please be more careful. I'm sorry that happened," he said, his voice gentle.

Just then, Sam and Kristen walked up. Seeing Matt's face, Sam said, "What happened to you?"

"You should see the other guy," Matt said with a crooked smile, his eyes laughing.

Soon, they were both laughing and talking about lacrosse.

Kristen leaned into my ear and whispered, "Hey, we need to talk. Let's get out of here."

I nodded. We left the cafeteria, and we went upstairs to sit against our lockers.

"Here," Kristen said, giving me half of her chocolate bar. "There's nothing that chocolate can't fix." I took the chocolate and smiled slightly and bit into it. She was right. It did help.

She started to say something else but was interrupted by footsteps in the next hallway. We peeked around the corner to see what was happening.

It was Jared and Matt.

"You stay away from her," Jared hissed, his fists clenched.

Matt's voice was shaking slightly when he said, "You don't know the full story. That's not what happened."

"Don't lie to me. You're lucky we aren't turning you in," Jared said. Matt backed into a locker as the two figures glared at one another; Matt was slightly taller than Jared.

"No, you're lucky that I was there first. You just don't want to believe what really happened."

Jared pointed at him. "Stay away from her. That's a warning," he growled, walking away.

Matt started walking down the hall in our direction, and Kristen and I turned away quickly.

Matt came around the corner, looked at us briefly, then walked in the other direction. I let out a huge sigh—I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath.

"What was *that* all about?" Kristen asked.

None of it made sense. Stay away from *her*? I had a slight feeling the "her" they were referring to was me. But I didn't understand why.

"There's something you should know," Kristen said, flipping her long, honey-colored hair over her shoulder. "Matt was in an accident on Saturday night. My uncle's a police officer, and he told my dad all about it."

"What kind of accident?" I asked.

"Some kind of car crash. They found his car smashed on the side of the road. They made him do a breathalyzer test and everything, but they didn't find anything in his system."

I looked in the direction Matt had gone, and I thought about what Jared said. "Matt just seems like a harmless guy to me," Kristen said. "I don't know what Jared was onto him about."

"Yeah, I don't know either. Did your dad say what happened to Matt?"

She looked down. "No. He didn't say."

Jared was still lingering by some lockers when I peeked over again, and I realized this was my chance. I needed to know what happened. I turned to grab my backpack, but when I turned the corner, Jared was walking quickly down the hall. I tried to catch up to him.

"Kate, where are you going?" I heard Kristen ask behind me.

When I turned the corner again, he was gone.

I turned around and asked in a hushed tone, "What do you know about Jared's family?" I wanted to tell her about what happened to me, but part of me knew I shouldn't say anything.

"Let's talk here," she said, pulling me into an empty classroom. She shut the wooden door, and we went over and sat at the desks.

"Look, Jared's family has never been known to be the most...normal," she said. "Their family is always around when things go wrong. My uncle says that they're the first ones he calls when someone in town goes missing or something happens."

When things go wrong?

"Mr. O'Connor is kind of like the town sheriff, except he doesn't work for the police," she said.

"Who does he work for? I thought he was a vet."

"He used to work for the Coast Guard and still does, sort of. He's still pretty connected, and when they need him, he helps out."

She saw the look on my face. "Don't be nervous. Jared's family is loved by pretty much everyone."

Her reassurance didn't make me feel much better. They were so strange, the O'Connors. He worked for the Coast Guard. I then remembered what I heard the night of the camping trip.

"Someone has gone missing. Mike Thompson. You know what I think it is," Steve said.

"We'll check it out tomorrow. We'll let the Coast Guard know what's going on."

I was startled by the bell, signaling the end of the period. Students began pouring out of classrooms and crowding the hallway.

"I'll see you in English," I said.

"See ya."

IT WAS FINALLY ENGLISH CLASS, and Kristen and I met up again before we walked in. We sat at desks next to each other. Kristen was talking to me about something, but she stopped chatting when she looked up.

Mr. Thompson looked awful. His face was pale, he had bags under his eyes, and he smelled like he hadn't taken a shower in a couple of days. His clothes seemed slightly ragged, and he was acting a little off. It was strange.

But that's when I realized: I knew why.

He was reading the newspaper with shaky hands as he

waited for the students to settle in. The class was silent; we could all tell something was wrong.

"Today, we're going to talk about mermaids," Mr. Thompson finally said as he stood up. He folded the newspaper and laid it on his desk. "Does anyone know anything about them?"

Kristen and I glanced at each other. What was he talking about?

Helen raised her hand. "They're mythological creatures. Part-human and part-fish."

"Yes, good. Now, can anyone tell me any dangerous myths you've heard about them?" he asked. No one volunteered.

This time, he looked right at me. I was afraid, and my heart started to beat a little faster.

"How about you, Kate?" he asked. "Why are mermaids dangerous?"

He looked at me menacingly, almost like how the great white had looked at me at the aquarium. I was glued to my seat.

Mermaids? Why was he asking me about mermaids? I had read about them a little, but everyone knows they aren't real.

"I don't know much about mermaids," I admitted. "I've heard stories of them sinking ships, though."

"Ah, that's right. Very good. I'm sure you would know all about that."

He leaned closer, staring at me. I could feel my face becoming hot. Kristen looked at me, puzzled. I was as confused as she was. The class was silent for a few moments.

He straightened up suddenly and announced, "Over the weekend, my brother Mike disappeared. We suspect he was kidnapped. He was last seen sailing on his boat. If any of you

have seen him, please let me or the police know immediately. Class dismissed.”

He stared at me for a few more seconds. Then he sat back down at his desk and picked up the newspaper to continue reading.

“Come on. Let’s go,” Kristen said, her backpack over her shoulder.

I looked at the clock above the board—he had dismissed us forty-five minutes early. I glanced at him one more time as I headed out the door and watched him take a sip of coffee and slam it on the desk with enough force to splash the coffee all over his newspaper.

I gasped and bolted for the door.

I sat down on a nearby bench and put my head in my hands. I was so overwhelmed by everything that had happened, and his behavior was the last straw. I could feel the tears on my fingers, and I tried to wipe them away before anyone could see.

“I don’t know why Mr. Thompson was acting like that,” Kristen said, giving me a hug. I held onto her and tried not to cry, but it was no use. I was like a fountain. The tears were sliding out with no end in sight.

We headed out the door to the parking lot, and I noticed Jared was standing near his blue truck. Now wasn’t a good time to talk to him.

He frowned as he watched me, and I felt very embarrassed that he was seeing me like this.

I just wanted Brandon. I wished he were here today.

“I know something that will cheer you up,” Kristen said as we approached my car. “Come over to my place. My parents aren’t home, so we’ll have the house to ourselves.”

I nodded and opened the door to my green Jeep. I glanced

at Jared once more, and we made eye contact as I drove out of the parking lot.

I tried not to focus on this strange day and weekend as I drove to Kristen's.

"I'm in here," Kristen said as I walked in. The place was enormous, with big, beautiful open windows and a stunning view of the sea.

I followed her voice to the kitchen. The walls were yellow with white cabinets and a marble countertop. All the appliances were stainless steel, and it smelled really good.

Kristen was holding a plate of red velvet cupcakes and chocolate.

"My mom left these for me," she said. "They're fresh."

"Thanks, Kristen." I smiled as I bit into one of the cupcakes.

We went downstairs, and Kristen turned on a surfing competition. I smiled as I watched the surfers riding the waves. Kristen was right—a girls' night was just what I needed.

"When did you start to surf?" I asked her as we were eating the cupcakes and watching as pro-surfers rode waves in Hawaii.

Kristen wrapped a blue blanket around herself and said, "I was seven when I started surfing. My parents were surfers, too. My dad was sponsored."

"That's neat. So it's like a family legacy for you then?"

"I guess you could say that, but it's never just been about that. When I'm up on the surfboard, it's like, everything else goes quiet. And I like the challenge of it."

I smiled. "Sounds like fun."

"It is. But it can be dangerous," she said.

"Have you ever gotten hurt?"

"No, but I got caught under two back-to-back waves

once. It was scary,” she said. “Anyway, I think I’m going to head to bed. Would you like to sleepover?”

“Sure,” I said.

“You can use the guest bedroom down here. I’ll be upstairs if you need anything.”

“Goodnight.”

“Night.”

It was hard to peel myself off the couch. When I finally did, I walked into the guest bedroom and smiled. It was a surf-inspired room, and I think their family trophy collection.

Surfboards, trophies, and photos covered the room.

I walked over and saw that there were many newspaper and magazine clippings. Some were of Kristen, but most of them were of her dad. He had won the Champions Tour—impressive.

As I walked around the room, I looked at the different surfboards hanging on the walls. They were all types of sizes and colors. A natural-colored one with white stripes hung next to a very long surfboard, and there were a few more that were orange, blue, and green.

I sat on the bed as I looked around in this surf-inspired bedroom. I loved it.

Wait...was I seeing what I thought I was seeing?

I spotted a picture of my mom, Kristen’s parents, and my dad on the desk. I practically leaped off the bed as I went to look at it.

No way.

They were on the beach, the four of them, and they were smiling. My mom was so radiant. Her dark hair was shining brightly in the sun, and she looked happy in her long sundress standing next to my dad, who was wearing shorts

and a collared shirt. She and my dad looked so happy together, and it made me feel warm inside.

"Hey, Mom," I whispered.

I pulled out my phone and took a picture of it. I looked at her again and smiled. I brought the frame with me to my bed, and I fell asleep with it in my hands.

When I opened my eyes, I was playing in the sand with Kristen, building sandcastles on the beach.

She grabbed the shovel out of my hand as I looked up at the sky. There were only a few clouds, and the sun was shining.

"Ta-da!" she said.

"Pretty!" I said, looking at the small castle she made. I stood up when I noticed a long, flowy skirt.

"Hello dear," I heard my mother's voice.

She scooped me up in her arms and looked at me with a large smile.

"Daddy and I are going on a short trip. We'll be back soon," she said. "You promise to be good?"

"Yes, Mommy," I said as she put me back on the ground.

She hugged me and said, "I love you so much, Katrina."

"I love you too. Bye, Daddy," I said.

"Bye, darling. I'll be back soon," he said as he handed me something. It was a green stuffed animal turtle.

I watched them as they walked toward the sailboat. They took a few minutes to get set up, but soon, they were sailing away.

"Kate!" I heard. Kristen came and took my hand and brought me back to where we were playing. I looked back at my parents, who were traveling away fast. They were getting smaller and smaller, and it was becoming harder to see them.

I looked to my right and saw a boy with bronze hair and a girl with light blonde hair playing in the sand. We were near

the woods, and I could see that the leaves of the trees were swaying harder. I then saw that the boy with bronze hair was looking up into the sky. I looked up too, and I could see what he was looking at.

Black clouds were appearing like big puffs of dark smoke.

“Hey!” Kristen yelled as some of the sand blew off her castle from the strong wind that was blowing in.

I looked up at Mr. Johnson, Kristen’s dad, and he was looking out toward the sea.

“It’s time to go, girls. A storm’s coming in.”

I sat up quickly. That was the first time I’d dreamt about the storm in years. I sighed and lay back down on the bed, and I closed my eyes again to go back to sleep.

I missed my parents.

THE BEACH



“Hello, Earth to Kate?” Kristen said, waving her hand in front of my face. “You want to go to the beach with some people on Friday?”

I looked up at her, and her eyes looked earnest, waiting for me to answer.

“Oh, um, sure.”

“Good! I’m excited.” She took a bite of her sandwich as she looked over her shoulder a moment. Sam was standing behind her, and she smiled and laughed at something he said to her.

I had been thinking about my dream. Part of me wanted to ask Kristen what she remembered, but I knew she would feel bad talking about that day. So instead, I would find answers elsewhere.

After classes ended for the day, I went to the library. I noticed Matt sitting at a table as I peered in the glass doors. He gave me a small wave. I waved back and walked over to the librarian’s desk.

“Hi, I was wondering if you could help me find some

information on the storm that took place here twelve years ago. The hurricane?" I said.

"You know, you aren't the first one to come in here asking about that this week. Jared O'Connor's been here as well," she said.

Jared? Why did he want to know about the hurricane?

The librarian led me through the bookcases toward a small section in the back.

"Here," she said, pulling a thick folder off the top shelf. "This has a lot of information. You could do some research online as well, but I think you'll find these more helpful."

"Thank you."

I pulled a few of the files out at random and started flipping through them. The hurricane had made national news. There were dozens of clippings from local papers, interviews, even a National Geographic article.

I sat down and began reading one of the newspaper clippings. It was an interview with a meteorologist.

Dan Schultz, a reporter from the Bay Times, interviewed professional weatherman Dr. Nathaniel Brown.

NB: Do you know what could have caused the hurricane?

DS: Scientifically, it doesn't really make sense. Sure, we've seen cases like this in other parts of the world, but we are still trying to figure out what might have caused it.

NB: Did any of your radars pick up this storm?

DS: We did, but the hurricane was created in mere minutes, not hours. It's unparalleled. An anomaly.

An anomaly?

I scanned the rest of the interview, but I didn't find anything else to be of much interest. I put the newspaper down and pulled out another article from the bottom of the pile. It had a picture of a young girl. Had I seen this girl before?

I jumped as Matt suddenly appeared next to me.

"How's it going?" he asked, peering over my shoulder at the article.

"Good. I'm fine," I said quickly, putting the paper down and closing the folder. I didn't want him to see what I was reading.

"You going to the beach on Friday?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," I replied, packing up my stuff.

"Cool, me too." He gave me a crooked smile, but it disappeared soon after. "How's your arm?" he asked, frowning.

"It's okay," I said, giving him a small smile. "You look better."

"Thanks, yeah. I'm feeling better," he said, running his hands through his hair. "I was wondering...do you want to stop by the aquarium with me?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. I put the files back on the shelf and followed him out of the library. I hadn't learned much aside from what I already remembered about that day—the storm had come out of nowhere.

When I pulled into the parking lot, Matt was already waiting for me in front.

"You weren't speeding, were you?" I asked him, smiling.

He laughed. "Let's go, blondie."

We went inside, and the evening golden sunlight was shining through the window. It was getting late.

"So, what are we doing here?" I asked as we walked next to the tanks.

We both stopped for a few minutes and stood together

watching the fish. I marveled at the difference in colors and patterns—some with zigzags on their fins, others with stripes, more with small dots. They were each so perfectly unique.

“I thought we could feed the sharks, of course,” he said. I wrinkled my nose. “I’m kidding,” he laughed. “No, I wanted to show you something. Come on.”

We went into the office, and he led me toward one of the filing cabinets. He took out a key, opened the bottom drawer, and began digging through it.

“Are we allowed to be doing this?” I asked him.

“Jan said it was okay. I asked her the other day.”

I walked up to him, watching him rifle through what seemed like hundreds of files. Finally, he pulled one out.

“I saw what you were reading, and I thought this could help,” he said, handing me the file.

I opened the folder. It was information about the storm.

“Some of the aquarium staff were called to investigate the storm. They recorded their findings in there,” Matt said, pointing to the documents.

“Thank you.”

He nodded.

I sat down at a small table in the corner. He pulled another file from the drawer and stared at its contents.

“What are you reading about?” I asked.

“Some scientific findings of great white sharks,” he said. “I’m not sure you’d be too interested in that.”

I laughed. “Let me know if you find anything interesting.”

I looked down at the file in front of me and opened it, wondering what would be inside.

I flipped through the pages of reports. Most of the findings said, “Inconclusive Evidence”, but there was one report that said something different.

"Some phenomena cannot be solely explained by science. This storm is one of them. What we do know is that the pressure dropped significantly faster than any other storm on record. What we don't know is what caused it. Further examination is necessary. Dr. Keys has volunteered to lead the ongoing investigation."

I put the report back in the file and snapped the folder shut. I had to go back and talk to Dr. Keys.

"Did you find something interesting?" Matt asked, looking up from his file.

"Yes," I said, standing up. "I'll see you on Friday for the beach. Thanks for this." I handed the folder back to him.

I would go to see Dr. Keys on Friday.

* * *

FRIDAY CAME QUICKLY, and after school, I went to Kristen's. I walked up the steps and knocked on the door.

A woman opened it. "You must be Kate. I'm Kristen's mom. She's told us all about you," she said. She was cradling a toddler on her hip, a girl who had big round cheeks and the sweetest little smile.

"It's nice to meet you," I said as I went inside. I gave the toddler a smile and a wave. "She's so sweet."

"She is," Kristen's mom said. "Her name is Ava."

"Hi, Ava," I said. She gave me a small wave. I turned and noticed a man sitting on the couch in the living room.

"Hey, I'm Mr. Johnson," her dad said as I came into the living room to say hello. Another kid of theirs, who looked to be about ten, was playing with Legos, which were splayed out on the carpet next to him. I didn't step any further.

"Do you remember me from when you guys were little? I was good friends with your parents."

"Yeah, I do," I said, smiling.

"Kristen told us you offered to film her surfing!" Mrs. Johnson beamed. "That's really nice of you. Did she tell you she's trying to qualify for the Champions Tour? We're so proud of her."

"Yeah! That's so cool," I said.

"Did you bring a suit?" Kristen asked from the top of the stairs. "Come on up. I'm just getting ready."

I followed her up to her room and noticed she had on her swimming suit and makeup. Why would she wear a full face of makeup to the beach?

"Here's the video camera I want you to use for today. It's a bit of an update from the phone," she said, handing me the handheld camcorder. Her room reminded me of a Hawaiian bungalow, and it looked similar to the basement bedroom.

Dozens of clippings from surf magazines hung on the wall, and her surfboard was hanging on two hooks on the wall opposite them. Her bedspread was ombre in hues of blues, greens, and purples, and she had pictures of the ocean all over her room. I smiled—it looked like I'd made another friend who liked the ocean.

"Your room's cool," I said.

"Yeah. I have dozens of surf magazines that I cut out and put on the wall. You're welcome to have some," she said. She picked up a basket of them and handed them to me. "Go on. Pick a few if you'd like," she said.

"Are you sure?" I asked, digging out some of the magazines.

"Yeah. I've already looked through all those."

"Thanks," I said as I took a few.

Kristen checked her watch. "We'd better get going. Everyone's probably already there."

When we arrived at the beach, Matt, Sam, Helen, and another girl named Bri were waiting for us on the sand. We got out of the car, and I helped Kristen unstrap her surfboard from the roof. It was sunny outside, and the water was crystal blue.

I looked over at Kristen, and she had wide eyes as she watched Sam and the girl holding hands. She looked away, tears in her eyes, but then she feigned a smile and grabbed her surfboard as she met everyone on the beach. But she only stayed a moment.

"Hey, Kris," Sam said. Kristen walked past him without a word and ran toward the waves. She jumped onto her surfboard and started paddling out.

Sam raised his eyebrows and then waved to me. As I looked at Kristen, I thought I saw something moving through the waves behind her. I walked closer to the water and again, I saw a shape. I squinted my eyes from the sun, but it had disappeared.

What was that?

I walked toward the sea, but I kept my distance and took out the camcorder. The smell of the sea salt wafted toward me with a gust of wind.

I had just started recording her when Matt approached me. He was wearing a blue T-shirt and swim trunks and had his sunglasses on top of his head. He was carrying a surfboard with him.

"Hey," he said, smiling. "The sunsets here are beautiful, huh?"

"The best," I said with a smile as I looked at the orange, pink, and purple-streaked sky. It reminded me of ice cream.

"How's California treating you so far?" he asked, picking

up a stone from the sand and tossing it at an angle toward the waves.

"Fine. Good." I watched as the rock skipped along the tops of the water before tumbling in with a splash.

"Yeah, I like it here too."

"Where did you move from?" I asked as he skipped another rock. He made it look so effortless, and I was mesmerized as the rock bounced on the water.

"Michigan," he said, stiffening suddenly.

"Do you miss it?"

"Not really," he said, throwing another rock in. "There's nothing there for me anymore. Do you miss Chicago?"

I picked up a dark gray rock. I turned it over in my hand, rubbing off some of the sand and thinking about Brandon.

"A little," I admitted. I looked up at him, and the corners of his mouth seemed to turn upward. "What would you do if your best friend suddenly just stopped talking to you and abandoned you?" I asked as I threw the rock as hard as I could into the water. It tumbled in with a large splash.

He looked at me with a frown. "When you moved away?" I nodded. "Maybe your friend knew they needed to let you go off and live your own life."

"Well, my friend broke his promise."

"And what promise was that?"

"That he wouldn't leave me."

I couldn't believe I was opening up to him like that. Being around Matt felt so easy.

"You sure this was some *friend*?" he asked, smiling suddenly again.

"Yeah. We're friends all right. Or we *were* friends," I sighed. He froze and looked at me.

"Well...just promise me you're being careful about who

you do decide to be friends with," he said in a more serious tone.

"Okay," I said, wondering if he was talking about Jared.

Matt grabbed the surfboard that he'd left behind me. "What would you say to going surfing with me?"

"No thanks, I should probably stay here and—" I motioned to the camcorder.

"Oh yeah," he said, shrugging. "Well, if you change your mind, you know where I'll be." He then charged into the water and began paddling out.

I sat on my beach towel and recorded Kristen for the next half hour. I watched as Matt caught up to her, and the two of them surfed together.

For being from Michigan, Matt wasn't too bad a surfer. He jumped on the board with ease and slid down the wave. He wasn't as good as Kristen, but he looked like he knew what he was doing.

I watched them surf until the sun had almost completely set. Cool air blew in, tossing my hair around me. I stopped recording Kristen and looked up at the lighthouse.

The light was glowing from the window, and I could see the beam as it flashed across the ocean. Maybe this was my chance to talk to Dr. Keys.

Kristen was walking in, Matt trailing behind her. He shook the water out of his hair before putting his surfboard in the sand next to Kristen's.

"These videos are awesome! Thanks, Kate," Kristen said as she watched the recordings. "I owe you one, again."

I looked back up at the lighthouse and wondered how late it stayed open.

"Actually, there is something you could help me with. I need to check something out at the lighthouse, but I don't want to go alone. Will you come with me?" I asked, getting

up and folding my beach towel, my feet sinking into the sand.

“Sure, why?”

“Apparently, the guy who works there, Dr. Keys, knew my mom. I want to ask him about her.” And something else.

“Okay.”

We waved goodbye to Matt and walked into the lighthouse. Dr. Keys sat in a chair, reading over some documents on his desk. I went up to him, but he didn’t seem to notice.

I decided to cut right to the chase.

“Hi. Did you know a woman named Cassandra Peterson?”

“Cassandra?” he said, looking up. “Who’s asking?”

“I’m her daughter.”

He looked shocked. “Wait, is your aunt back, too?”

“Yes, why?”

He then smiled and looked down and chuckled. “I can’t believe it. Janice is back, after all these years.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I veered the conversation back to why I was there in the first place.

“Can you tell me anything about my mom?”

“Do you know who she was, your mother?” he asked, looking at me somberly.

He saw me hesitate.

“When you know, come back and see me,” he said, looking back down at what he was reading. “You don’t look anything like her,” he reminded me.

I didn’t respond to that, but I wasn’t leaving until I had my other question answered.

“There’s something else I want to ask you,” I said. “What did you end up finding regarding the hurricane twelve years ago?”

“How do you know about that?” His head snapped up. I

didn't answer him, searching his eyes. "When you find out about your mother, come back and see me, and we'll talk about that storm."

I scowled, frustrated. This is not how this meeting was supposed to go.

"Goodbye," he said, turning back to his reading. He was clearly done with the conversation.

"Bye," Kristen and I said as we turned around and walked out the door.

"That was weird," Kristen said when the door had closed behind us. I nodded. "I'm going to head back down. You want to come with?"

"No, I'm going to walk home. But thanks."

I began walking up the beach. The whole point of going to see Mr. Keys was to learn about my mom. How else was I supposed to figure out who she was? And why wouldn't he tell me anything about the storm?

Matt saw me walking and ran up to me. "Leaving so soon? Can I at least walk you home? It's getting dark," he said.

"I'll be fine, but thanks."

"You shouldn't walk home alone. It's dangerous."

"No, I'll be okay. I know the way. Thanks, though."

He looked unconvinced, but he waved goodbye and walked back to our friends, who were paddling out into the water.

I walked off the beach and onto the asphalt where the houses began. The sun was sinking fast, and lampposts sprung to life as I traveled down the streets. I turned left, then right, then left again. I looked up. Stars were starting to dot the sky, and the cool wind was picking up a bit—not that it bothered me.

The longer I walked, the darker it got, and I realized I was

lost. I should have listened to Matt—it was not smart to walk home by myself. I was typing my address into my phone when a golden-haired dog came trotting up the road toward me.

“Hey, little guy, are you lost, too?”

The dog sat in front of me, panting with its tongue hanging out the side of its mouth. I scratched his golden fur behind his ears as I looked around his neck for a number I could call, but the dog didn’t have a collar.

I shrugged and continued my walk home, the dog following me with every step. It seemed odd, but after a little bit, I was glad that the dog was with me.

Something didn’t feel right. I had a feeling that I was being watched. I began walking a little faster. I wasn’t too far away from my house, but I wanted to get out of there.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I looked behind me and could see, from far away, a hooded person walking up the street.

I didn’t know if I was being paranoid, but I texted Jared.

Can you come pick me up? I think I’m being followed. Kate.

I sent him my location pin. When I looked up from my phone, I could see the man was getting closer. I began jogging, the dog at my side.

“Kate!” I heard suddenly from behind me. I turned around so fast that I almost tripped.

A man with a ski mask and a leather jacket was in the middle of the road. “You’re coming with me,” he said.

The dog leaped in front of me and growled at the man, then barked loudly.

The man looked at the dog and pulled out a knife. I screamed, and I began running away as fast as I could.

The dog ran toward the man and attacked his ankle. I

heard the man yell in pain as a blue truck pulled up next to me.

“Get in!” It was Jared. I opened the door and then slammed it shut behind me, gasping.

Jared swung his door open to look around. But when I looked behind us, the man was gone. It was just the dog now, who was trotting away unscathed.

Jared pulled at his hair in frustration for a moment before turning around again. His eyes were wild, and his hair was sticking up in all directions.

The engine roared to life as he stepped on the gas.

“What were you doing walking out here? It’s almost pitch black,” he said.

“I was at the beach.”

“Which beach?” he said, his hands gripping the steering wheel a little tighter.

“Just the one off of Green Bay. Why?”

“Promise me you’ll stay away from that beach.”

“Why? What’s over there?”

“There’s been tons of shipwrecks happening around there over the last few years. It’s not safe.”

I thought of my own parents for a minute. Maybe what he was saying was right. But I had more important things on my mind. It was time to finally ask him about the camping trip.

“What happened that night in the woods?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“You’re lying.”

I looked over at him. His lips were pressed into a thin line as he looked out across the dashboard.

“Look. I saved your life, okay? That’s all I’m going to say. You have to trust that I can’t tell you any more.”

“But why?”

"Kate, there are some things you just can't know."

"Jared, can you at least tell me what happened with Matt in the hallway?"

"Stay away from Matt. He's not good for you," Jared said, his teeth clenched.

"Why?"

"I can't tell you. But you'll have to trust me."

"Matt's been nothing but nice to me since I got here."

"Just be careful around him, okay? I don't want to see you get hurt. He's not good for you. I'm not sure if I am even good for you," he said coldly.

"Matt wouldn't hurt me," I said, looking at my hands. What did he have against Matt?

"I'm not sure that's true. You don't know all there is to know," he said.

"Then tell me!"

"I can't."

"Matt's my friend, Jared. You're just going to have to accept that," I said.

He sighed and shook his head. "Do you have to be so stubborn?"

I crossed my arms and looked out the window. "I don't know if I'm stubborn, but I'm a good judge of character."

"What about me, then? What have you decided about my character?" Jared asked, glancing at me as he drove.

I looked at him, and my breath caught in my chest. He really was beautiful. But I would like him more if he wasn't so rude.

I cleared my throat. "I'm not sure yet."

"Well, let me know when you decide."

We stopped abruptly—we were at my house. Jared climbed out and walked around to open my door.

"Home sweet home," he said as he extended his hand to help me out of the truck.

I met his eyes for a moment. He didn't seem angry like he did earlier. They looked hopeful this time. And I noticed something else. There was age in his eyes. He looked many years older than he was. But why?

I took his hand as I slid out of the car. I looked up at him.

"Can you please give me some answers, about anything?" I whispered.

"Some things are better kept a secret."

Why were there so many secrets?

"Please? I'm a good listener."

He looked down and then smiled slightly as he kicked a rock across the street.

"There are some things you just don't want to know, I think." He turned around and put his hands in his pockets. "I just don't want anything to happen to you. I don't know what I'd do if something did."

My heart skipped. Where was this coming from?

"Jared, you don't have to protect me."

"Actually, I do," he said. "I'll be back here tomorrow."

"What for?"

"Just be ready," he said with a quick smile and walked back around to the driver's side.

As he drove off, I felt a pull to be near him like I felt when I was around water. But this was different—the farther he drove, the greater the pull.

SANTA CRUZ



I sat on my soft carpet in my jeans and blue sweater with a thick book resting on my lap. I tried to focus on the words, but I couldn't help staring out the window, waiting for Jared's truck to pull into the driveway. It hadn't occurred to me last night to ask him what time I should expect him.

I saw a flash of blue out of the corner of my eye, and I looked out the window. I grinned as I saw Jared hop out of the truck and head up the driveway. I did a quick glance in the mirror and brushed through my hair one more time before I ran down the stairs.

"Hey," I said, opening the front door and letting the screen slam shut behind me. Jared had on a pair of shorts and a windbreaker jacket.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

He began walking toward the truck, and I followed.

"We're going to the Boardwalk," he said, shutting his door and putting the keys into the ignition. "It's an amusement

park.”

I laughed. “An amusement park?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. You just don’t strike me as an amusement park kind of guy.”

He cracked a smile. “The last few times you’ve seen me, I was under a lot of stress.”

“I guess you could say that,” I said. “It’s a good thing you saved me from that bear.”

“True.” Then he caught his mistake—he’d said more than he wanted. He sighed and shook his head. “It’s going to be hard to keep things from you, isn’t it?”

“Well, with that one it’s not like you can just pretend it didn’t happen.”

He chuckled as we pulled away from the house.

On the way there, it was mostly silent. I tried to turn on the radio, but he didn’t want to listen to any music. So instead, I rolled down the window and looked at the pretty houses that were sitting along the road.

As we arrived in the parking lot, I could smell the sweet sugar from the churros stands, and I saw a roller coaster zoom by. Kids were running around, and overtired moms stood with their strollers looking after them. We laughed as we watched one kid try to eat the largest ice cream sundae I’d ever seen as he headed out of the park.

“You ready?” Jared asked. I nodded.

After we paid admission, we walked through the gates into the park. Near the entrance, there was a stack of maps on a table, and I picked one.

“We won’t need that,” he laughed. “I’ve been here a bunch of times.”

“Do you come here a lot?”

“No, I haven’t been here since I was a kid.”

"So, who gets the first pick on a ride?" I asked.

"Go right ahead," Jared said.

We raced over to the rides and laughed. Jared was a little more serious at first, but he started laughing right along with me as we went through the amusement park.

I stood outside one of the rides and looked up. It was a roller coaster called the Giant Dipper.

Why did that seem familiar? Oh...

"Aren't you getting tired?" he said as we stood in line. He was leaning back against the wall as we waited in the long line. It was a nice, sunny day outside, and I could see why it was so crowded today.

"No way! I'm having so much fun."

"Good. You deserve it after last night's craziness."

We inched forward in line, and when it was finally our turn, he laughed and said, "Ladies first," as we filed into the seats.

My stomach quenched with nervousness as we climbed up the coaster, and finally, the drop came. He gripped my hand, and we went up and down as the wind blew through my hair. We were laughing after we finished. His hair was windswept and messy from the coasters, and that made me laugh more.

"What?" he said.

"Oh, your hair is just a little messy, that's all," I said.

"Speak for yourself," he said with a serious face. Then he chuckled a little.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in my phone, and I shoved him playfully.

"My hair's fine," I said, grinning.

He just laughed and said, "Come on. Let's go."

As we were walking, I noticed a pirate ship ride, and there was no line.

I was smiling most of the ride as we went back and forth as if caught in a large wave until I looked over at Jared; he had a frown on his face.

"What's wrong?" I asked as we got off the ride.

"No more rides," he said. "Maybe we can just do the gondolas and then we can get some food."

"Okay," I said, feeling a little sheepish.

We waited in line for a few minutes, and then we stepped into a blue gondola and were lifted into the air. As I watched the sun begin to set on the horizon, I looked at Jared. His auburn-bronze hair and piercing blue eyes made me forget about everything, and the way they caught the setting sunlight was mesmerizing. He seemed lost in thought for a moment, but then he smiled at me. I shifted my eyes toward the water, watching the waves and sailboats drifting among them.

"Why does your dad work for the Coast Guard?" I asked.

"You really pay attention to details, don't you?" Jared said, stretching his hands out and draping his arm around me. "He doesn't really work for them. He just helps them out sometimes. Steve, some of my cousins, and I go with him to help."

"What do you do?"

"Protect the common good. Rescue missions, that sort of thing."

"That's cool."

"No, it's not," he said, furrowing his eyebrows as he looked out onto the water.

I hesitated, swinging my legs. "Jared, do you think it was Steve who tried to attack me? I mean, there was the forest incident and then last night. Do you think they could be related?"

"Steve? No, he wouldn't have done that."

"I don't know. I was just wondering because I did hear

Steve that night telling you to stay away from me. Why would he say something like that?"

"Steve noticed something different about you, the same thing I noticed. And he doesn't like different. But what he doesn't understand is that you, being different, is a good thing. You're not like other girls. You're caring, you're not superficial, and you're a lot of fun to be around. There's something special about you," he said.

I smiled slightly and looked down.

"Kate, I want you to know that I'm going to try to figure out what happened to you. I can't say for sure if the forest incident and last night were related, but maybe."

"You shouldn't have to, though. I'm just, well, I'm worried," I said, turning my head. Then I added, "I'm sorry to be such a bother."

"Anyone putting up with what you've been through recently would be worried. And you're not a bother. We are going to take care of this."

I nodded, and he moved his head to meet my eyes.

"You know, you're one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen."

"No," I said sheepishly.

"I mean it," he said. He looked at me with those beautiful blue eyes of his.

The gondola stopped suddenly. He climbed out first and took my hand. We walked toward the food area where he bought us both ice cream—chocolate chip for him, sea salt caramel for me, my favorite.

"Want some?" he asked, offering me his.

I nodded and took a bite. It melted in my mouth, and the smoothness of the combined chocolate and vanilla was delicious.

"Want to try mine?" I asked him.

He shook his head and said, "Ready to get out of here?"

"Yeah, it's getting a little late."

As we walked out of the park, I felt like I was walking on air. The stress from the past few weeks had been weighing on me like a ton of bricks. But today, it had been lifted off my shoulders.

"I had the best time with you today."

"So did I," I said, smiling up at him. "Do you want to take a picture?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, smiling.

I snapped the photo. I'd print this later.

As we drove home, we were passing near a forest when I noticed a fox on the side of the road.

"We should stop," I said.

"Okay."

I hopped out of the car and ran up to the fox. It looked hurt—really hurt.

"Don't touch it. I'm going to call my dad," Jared said.

I stooped down and scooped it in my arms.

He sighed, looking unsurprised that I'd picked it up.

"Fine, but if you get rabies, don't say I didn't warn you."

We hopped back in the truck and drove toward the Native Animal Rescue.

"I've never seen a wild fox be okay with being handled by a human like that," Jared said.

I looked down at the fox. Its eyes were open, and I could tell it was in pain. It snuggled against my arms.

Jared's dad was waiting for us when we pulled up outside.

"You must be the girl Jared's been telling us about," Mr. O'Connor said. He was tall, and he closely resembled Steve. He looked young for his age, though—his hair didn't have a speck of gray, and his face was smooth.

"I'm Kate."

"It's nice to meet you, Kate. Wow! That fox seems to like you a lot," he said, looking down. "Let's get it inside."

We took the fox into an exam room, and I laid him on the table.

Jared's dad looked over the fox carefully and said after a moment, "Looks like he may have a broken bone or two—this little guy may have gotten hit. Why don't you two wait outside, and I'll call you back in a bit."

We were only in the waiting room for a few minutes when Mr. O'Connor poked his head around the corner and asked us to come back in.

He was bandaging one of the fox's legs as he said, "Do you like animals, Kate?"

"Yes, I volunteer at the aquarium in Monterey," I said, leaning over to catch a glance at the fox. He looked like he was doing better, and I was glad.

"I hear you have a great white shark there," he said. "They're incredible creatures."

I nodded, feeling a little uneasy.

"So...Jared told me about the guy who tried to attack you last night," he said, leaning against his desk with his arms crossed. "Can you tell me anything about him?"

"Um, I'm not really sure," I said. "I couldn't really get a good look at him. He was wearing a face mask."

"Hmm.... Well, I'll report it to the sheriff. In the meantime, don't walk alone after dark, okay? I know your dad's not around to tell you that stuff, so I'll tell you."

"Dad," Jared said, putting his hands in his pockets.

"I stand by what I said. Look, Kate, if you ever need anything or run into trouble, you let Jared know, and we'll find a way to help."

"Thanks, Mr. O'Conner," I said.

He smiled at me, brushed off his hands, and stood up straight.

“And if you ever want to volunteer here, let me know. It’d look good on your college resume.”

College—when would I be hearing back from the colleges I’d applied to?

“Thank you,” I said.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it—I’ve got a phone call to make. Jared, see you at home?”

“See ya, boss,” Jared said. Mr. O’Connor laughed, and then he disappeared into the other room. I could hear his voice raise intensely, and I thought it sounded like he was negotiating something.

“Let’s get you home,” Jared said rather quickly, escorting me out of the room.

During the ride home, Jared didn’t say anything when I turned on the radio. When we pulled into the driveway, Jared hopped out and came around to open my door for me. We walked up to the front door, my hand securely in his.

“I had fun with you today.”

“Me too.” I smiled. It had been a really great day.

“I’ll give you an update on how the fox is doing this weekend. Can you text me your number?”

“Sure,” I said, smiling.

“See you Monday.”

“Bye,” I said.

When I lay in bed that night, I thought about everything. *What was I doing? Better yet, why was I spending time with Jared O’Connor?* But I realized I *wanted* to spend time with him. I liked how I felt when I was around him...and I liked how protective he was over me. But did I want this? Could my broken heart take a chance on someone like this? What if my heart was going to be broken again?

I closed my eyes as I thought of this. I guess these decisions couldn't necessarily be decided tonight.

* * *

THE WEEKEND SEEMED to drag on as I waited for Monday. That's when I'd see him again. I'd been looking forward to seeing him the entire weekend.

"Hey," he said as he approached me. He sent butterflies into my stomach, and I smiled at him. "Can I walk you to your first class?"

"Sure." I shrugged, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. I grabbed my books, and as we walked toward the classroom, I could feel the stares from the other students. It made me feel uncomfortable. But when I looked up at Jared, he smiled at me. He didn't seem bothered by the obvious stares.

When lunch rolled around, he went to sit with the lacrosse guys, and Kristen met me at our usual table.

"You and Jared?! Why didn't you tell me?!" Kristen asked, her eyebrows raised as she practically ran toward the table.

"It was one date. At least, I think it was a date," I said, frowning.

"One date?! Are you kidding me? Do you know how many girls are upset? Don't talk to Helen about it. She's pretty upset," she said.

I looked over my shoulder. Helen was sitting at another table with some girls I didn't recognize, and her eyes looked a little red. Had she been crying?

I met eye contact with a few girls, and I recognized them as some of the cheerleaders from my gym class. They turned away, whispering amongst themselves. Meanwhile, Helen looked over and began glaring at me.

My stomach clenched, and I turned around. I suddenly didn't feel well, and I let Kristen talk to me about surfing.

After lunch, I met up with Jared in the hallway.

"How's your day going?" he asked as we began walking.

"Well...not very good," I admitted. "People are talking about us, I think."

"Let them talk. You're the only girl I'm interested in. It'll die down. I promise," he assured me.

"If you say so," I shrugged.

He paused and looked into my eyes. "I know something that'll take your mind off of it. You want to go hiking today after school?"

"Yeah, okay."

He walked me to my class, and then he disappeared down the hallway.

It was like the first day of school all over again...except worse.

P.E. class wasn't fun. Helen wouldn't speak to me even though we were partners. It was awkward, and she avoided eye contact with me for the majority of the class.

And when I sat down in Calculus, some of the girls behind me were whispering.

"Why her? I mean, out of all the girls in the school, he picks *her*?"

My cheeks flushed hot. I wanted to hide under my books. I tried not to cry, but the gossiping was hurtful. I wanted to confront them, but for some reason, each comment made me feel smaller and smaller. Maybe after the end of the day, I'd be small enough to hide under my books.

When the final bell of the day rang, I rushed out of the classroom, anxious to get out of there.

Jared was standing near the doors. I gave him a faint smile. And again, I could feel stares from the other students

as we met up. It wasn't like I couldn't understand why those girls were upset. I could see why Jared was well-liked: he was handsome, endearing, and naturally charming, and they were some of the things I liked about him, too.

But I wondered if the other girls saw what I saw in him. He wasn't just some popular lacrosse boy. There was so much in him, so many layers, that I wasn't sure they could see.

ABANDONED



“*Y*ou really love being in nature, don’t you?” Jared said as we hiked. He had noticed me looking up as we walked along the redwoods. “Nature suits you.”

“How tall are these trees?” I asked, trying to estimate them. The redwoods went up extremely high. The green from the trees looked small at the top.

“They can reach up to 300 feet, I think, maybe a little more,” Jared said, looking up too.

The forest was so full of life and so beautiful. At the bottoms of the reddish trees, there were many green bushes and ferns, and even the trail had a sort of red-brownish color. The birds were chirping and flying above, and there was a sea of green.

As we hiked, we had to duck underneath some of the fallen redwood trees. On the tops of the fallen trees, moss climbed, and I saw some lavender colored flowers growing on the top of the moss.

I liked that we didn’t need to be constantly talking as we

hiked. Jared never minded just listening to the sounds of the teeming life in the forest or the waves as they crashed when we went on our hikes. Jared didn't need to fill the space between us with sound. He was just cool.

I smiled and turned to look at Jared, who smiled back. Suddenly, a monarch butterfly landed on my shoulder.

Jared shook his head in disbelief, laughing. "You're a magnet for animals. I don't understand it."

I took the butterfly on my finger and watched as it fluttered its orange wings a few times.

I put the butterfly in Jared's hands and watched him smile. For once, the years in his eyes seemed to disappear. The butterfly flew away, and we watched it soar into the trees.

"You know, we're not that far from where we were camping..." he said. I could smell salt in the air, and I knew we were not far from the ocean. Soon, we had walked to the outer part of the forest, and the ground had turned rocky.

Ahead of us, I saw an abandoned lighthouse. It looked like it hadn't been refurbished in years. Some of the white bricks were falling out, and the bottom windows were boarded up. The brown door looked weathered from the rain.

"Want to head inside?" Jared asked as we looked at it.

"Is it safe?" I said, turning to look at him.

"Yeah, I used to come here a lot as a kid," he said. Then he stepped out of the bushes and stood in front of me.

"Come on," he said, tugging my hand so that I stepped onto the rocks with him. "Let's go see it."

Jared guided me toward the lighthouse as we walked on the rocks. I had to be careful not to trip as we went, and I could hear the waves crashing loudly against the shore.

We reached the door to the lighthouse.

"Do you have a key?" I asked.

"No need," Jared said, opening the unlocked door. A bird flew out, and as we walked inside, I noticed that it smelled musty.

"There's not much to see down here. Let's go upstairs," he said, gripping my hand as we journeyed up some wobbly stairs.

When we reached the top, grayish light poured in from the windows, and I walked over to them. They overlooked a choppy, gray sea, and I could hear wind hollowing loudly against the panes. A bird sat perched on the roof, and I saw a few seagulls in the distance flying over the sea.

The window had a little dust on it, and I drew a small starfish in the window. I smiled, and I turned to look around.

Books and DVDs were scatted across the floor. A wooden box laid in the corner, and there were a few cushioned chairs. Jared pulled a wooden board up from the floor and pulled out a key. He took it and opened the wooden box. I walked over and saw that there was a laptop, a few blankets, some old toys, a baseball, and a few jackets.

"Here," Jared said, putting a thick coat in my hand. "I know it's cold up here."

"How are these still here after all this time?" I asked, picking a book up from the ground. It was covered in a thin layer of dust, and I brushed it off.

"Nobody comes over here," he said. And I wondered what he meant by that.

I took the coat from him, shrugged it on, and watched as he slid the other jacket over himself. I hoped I wouldn't overheat.

Jared pulled out an old book and sat down on the floorboards, flipping through the pages.

"I didn't know you liked to read," I said, sitting down and placing the book I was holding next to me.

"Yeah. It's an escape. All I have to do is turn a page, and I'm transported to another world.... Do you like to read?"

"Yes, but I mostly read books about the sea. I read mostly nonfiction."

"I prefer fiction," he said. "Do you want to hear a spooky story? It's called 'The Most Dangerous Game.'"

"Okay."

I was gripping my sweater by the end of it, and my knuckles had turned white.

"You look nervous," he said, laughing as he closed the book.

"That was a story all right." I cracked a smile as I looked over at him. He laughed and picked up another book. I let him read to me for a little while, and I became lost in the many stories he told me.

His voice was soothing, and it was putting me asleep. My eyelids felt heavy, but I widened my eyes, forcing myself to stay awake. Maybe talking would help.

"So, do you want to work for the family business? Become a vet?" I asked, yawning, trying even harder this time to keep my eyes open.

"No," he said, closing the book for a moment. "I want to get away from all this. I want to get away from the coast."

He looked serious as he looked out the window at the sea. The gray sky cast a shadow over his face.

I bent my knees and wrapped my arms around them.

"Do you not like volunteering for the Coast Guard?"

"Not really. I don't want to be involved with them anymore...but I don't have a choice."

"Jared, you always have a choice."

"No, you don't get it," he said, looking at me. "I was made to protect people. It's what I *have* to do."

"You can choose your own path. It's not up to your dad."

"I don't know," he sighed, looking out at the sea again. He didn't say anything for a few minutes and seemed consumed by his thoughts. Finally, he said, "Well, what about you then? What's your big life plan?"

I shifted my weight and thought about it.

"Honestly, I can't think of anything except becoming a marine biologist," I said. "It's kind of hard isn't it? We have to decide where or if we want to go to college and who we want to be, and we aren't even eighteen yet."

"At least you're free," he said. "I'm pretty sure the job I have is a lifetime commitment."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be this way," I said, my voice just above a whisper as I searched his face.

He looked at me with a small smile. "I think you'll be great at whatever you decide to do," he said. "But I have to ask something."

My breath caught.

"I wanted to ask you the other day.... Where did you learn to sing?"

I looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I heard you singing that night in the woods. That's how I knew where to find you."

He had heard me singing? I could feel my face heating up.

"I don't know," I said, looking down at my shoelaces. "I never really learned."

"Don't be embarrassed. Your voice is beautiful." Then he paused for a moment and said a little quieter, "Could you sing like that again?"

"I don't usually sing in front of people." But then I thought of something. "You could hear me singing in the woods? I was at least a mile away from camp."

I didn't know I was singing that loudly. I only felt I was one or two volumes above a whisper.

"I could hear it, and I'm glad I did."

"Me too," I whispered.

And as I looked at Jared reading, I realized that I'd made a decision. Regardless of my broken heart, I wanted to give Jared a chance. And so I decided that I would let him into my heart. I didn't know the consequences of what would happen in doing so, but I decided that I didn't care. I liked Jared, and I wondered what it would lead to.

* * *

THE NEXT TWO months passed quickly. Jared and I were spending more and more time together, and for some reason, dating Jared seemed to change me. I felt more confident than I had in a long time: maybe ever. Jared just had this sureness in him that seemed to reflect onto me. He never doubted a decision he made; he was just so confident in every action he took.

When we were hiking, even if we were miles into our hike, he never seemed lost. Every decision, whether we were finding our way back or looking for a new trail, was made with so much certainty. He always carried a silver compass with him, not some kind of fancy GPS. We'd pause a moment, and he'd stare at it quickly and then know exactly where to go next. I was sort of shocked at how well he knew the forest and the places around here. No matter where we came from, Jared would find our way back in a short amount of time.

Jared was the best tour guide I'd ever met. We would hike to spots that overlooked dozens of acres of forest—places I didn't even know existed in California. There was a cliff, up about fifty feet high, we often went to that overlooked the sea. When I peered down over the edge, I could see the blue

waves slapping against the rocks below, leaving behind white foam in their place. And the ocean stretched out so far from up there. I could see miles of beaches in either direction. It was beautiful.

Jared and I shared a deep appreciation for nature. But I wasn't convinced it was what he was passionate about. He loved to read, that's for sure. And he liked hiking with me, but I wondered what else there might be about him. Jared just seemed like he had so many layers in him. I could see it in those old eyes of his.

We also made frequent trips to the abandoned lighthouse. I would pack picnics, and we'd spend the afternoons reading. On one of these afternoons, I was sitting on the floorboards putting together a collage from some photos I had cut from magazines.

"I have an idea for your collage. Come with me," he said.

I was wearing a long blue satin skirt with a cream sweater and sandals, not thinking we'd be hiking. I followed him down the stairs and out into the forest that was just beyond the rocks.

I held up the hem of my skirt and instantly regretted wearing it now that we were in the forest. It had rained the day before, and the ground was muddy.

"Try to step on branches or rocks so your feet don't get dirty."

"It's a little late for that," I said.

He looked down at the hem of my skirt and laughed.

After a few minutes of walking, Jared stooped down to pick something off the ground.

"Look," he said as he placed them in my hands. I looked up at him, and he gave me a nod, and when I opened my palm, I saw small, beautiful white and brown feathers.

"How did you know where to find these?!" I gasped.

"I used to collect them when I was little," he said. "I think they'd go great with your collage."

"Thank you."

As we walked back to the lighthouse, he led me over the rocks and toward the ocean. I started to feel the pull.

"Let's go back inside," I said.

"Come on."

"No, really, I'm okay here," I said as he walked closer to the ocean.

He laughed and said, "Come on," pulling my hand toward the ocean. I was now the closest to the ocean I'd ever been. The pull was extremely strong, and I wanted to turn around and run back to the lighthouse. I was scared that if I didn't, I would run into the ocean.

We were at the edge of the ocean now, and I was watching it ebb and flow. The grayish, blue water was only inches away from my feet as it came up. I let go of Jared's hand and stepped back so the water wouldn't hit my toes. I was panicking a little.

"What's wrong?" Jared asked.

"I can't swim."

Jared raised his eyebrows and grinned. "The nature girl can't swim. Seems a little ironic, doesn't it?"

The water seemed to whisper to me, trying to get me to go in.

"Do you see how when it pulls back, there are shells and rocks in its place?" he asked.

I watched the water retreat and saw what he meant. When the water retreated, it left behind shells and shiny pieces of seaweed.

"You can find some real treasures down here," he said. "It's pretty amazing what the ocean coughs up."

He walked toward the water as it retreated again and bent

down to pick up a few pieces. The water came back up and swam around his ankles.

He walked back to me and opened his palm. Inside, there were sea glass and a few shells.

"For your collage," he said, gently placing them in my hands.

"Thanks," I said, giving him a small smile.

We sat down on the soft white sand. While I knew much about the ocean, I never got around to knowing the names of the shells. The one in my hand had a little swirl at the top, and a few others were smaller and more oval in their shape. As I looked at the green and blue sea glass, I could see that they were somewhat transparent.

"I thought you didn't want me going to beaches," I said as we looked out at the water.

"I don't," he said. "But this beach is different."

"Different?" I asked.

He changed the subject.

"You know, I could teach you to swim," he said.

I shook my head.

He laughed. "What is it with you and water? I thought you wanted to be a marine biologist."

I looked up at him. "I do want to be a marine biologist, but I just don't want to go in the water."

"I think you'll have to get over that fear."

"You don't have to go into the water to be a marine biologist," I said.

He nodded, but he stayed silent a moment.

Maybe he was right. Maybe being a marine biologist wasn't such a good idea. But all I'd done the last twelve years was study the ocean and the sea creatures inside it.

"If you don't mind me asking, why are you so afraid of it?"

I knew we'd be having this conversation eventually. I sighed a little as I looked out at the horizon. The sea from far away seemed to grow a darker blue as it went closer to the horizon.

"You know what happened to my parents, right?" I sighed, looking at him now.

"No," he said.

"I thought everyone knew."

"Well, I don't. Tell me," he said softly.

"My parents died in that really bad hurricane that happened here twelve years ago," I said. "I thought you might've known since your dad works for the Coast Guard."

He stiffened a little.

"We lost a lot of people that day. And I was little, so I didn't know exactly who was gone," he said. Then he paused a moment before saying, "So, that's why you're afraid." I nodded. He sighed and said, "Maybe it's better this way."

BENCHED



School changed quickly once we started dating. Jared was popular, and that somehow made me cool too. I typically wasn't someone who liked or wanted attention, but I liked how confident I felt when I was with him. I liked feeling noticed. Kristen liked the popularity more than I did, and she seized every opportunity she could to spend time with me at school. We were quickly becoming best friends.

I was sitting with Kristen, Sam, Matt, and Helen at our lunch table and laughing at a joke Matt had said when I looked over at Jared for a moment. He looked beautiful, and his face lit up with an enormous smile as he laughed at something one of the lacrosse players said.

"You're different, you know?" Matt said, bringing my attention back to him. "You've changed. It's not a bad thing—I like seeing you confident, but I feel like I never see you at the aquarium anymore. Are you coming back to volunteer soon?"

"Sure, I will," I said, feeling guilty. My time had been split

between spending time with Jared, recording Kristen, and volunteering at the Rescue. I hadn't been to the aquarium for a while.

Matt nodded and left the table without another word, and I wondered how Matt was adjusting to life in California. He'd made fast friends with our group, but lacrosse wasn't going well for him. Kristen and I watched Matt sit on the bench game after game. On the rare times he did get put in, he would score almost immediately. He was clearly a talented player, so why was he benched? It made no sense.

I was sitting with Kristen on the cool bleachers during a home lacrosse game when I saw Mr. O'Connor yell at Matt about something. We couldn't hear what he was saying because of the noise from the marching band, but he was clearly upset about something. He walked off, and Matt's shoulders slumped.

What did the O'Connors have against Matt? More importantly, what was Jared not telling me? It wasn't right that they were treating him like that.

When the game ended, I felt a gust of wind against my face as I walked down the noisy bleachers. Kristen and Sam met up, and Jared came toward me, Matt behind him. Jared gave Matt a dirty look, which he then reciprocated, and then Jared pulled me into a hug.

I pulled apart from him and looked up.

"What is it with you two?"

Jared ignored my question. "Ready for dinner? I'm starving."

I let it go for now, but Jared wasn't getting off the hook this easily. I didn't like this animosity between two people I cared about. There had to be some explanation for this.

"Jared, I don't understand why you and Matt have so much animosity between you two. And I don't understand

why he doesn't get any playing time either. We both know he's a good player."

Jared opened his mouth to say something, but then the waitress came by. She handed Jared his spaghetti and gave me my salad. I sat there impatiently as she grated some parmesan cheese for Jared's pasta.

When she left, Jared said, "You need to stop asking me all these questions about Matt. I told you before, and I'll tell you again. You don't know all there is to know about him."

"Then tell me...please," I said.

Jared sighed. "I can't give you more explanation, and I'm sorry I can't. Just remember what I said to you before. Be careful who you are friends with."

I ignored that.

"Jared, I was also wondering," I said. "Why doesn't Steve play lacrosse?"

"Because he was a baseball player. He was really good, but he had to quit."

"Why?" I asked.

He dodged the question.

"After he quit, he didn't want to play sports anymore. He got involved in working with my dad and the Coast Guard. He spends most of his time doing that."

"Are you twins?" I asked. "You're the same age, right?"

"No, Steve was held back a year."

I nodded. We ate in silence for a few minutes, and then Jared said, "Tell me more about you. I feel like I barely know anything about you."

"I could say the same about you," I said.

He chuckled a little. "Really, I want to know," he said.

"Well, I love animals. But you know that," I said. He nodded. "And, well, faith is something that's really important to me."

"It's important to me too," he said. "I sometimes see you and your aunt walking out of Church."

"Yeah," I said. "Were you always involved in your faith?"

"Yeah, since I was young," he said, smiling.

"Me too."

"I like that about you," he said. We sat there a few moments, and then he said, "I was wondering if you'd like to go hiking on Saturday? I promised my younger brother Luke we'd go."

"Sure, sounds like fun," I said before taking a bite of my salad. "I'd love for you to come to the aquarium. I love it over there. I'd love to show you around," I said.

Jared shook his head. "That's all right. I get plenty of time out at sea with the Coast Guard," he said.

I nodded, and I looked down at the table, disappointed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm just not that into sea life. I used to be when I was little, I guess. But not anymore."

"Why?" I asked.

He shrugged and took a sip of water. "Like I said...I get more than enough time in the water with the Coast Guard."

I remembered what he'd said about not wanting to volunteer for the Coast Guard anymore.

"Tell me something about you, then," I said.

He shrugged. "I know I don't seem like the type, maybe, but I like writing. I'd really love to travel the world and write," he said. He then smiled a little, showing off his very white teeth, but then frowned. "My dad doesn't want me to. He wants me to become a vet like him and stay here. He wants me to go to college in Monterey."

"And he wants you to continue volunteering with the Coast Guard, too," I said. He looked up at me and then nodded.

"I do like working at the Rescue, really I do, but I'm just

not sure what I want anymore. I could see myself becoming a vet, but I don't know...", he said, shrugging. "I'm worried that if I did, I'd never be able to escape this place. This job," he said. "The only thing I am sure about anymore is you."

My heart fluttered.

"Jared...", I said. "Thank you." I didn't really know what to say to that. I felt so much emotion at those words.

He smiled and stretched slightly as he waved over the waitress to get the check.

"Let's go home."

THE COAST GUARD



“Look what I found, Kate!” Jared’s little brother Luke said as he showed us a frog he caught. Luke was nine. He shared some of Jared’s features, but his hair was a pale blond color.

“Wow! That’s so cool!” I said, and I touched the top of the frog, feeling its texture. It hopped out of my hands, but Luke caught it.

We had been hiking for hours, and I was starting to get a little tired. Luke’s seemingly never-ending energy was starting to wear me out. He tugged me around with him everywhere to show me different plants or animals, and he caught a strangely huge number of worms and bugs. He’d run up to me and open his palms and show me all the bugs he’d found. I have no idea where he found all those bugs, especially in this fog.

“Aren’t you a little worried?” I asked Jared as Luke ran into the fog for the third time.

He chuckled a little. “Luke knows these woods better

than the rest of us. He'll be fine." I could hardly believe that, but then again, nothing seemed normal anymore.

As we were walking, I could tell that we were getting close to the coast. The smell of sea salt was growing stronger by the minute, and the fog was getting worse.

All of a sudden, Steve popped out of the fog. His face looked pale, and he looked extremely worried.

"Jared, we have to go NOW!" Steve ordered. "The boat's ready."

"Boat?" I heard Luke say. He popped out of the fog, and I sighed in relief.

"Let me just take them home," Jared said.

"There's no time for that. We have to go." Jared's face turned white as Steve whispered something in his ear, and he nodded. Jared grabbed my hand, and we began walking quickly out of the woods. I was tripping on branches along the way. Luke caught up to Steve, who gave him a piggy-back ride on the way there.

"Where are we going?" I asked Jared as he pulled me along.

He stayed silent. The only sounds I could hear were our shoes crunching on the leaves and twigs. We finally stopped at a harbor, the fog clearing somewhat as we walked up to a boat.

"This is our boat," Jared said.

It was fairly decent sized, and it looked like it could take on a big storm. But that still didn't make me feel secure. And I didn't like the idea of being in a boat. Better yet, in the ocean, even if by boat.

"I can't get on," I told Jared, panic setting in as he hopped on board.

"Well, marine biologist, you have to come. So, let's go," he said with a smirk.

"This is not the time to be funny. This is serious," Steve said as he put on a baseball cap and climbed onto the boat.

It didn't look like I had much of a choice. I looked at the water and made my way onto the dock. My legs were shaking a little. My heart rate was quickening. I wanted to turn and run, but I sort of just felt frozen.

I thought about what Jared said about being a marine biologist and needing to go into the water. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and hopped onto the boat.

I don't know why I was expecting something to happen.

I opened my eyes, and I felt all right. I was still a little panicky, but I was okay.

Jared handed me a yellow life vest, and I could see Jared's dad at the top of the boat.

Jared said, "You and Luke need to go in the cabin. And stay in there, no matter what you might hear. A storm's blowing in, so it might get rocky."

On second thought, maybe getting off this boat would be the best thing to do.

"Can't we just wait ashore?"

"No, it'll be safer here. I'm sorry," he said. "Unless you know your way back?"

I looked out at the forest, considering my options. The last time I'd been in the forest, I had almost been attacked by a bear, so it probably wasn't the best idea to try to find my way home. And the fog...

"I guess I'll stay," I said, feeling hopeless.

Jared nodded, and I slid on my life vest, buckling it.

I opened the door into the cabin that went below, which was larger than I expected. It was strange, though. There were no portholes down here. I sat down on one of the leather seats as Luke turned on the small TV and popped in a kid's DVD.

"Can I go outside and see what's going on?" Luke asked after a few minutes.

"No. You have to stay here with me. Captain's orders."

He nodded, and suddenly the boat was lurching through the waves. The waves tossed us around with ease. Luke started laughing and rolling on the ground as the boat bobbed up and down, while I clutched what I could.

What was happening?

It was getting rockier and rockier. I closed my eyes, trying to take deep breaths as I went up and down in the boat.

I could feel us going up a large wave, and we were suddenly crashing down, and I could hear the wave hit the boat. We went up again, and then I screamed and held onto a handle on the wall as I felt the impact of the waves colliding against the boat. This was a nightmare.

I then realized why Jared had such a bad time on the Pirate Ship ride...and maybe why he didn't like this job.

"Hey!" Luke said. He was chasing something. The door blew open, and I noticed the frog leap out of the cabin. Luke followed it right out the door.

Oh, no.

I gathered my courage and ran after him, panic coursing through my veins, my heart pounding. Rain was pouring down in sheets, and the waves were spilling over the sides of the boat. I could barely see.

"Luke!" I screamed, trying to find him.

The boat reeled through the waves, and I tried to grab the railing to prevent from going overboard.

"Luke!" I screamed again.

I could suddenly make out the waves through the rain, and I felt a pull toward them that was stronger than I ever

had. It seemed like the water was reaching out to me and pulling me in.

Then I heard, “Kate!” The boat lurched again, and Luke went flying off the boat, but I grabbed the strap on the back of the vest and brought him back in.

We both fell to the ground with a loud thud, and I gripped the railing as another wave swished against the boat, sending water overboard.

Then I caught Jared’s eye. He looked panicked as he saw us on the deck, and I could tell he knew what happened.

I stood up, wobbling slightly, and guided Luke back to the cabin.

“What were you thinking?!” I said incredulously, handing him a towel. “You shouldn’t have chased after that frog. I don’t know what we would have done if something happened to you.”

He nodded and suddenly hugged me.

“I found the frog,” he said, and he opened his hands to show me.

“All right, well, promise me you won’t do that again.”

“Okay,” he said as he went back to the couch to keep watching the movie.

I shook my head as I grabbed a towel and began drying off my hair.

There was suddenly a boom of thunder, and the door banged open. Lightning flashed, and three figures appeared in the doorway. Luke and I both screamed, but then I saw that it was Jared. He was with two people who looked disoriented and exhausted, their hair sticking to their faces from the rain.

“These two need some towels. They were shipwrecked—we made it just in time.”

“What happened?” Luke asked the woman, handing her a towel.

“I-I don’t know,” the woman stammered. “We were sailing, and then all of a sudden the storm hit, and I can’t remember much after that.”

“Well, you’re safe now. That’s all that matters,” I said, handing them water bottles.

“You two stay down here with them. We’ll be approaching the coast pretty soon.”

Jared left, shut the door, and then we waited. The couple were shivering a little from all the rain, and I went over and handed them a few more towels.

The door opened, and Jared said, “All right, let’s go. We’re onshore now.”

I headed to the top of the boat and watched the couple climb onto the dock. They still looked a little dazed, but I could tell they were happy to be back on land. The storm was gone now, and the rain had turned into a light drizzle. The storm had come and gone pretty fast, and I looked out at the sea.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jared said after the rest of the crew filed off the boat. Jared was frowning, and his eyebrows furrowed.

I nodded, but I was a little disoriented. My legs felt like jelly, and I was exhausted—I was coming down from my adrenaline rush.

“You saved Luke’s life. I don’t know how to thank you,” Jared said.

Mr. O’Connor walked over and took my life vest. “Thank you so much, Kate.”

I hesitated as I watched him place the yellow vest over the railing to dry.

"I'm sorry he ran out on the deck like that. I know I was supposed to be watching him."

"Yes, you were," Steve said, glaring at me.

"Lighten up. She saved our brother's life," Jared said, slapping Steve on the back and smiling. Steve just crossed his arms. "Really, Kate, thank you."

Mr. O'Connor docked the boat, and Jared and I hopped off. He helped tie the boat back onto the dock for a few minutes, and I stood there, trying to regain my composure after what had happened.

When Jared was done, Mr. O'Connor waved at me, and Jared caught up next to me.

"I need to tell you something."

* * *

THE SUN WAS BEGINNING to set as the storm clouds were rolling away. The colors were strewn across the sky in hues of striking and soft colors, colliding into a masterpiece. I watched as the colors slowly changed colors, turning the oranges darker and the pinks more purple. I knew soon that they'd be replaced with stars.

We were sitting up on some rocks, and Jared picked one up. He tried to skip it across, but it landed with a thud in the water. I watched the ripples as they expanded outward, taking on some of the colors from the sky as they shimmered.

"I found this in the woods when we were hiking," Jared said as he sat next to me.

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. My name was scribbled at the top, and underneath it, I saw that Mike Thompson had been written underneath it.

I looked at it, my eyes widening.

"I think that's Mr. Thompson's handwriting."

"Mr. Thompson?" he asked, and his eyebrow furrowed as he thought. "That doesn't make any sense. He left town."

"What?"

"Yeah, I found out yesterday. Apparently, he's gone looking for his brother. I don't know where he thinks he's going to find him. What I don't get, though, is why he would've written *your* name."

"I don't know," I said, taking the paper into my hands. "Have you spoken to him?"

"Not since the night of the camping trip," he said. "We tried to call him, but he isn't responding to anyone."

We didn't speak for a few minutes. My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I didn't look.

"There's something I want to tell you," he said, hesitating.

"What is it?"

He took a deep breath, and then he looked directly at me.

"I knew who you were before I met you, and I recognized you at the lacrosse game the moment I saw you. I wanted to tell you earlier...but I just couldn't find the right time."

So, he *had* been looking at me.

"How?" I asked.

He paused for a moment, debating what to say next. But then he said, "I've been having dreams about you. For months, even before I met you."

"Dreams?"

He frowned. "The dreams change sometimes, but I usually see you walking across the beach, or looking into the tanks at the aquarium. And the way you would look at me, the way you're looking at me now," he said, meeting my eyes. "With so much...love."

My heart skipped a beat. *What was he saying?*

"But the end of the dream is always the same. I can't save

you. A whirlpool pulls you in, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. I don't know how to keep you safe," he said quietly.

I fell silent, not knowing what to say for a few moments.

"Can anyone keep anyone completely safe?" I finally said softly.

"You have to stay safe. I can't lose you."

I looked down and said, "I can't lose you either."

He cupped my face in my hands and pressed his forehead to mine.

"But, Kate, the dreams...they're getting worse. I don't know how to stop them. And I'm so afraid they're going to come true. I'm worried it's going to happen for real," he said, lowering his eyes.

I could feel the fear growing inside me.

"You can't protect me from everything, Jared," I said, lifting my chin from his hands.

"I can. And I will. You'll see," he said.

I leaned my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. I could picture it, a whirlpool, spinning as I thought of the dream. It sent chills down my spine, and I tried not to think about it.

I pulled away from Jared, and he gave me a small closed-lipped smile, but it was gone almost as soon as it was there, and I leaned my head on his shoulder. Our hands met, and they intertwined.

I thought about how he told me I was looking at him with...love. I didn't know if I was in love with Jared yet...I knew how easy it *would* be to fall in love with Jared. But I wanted to find someone who could love me fully and unconditionally. Someone who would accept me for who I was, and to love that person back, whole-heartedly and truly.

And I wondered if I'd find that in Jared.

HAWAII



I felt a buzz in my pocket.

Kristen: Hey, Kate! I have HUGE news. My dad's letting me take a friend for my competition in Hawaii. Do want to come?! Call me when you get this

I called her immediately. "HAWAII?!" I yelled excitedly. "Are you serious?!"

"My dad has two extra tickets, and I honestly owe you so much for all the recording you've been doing for me lately," Kristen said quickly. "This is my way of saying thank you."

"Thank you! I absolutely cannot wait. When are we going?"

"Over fall break, so we won't have to miss more than a few days of school."

"This is so exciting! I'll text Jan to see if she's okay with it."

I put Kristen on speaker while I typed out my message to Aunt Jan.

Can I go to Hawaii with Kristen?

Jan: That's kind of a big ask. Let me think about it

I won't have to miss much school it'll be over fall break.

Jan: I'm going to be home in a minute, let's talk then

"Can I call you back with an answer in like an hour? Jan wants to talk," I said to Kristen.

"Seriously, take your time. I hope she says yes!" she said.

We hung up as I heard the front door close. I bounded down the stairs.

Jan was sitting at the table. "Sit down. Let's talk," she said, patting the open spot across the table from her.

I sat down and gave her a big grin. "So, Hawaii?" I asked, raising my eyebrows hopefully.

"I have something else I'd like to talk to you about," Jan said.

"What is it?" I asked, a pit forming in my stomach as I waited for her to answer.

"You've been spending an awful lot of time with that boy Jared lately," she said. "I never see you at the aquarium anymore. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said. "I just really like spending time with him."

"Well, I'd like to meet him soon," Jan said.

"Okay. Do you mind if we get back to talking about Hawaii? What do you think?"

"I don't know.... There's going to be a lot of water there," Jan said, a few lines on her forehead creased as she thought.

I sighed. "I know, but I'll be careful. I have been around water all my life."

"You're right," she sighed. "Are her parents going?"

"Mr. Johnson is, I think."

"Well, even though I do feel a little uncomfortable about it.... I guess you can go as long as Mr. Johnson is going with you."

“Yay!” I said, jumping up from the table and running around to hug her. “Thank you!”

She grabbed my hands and looked at me seriously. “Be very careful, okay? Don’t talk to strangers and be a good guest. I’m going to send you with some money—do not let them pay for all your meals,” she said. “And you’ll have to be very careful around the water.”

I nodded. “Thank you so much, Jan. Do you want to hang out a little tonight?”

She smiled and nodded.

That night, we ordered some pizza and watched TV. It was the first time we’d spent much more than a meal together since we moved here. It was nice.

As I was thinking about Hawaii, my thoughts drifted back toward the map. There was a clue in Oahu, I remembered. And then I realized it had been some time since I’d thought about the map.

I was so focused on being with Jared and spending time together these last couple of months that I’d forgotten about Dr. Keys and his cryptic message about my mom. Part of me didn’t want to go looking for whatever might be on that map, but the other part knew that I should. I had to go to Hawaii and find whatever was waiting for me there.

That night, I placed the map on my white, wooden desk and turned on my lamp to read it. The address was scribbled next to the note. The note said: *A ship that holds my heart*. I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew I had to find it.

I called Kristen back on the phone. “I’m in,” I said.

After we hung up, Jan knocked on the door.

“What is it?”

She came in and took a deep breath. “Brandon called.”

My heart dropped into my stomach, and I felt nauseous.

“What did he say?”

"He asked how I was. How you were. And he wanted me to pass along a message."

"Well, what is it?" I pressed.

"He wanted me to tell you that he hasn't broken his promise. I don't know what that means, but he sounded very serious when he said it."

I blinked, trying to hold back angry tears. "Oh yeah, sure he hasn't," I said bitterly.

"Well, that's what he said."

"He called *you*? He didn't even have the decency to call me and tell me that himself?"

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

I wanted to scream. I was furious at Brandon. How could he call Jan instead of me? And how could he say he was still keeping his promise?

As I lay in bed, I turned over and looked out the window. I was thinking about glass, and how much Brandon and I used to spend looking through it.

We used to have so much fun bringing his telescope to Wisconsin where we'd camp and look at the stars. If I looked through the glass of the window, I felt like I could kind of see him. It was like he was standing on the other side of it. He *was*...somewhere. I didn't know where exactly, maybe in Chicago or maybe he wasn't even in Chicago. But when I looked through that glass, I could see him. If only I could reach out to him and tell him how much I missed him...

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, Brandon was sitting under the stars at the campsite we used to visit in Wisconsin.

"Brandon!" I called out as I ran toward him. His face was scrunched up as he pressed his eye at his telescope.

"What?" he asked, looking toward me.

"What happened to your promise?"

"What promise?"

"You promised you'd never leave me," I said.

"I don't even know you," he said. "How could I leave you?"

"Of course, you know me. We grew up together. The Shedd?" I ran toward him.

His face was blank as I approached him, standing a few feet away.

"I'm the sea girl. You're the astronaut, remember?"

He shook his head. His eyes were like those who had seen a stranger.

"We went on camping trips to this exact spot."

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea who you are," he said, and he turned around and began walking into the woods.

"Brandon!" I screamed as I ran after him.

But when I entered the woods, he was gone. I kept running, trying to find him, brushing at branches as I went through the forest. I kept running and running until I realized I was at the ledge of the cliff. I recognized this cliff—Jared had taken me here a few times.

My feet were teetering at the edge, and I put my hands out to try to balance myself as I took a few steps away from the edge.

Brandon was standing a little bit down from the cliff on some rocks. I struggled down the rocks toward him. When he saw me coming, he turned around and began running.

I tried to follow him, but then I saw that my feet were in water. The water was rushing around my feet, pulling me in.

"Brandon!" I screamed.

I woke with a scream.

"Kate! Are you okay? What's wrong?" Jan asked as she opened the door to my room. She was in her robe, purple pajama pants, and slippers.

"He broke his promise," I said, and I burst into tears.

Jan came over and sat on my bed. "I'm so sorry, honey." She wrapped her arms around me, rocking me back and forth as I sobbed into her shoulder.

"He's never coming back," I said softly.

Jan gently pushed me off of her, brushing my hair behind my ear. "What do I always say?"

"God has a plan for me."

"That's right," she said. "And it's going to be okay. It's all going to be okay."

I grabbed a tissue from the box on my nightstand and wiped my eyes. The dream was fading a little, but the tears were still flowing out of my eyes.

"Jan, can I ask you something?"

"Anything?"

"What was she like? My mom?"

"Not so different from you. She was kind and warm. And she was loving. She loved others so deeply. She always put other people before herself."

"But why don't I look like either of them?"

Jan sighed as she took my tissues from my hands and threw them in the white bin next to my bed. She turned on the lamp on my desk.

"It's what's on the inside that matters the most," Jan said. "Choosing right and choosing to love every day is what's important."

I hugged her again, wiped my eyes, and sniffled.

"Thanks, Aunt Jan," I said.

Jan looked serious now and said, "You are so loved. I don't ever want you to forget that. I know this move has

been hard on you, and you've been through a lot. But, Katrina, you are loved."

"I love you too, Jan," I said.

"You stay there. I have some cookies downstairs. You want to share them?"

I nodded and smiled as I swiped away a few more tears. Jan came in a few minutes later with the cookies. She sat on my blue fuzzy rug, and I sat next to her. She had brought up a glass of milk too.

We dipped the cookies in the milk, and we chatted a little about the aquarium.

"You are going to come back to the aquarium soon, right? We need your help around there."

I nodded. "Sure."

"Do you think you can go back to sleep now?"

I stood up and lay back in bed.

"Come get me if you need me," she said as she left the room, shutting the door quietly behind her. "Good night."

"Good night," I said, holding my stuffed sea turtle and turning over on my pillow.

As I closed my eyes, thoughts of my dream lingered, and I wondered...how long could heartbreak last?

OAHU



“*B*ye, Jan!” She waved, and I walked into the airport, rolling my luggage behind me.

As I approached the gate, I saw Kristen, Mr. Johnson, and, to my surprise, Matt.

“Hey, guys! Thank you so much for taking me, Mr. Johnson.”

“No problem, kiddo. We’re getting pumped for our Kris—it’s a big week for her.” He gave us all high fives when I walked over.

Kristen smiled. “Thanks for coming,” she said, giving me a side hug.

“Thanks for inviting me.” I turned to Matt. “It’s good to see you. I didn’t know you were coming, too!”

“Yeah, you too. Mr. Johnson and I have been scuba diving together lately, and he asked me to come with.”

“Please, you can call me Tony,” Mr. Johnson said.

I raised my eyebrows. First-name basis with Mr. Johnson—these two *were* friends.

"We should probably find some seats while we wait. The plane doesn't take off for a few hours," Kristen said.

We walked over to our terminal, and we dropped off our stuff.

"Want to grab some snacks?" Kristen asked.

"I'm down for that," Matt said.

The three of us headed in line. Kristen ordered a smoothie while I bought a hot pretzel, and Matt ordered just about everything he could.

"Matt, the food's expensive. Are you sure you want all that?"

"We're going on vacation, why not!" He chuckled as he handed the cashier his credit card.

Thirty minutes later, it was time to board. We waited in a long line at the airport, and I caught eye contact with Matt. He looked as excited as I was and was grinning. We were soon on the plane, and I took the window seat.

Five and a half hours later, we were finally descending. I looked out the window, and the most breathtaking view filled my eyes. Beautiful greenery and crystal-clear ocean seemed to go on for miles. I felt excited but a little nervous at the same time—I'd never been around this much water.

When I stepped off the plane, I looked around in amazement. The flowers were bursting with color, and the air was so fresh. Everything felt so *alive*—including me.

We grabbed our bags from the carousel and first went to the car rental kiosk. After another half-hour, we were finally in the car and headed for the hotel. As we arrived, I noticed the hotel was next to a white sandy beach, a turquoise ocean, and dark green palm trees that swayed in the wind.

We walked into the open-air lobby, and right away, I felt a strong pull toward the water. I guess I should have known what I was in for. There was water everywhere—pools, foun-

tains, and the ocean surrounded me. But I didn't care much because everything about the island was so beautiful.

As we waited to check-in, a hotel employee gave Kristen and I pink leis. I was looking around, trying to take it all in when I caught Matt munching on the free appetizers at the snack bar and sipping some kind of juice. I walked over. There was a small sign next to the juice with "POG—passion fruit, orange, and guava juice" written on it in chalk. I poured myself a glass. I wish we had this in California—it was amazing.

"Are you ready to go?" Kristen said, approaching me. She had a room key.

I nodded, and we rolled our luggage to an elevator. When we reached our door, she slid the room card into the reader, and with a green light and beep, we were allowed inside.

The room was absolutely gorgeous. The walls were light brown and lined with photos of Hawaiian beaches and flowers, soft, white linens covered the beds, and sliding glass doors opened to a balcony with an incredible view of the beach.

"Check out the bathroom," Kristen said, motioning me toward it.

It was absolutely stunning. The entire bathroom was covered in beige marble. A vase of fresh hibiscuses sat in the corner, and soaps, lotions, and shampoos were stacked next to the sink. We laughed as we grabbed the lotions, and we lathered our arms and face in it. The lotion smelled like roses with an orange zest mixed in.

I turned around and dove for the bed.

"This is amazing," I said into my pillow.

"It is," Kristen said as she sat on the edge of her bed. She sighed.

I looked over at her, and I sat up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kate, I’m nervous. I feel like I’ve worked hard, but I just hope it goes okay... I really want to win.”

“You’ve been practicing so much. Just go out there and do your best,” I said.

“You’re right.”

“How does the competition work?”

Kristen kicked her feet a little off the side of the bed and said, “The competition is part of the World Qualifying Series. I’m trying to make it into the Championship Tour, so I travel and surf in different competitions. If I can rack up enough points, I could qualify. I started two years ago when I got the World Junior Title.”

“How do they grade you?”

“There’s different criteria. Some of them are speed, power, maneuvers, and difficulty.”

“Look, Kristen...you have a gift. You’re a natural. You’re going to do great,” I said.

She smiled. “Thanks, Kate. I’m so glad you were able to come. And actually, I have something for you.” She got up from her bed and pulled a light blue shirt out of her bag and handed it to me. It was made from the same material as a bathing suit.

“It’s a rash guard. We are all wearing these at the match.”

“Thank you,” I said, placing it on the bed.

“Let’s crash early,” she said. “It’s two hours later California time, and I’m exhausted. I have to train tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

I looked out the window, and I saw that there was still light outside. I checked the time. It was 8:00 p.m. Hawaii time which meant it was 10:00 p.m. in Santa Cruz. I guess it was getting late, so I lay down and closed my eyes.

. . .

THERE WAS a knock on the door the next morning. I hopped off the bed and walked to the door and opened it.

Matt was wearing a bucket hat, and he had a huge smile on his face.

“Want to go exploring?” he said.

I looked over at Kristen and raised my eyebrows.

She shrugged. “I guess training could wait a day.”

“Just give us a few minutes,” I said.

We changed, and I fished the map out of my suitcase. I read the note next to Hawaii again. *A ship that holds my heart.* I knew the location was in Oahu, and I hoped we could go there today and find the next clue.

We met Matt in the lobby.

“So, where do you want to go?” Matt asked.

“We’re all going.” Mr. Johnson said, coming up next to Matt. “Are there any places you want to check out, kids?”

I thought about bringing up the spot on the map, but Kristen said, “There’s a really cool spot I saw in a brochure that has a waterfall. Could we go there?”

“Let’s do it,” Matt said.

I frowned and felt the map in my pocket as we headed toward the car. As Mr. Johnson drove, I stared out the window and looked at the island.

The plants and flowers sprung to life. Everywhere I looked, I was met with beautiful flowers: orange and pink hibiscuses, white and yellow plumeria, and many more whose names I did not know. There was a crystal-clear view of the aqua ocean, and palm trees lined the roads. It was all so breathtaking. I rolled down the window, feeling the sea salt breeze toss my hair around me.

When we arrived, I looked down at my map. We weren’t far from where I wanted to go.

“Hey, can we stop at this spot?” I asked Mr. Johnson. I had

circled the location using a map I found at the hotel—I didn't want him seeing my mother's map. My mother's map was hidden at the bottom of my bag.

"Sure, it's on the way to the waterfall."

We hopped out of the car and grabbed our water bottles. I looked down at my sandals and realized these probably weren't the best walking shoes, but they were all I had with me. I had forgotten my gym shoes at home.

Kristen put her long brown hair in a ponytail and pulled on her backpack. I put on a headband to keep my hair out of my face and swung my backpack over my shoulders.

We began hiking the trail. It was humid, and the sun was beating down on us through the leaves of the palm trees. I took a towel from my bag to wipe off the sweat that had started to form on my forehead and arms.

As we were hiking, Mr. Johnson showed us these cool plants that retracted when you touched them. I touched every single one of them, watching in wonder as they drew into themselves.

We walked on. I was surrounded by a sea of green that was in all different shades: forest, emerald, and kelly green. Dewdrops spotted some of the leaves, which glistened in the sunlight, and rainbow beams surrounded the leaves in the forest.

There was a small stream ahead of us, and my stomach flipped. I looked around to see if there was a way to step over it without getting my feet wet. Thankfully, there were some rocks that stuck out of the water, and we walked across them single file to avoid falling in.

Mr. Johnson stepped off the last stone, puffing. "This hike is tougher than I thought! I shouldn't have gone on that five-mile run this morning." He walked over to a large, flat rock and took his water bottle out of his backpack. "The beach

we're heading for is just through those trees over there," he said, nodding to a line of trees ahead of us. "I'm going to take a break, but you guys can go ahead and check it out; I'll be there in a few."

I took the map out of my pocket and examined it carefully. If this was right, the boat should be on that beach. And sure enough, I saw it washed ashore several yards up the beach. The windows were broken out, and it was rusted where the water had been washing over it day after day. It looked like it had been through a huge storm.

"Let's go check it out," I told them, squinting in the sun and feeling the hot sand hit my toes as I stepped onto the beach.

"Let's do it," Matt said, following me.

"Check what out?" Kristen said with a confused expression on her face. I looked at her incredulously and made a sweeping motion with my arm.

"The ship?"

"I don't see anything," Kristen said.

Matt and I side-eyed each other. What did she mean she couldn't see it?

"You two are hilarious. I'm going to stay back and rest for a little bit," she said.

I looked at Matt, shrugged, and started walking in the direction of the ship.

"Do you know what Kristen was talking about?" I asked him.

"No clue."

Getting closer to the ship, I noticed it was in total ruins. Shards of glass lay on the top of the ship, and jagged floorboards were sticking out, but I was able to swing open a door.

"Maybe we shouldn't go in there," Matt said, hesitantly.

"I have to," I said as I ducked in.

I heard him scoff as he followed me in.

The boat's cabin was a complete mess. Cards littered the floor, glass was everywhere, and there was an old whiskey bottle between some slats in the broken deck.

As I tiptoed my way through the cabin, I was careful not to step on any of the broken glass. I thought about what the map said: *A ship that holds my heart.*

So, the ship holds something. What's "my heart"?

A bell chimed loudly, pulling me from my thoughts. I spun around and saw Matt smiling goofily as he rang the bell back and forth.

"You scared me! That's not funny," I said as I put my hand to my chest.

He laughed as we continued looking around the ship. I was heading to the back of the boat when I noticed a wooden box on a table. It looked unharmed and, strangely, *clean*.

I picked it up and opened it. The box was full of water. A gleam of silver caught my eye from a ray that was peeking through from outside. Floating in the water was a heart-shaped locket.

I slid my thumbnail under the latch. I opened it up, and inside was a picture of...

Me?!

I could feel Matt approaching behind me, and I scooped the necklace out of the water. The necklace snapped shut suddenly. I tried to open it again, but it wouldn't budge.

Holds my heart. This was it. It had to be. I put the locket on, fastening it behind my neck, and it was slightly cool to the touch.

"What is that?" Matt said.

"I'm not sure."

All of a sudden, a wooden beam came crashing down

from the ceiling. Matt grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the way just in time.

"I knew this thing was unstable. We'd better get out of here," Matt said.

We scampered through the door of the cabin and hopped off the boat. We turned around and watched with wide eyes as the entire boat caved in. All that was left was a pile of wood and glass.

"There you guys are!" Kristen said, running up to us. Her face was slightly pink from all the heat and activity. "Where did you go? I couldn't find you anywhere!"

She then looked at the necklace as it gleamed in the sun.

"What's this?" she asked, touching it. "It's pretty."

"Oh, just something I found."

I looked down at the locket—it *was* really pretty. There was a small design on the sides of the heart, and it was untarnished.

I tried to open the latch again, but it wouldn't budge. I hoped I hadn't broken it...

"Well, we should probably head back. My dad's waiting," she said. We headed up the sand and back to the path. I looked back one more time at the pile of rubble that was the boat and then continued walking.

When we met up with Mr. Johnson, Kristen went over to talk to him. Matt hung back with me as we resumed the hike.

"So, are you going to tell me what that was all about back there?" he asked.

I looked at him and shrugged. "Do you need to know?"

He looked down and put his hands in his pockets. "I guess not. But you can tell me what's going on if you want to."

I don't know why I decided to tell him, but I said, "Well, I found this map." He looked curious. "It was my mom's. She

left a bunch of notes, and for some reason, it feels like she left it for me.”

“Do you have it with you? Can I see?”

I felt a little nervous showing it to him, but I dug through my bag and pulled it out.

He looked down at it. “Interesting.” His eyebrows were furrowed—he was deep in thought.

“You think it’s stupid,” I said, folding the map back up.

He looked at me seriously and said, “It’s not stupid. I get it. I can help you find what you’re looking for, if you’d like.”

And before I knew what I was saying, I answered, “Yeah, I’d like that.”

We walked on for a few more minutes until we heard, “We’re here!”

I looked up and saw a beautiful fifteen-foot waterfall. The water was gushing down into a stream below, and we had to raise our voices to hear each other. We walked closer, and I closed my eyes, feeling the cool mist on my face.

“Let’s get a picture,” Kristen called.

Kristen and I made different poses as Mr. Johnson snapped photos on Kristen’s phone. I looked over at Matt who wasn’t smiling.

“Smile, Matt,” I said.

“Just for you,” he laughed, and he reluctantly smiled.

I turned to face the camera.

“That’s a good one,” Mr. Johnson said. He then paused. “Time for the hike back.”

As we were walking, Matt stopped me a moment. Kristen and her dad were up ahead.

“See that bird up there?” he asked, pointing to a small bird with a yellow belly and with what looked like an “x” on its face.

“Oh, yeah.”

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Want to see something cool?"

He then mimicked the bird's call, and the bird sang back.

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked, laughing.

He shrugged and said, "What can I say? Some people just have talent."

I elbowed him playfully, and he chuckled.

Soon, the hike was over.

"Who here is hungry?" Mr. Johnson asked as we piled into the car. "I know a great place we can go to."

We pulled up to a little diner and walked in.

"Breakfast for dinner," he said.

I did love breakfast.

The four of us sat in a booth, and I glanced at the menu. The pancakes sounded really good. So did the eggs.

"I'll have the congee," Mr. Johnson said when it was time to order.

"I'll have an acai bowl," Kristen said.

"I'll have the eggs benedict," Matt said. "And pancakes."

"I'll have the same," I said, looking at Matt. That was exactly what I was planning on ordering.

"We'll have a side of fruit for the table too," Mr. Johnson said.

We waited patiently for our food, but all of us were hungry.

"Coffee?" a waitress asked me.

"Sure," I said as I took a glass.

I drank the coffee a little too quickly, and I was now a little jittery. I was ready for that food to come out.

As we chatted to fill the time, I looked at the walls. They were yellow, and on them were pictures of surfers and famous people who'd visited the café. A big yellow clock and a few TVs were mounted to the wall.

Finally, the food arrived. We all dug in, and nobody spoke for a few minutes as we ate our dinner. The pancakes were delicious.

"Syrup?" I asked Matt, who was already halfway finished with his plate.

He nodded and took the syrup as he spread it on his pancakes.

"It's so humid in Hawaii," I heard Kristen say as we were eating. People always complained about humidity, but I didn't mind humid weather. I always liked it.

The waiter brought over the check as we finished our meal. I was sleepy now after all those pancakes, and I hoped I'd be able to sleep tonight after the coffee.

It turned out that it *was* hard for me to sleep. Jared was texting me.

Jared: I miss you

I miss you too.

Jared: What's it like there?

It's amazing. The island is so beautiful. Wish you could see it too.

Jared: I'll be glad when you come home. It's not the same without you here.

I'll be back soon. Don't worry.

I answered a few messages I'd received from Jan, and then I closed my phone, forcing my eyes shut. This time, I fell asleep quickly.

LUAU



“*T*raining day today. Can you record me?” Kristen asked the next morning as she opened her poached eggs. I was sipping on POG juice.

“Of course! That’s what I’m here for.”

Matt and Mr. Johnson had plans to go scuba diving, and they dropped us off with a picnic for lunch. I spread out my beach towel and got the camera ready as Kristen ran out to the water with her board. She was wearing a purple rash guard.

The pull from the ocean was especially intense today, and I kept getting distracted. I tried putting it out of my mind to focus on recording Kristen, but it was difficult. She came out of the water an hour later and took a break for lunch.

“How are things going with Jared?” she asked, unwrapping her sandwich.

“Oh, they’re good,” I said, looking away and feeling my face starting to turn red.

“You were up pretty late texting him. I need details.”

I giggled. "I don't know! I really like him. He's nice." I hesitated before saying, "We care about each other."

"Do you love him?" she asked.

I was quiet as I pictured the last two months. I thought about the walks we went on together, holding hands, and I thought about how chivalrous he was opening doors for me and taking me out to dinner. Being with him was easy, and my heart ached when we were apart.

I sighed and looked at her.

"You do love Jared, don't you?" she said, grinning.

I smiled and laughed. "I don't know."

"What about you?" I said, taking a bite of my sandwich. "What's new for you?"

"I thought Sam and I had something, but I guess not."

She looked down and grabbed the white sand in her hands as she let it slip through her fingers.

"Kristen, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Not everything works out the way you want it to, right?"

"No, it doesn't," I said, sighing.

"I guess I just thought we had something special. We're best friends, you know?"

"Did you ever tell him how you felt?"

"No," she said. "But he has Bri now. And she's so beautiful and nice. It's just...it's hard."

"Yeah. I'm sorry about this."

She nodded. "Well, enough real talk. Are you ready to keep filming?"

* * *

"I BET I CAN BEAT YOU," Matt said the next day as we biked, a huge grin on his face as he turned back to look at me.

Kristen and her dad left early this morning so she could train, so Matt and I decided to rent bikes.

"I believe you," I said, but then I pedaled my feet quickly to try to go in front of him.

He then started laughing and pedaled his bike hard and quickly as he zoomed on ahead of me.

We were laughing when I hit a rock and flew off the bike. I landed with a thud, and I felt my knee scrape against the pavement.

"Kate!" I heard as Matt ran up to me. My knee was bleeding. "You stay there. I'm going to get you a bandage. There's a gas station just down the street."

"Matt, I'm okay," I said.

He hopped on his bike anyway and began to bike toward the gas station. As I looked around, I watched the palm trees sway a little bit, and I bit my lip. I felt a little embarrassed. I got up, and I walked to the beach as I waited for him.

When he came back, he was pedaling fast. I waved at him, and he came over. He reached down into his pocket and pulled out what he'd bought. He cleaned the wound, which stung a bit, and then he placed the bandage on it.

"Maybe let's not race home," he said as he ruffled his fingers through his hair.

"Yeah, maybe," I said, feeling embarrassed still. He gave me a hand, and I took it and hopped up. "Good as new," I said.

"Good as new."

I looked to my right, and I could see the ocean stretching out in front of us. It was pink and orange today. It was so beautiful.

"I could live here. It's so beautiful."

"I personally don't care too much where I live," Matt said, looking me in the eye.

"Why not?"

"What's most important to me is being near the people I love."

I nodded.

"You know, I feel like I don't know that much about you," I said. "What's your family like?"

"My mom died when I was little," he said. "And I don't have any siblings that I know of."

"What about your dad?"

"Not in the picture."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"It's fine," he said, and he was quiet for a few moments. "You have a good heart, you know. You're always so kind to people."

"Kindness and love are everything, aren't they?" I asked.

"I think the Lord is everything," Matt said.

"I agree."

"Kindness and love are really important though," Matt said.

I felt like we were two kindred spirits. It was like we were both carved from the same piece of wood. I hadn't known him very long, but he seemed to just understand me.

"Wanna head back?" he said.

"Sure. And thanks," I said. "Thanks for helping me."

He smiled and brushed his hands through his hair.

"You're welcome. You ready to head home?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

We hopped on the bikes, and on the way, Matt stopped.

"No way."

"What is it?" I asked, pulling up next to him.

"It's a Hawaiian Gardenia. They're rare."

I walked over and reached down to pick the white flower.

“Don’t do that,” he ordered, and I stood back. “They’re endangered.”

“Oh, sorry,” I muttered.

He frowned. “It’s okay. You didn’t know.” Then he laughed. “Let’s go.”

“Where have you been? I’ve been calling both of you,” Kristen said as we came into the hotel. She was standing near the entrance, and she looked really worried.

“We were just riding bikes,” I said. “My phone was on silent.”

“Well, my dad made plans for us to go to a luau tonight! We need to get dressed! So we’d better hurry!” she said.

Matt smiled and said, “I’ll meet you up there.”

“Fine. But head up soon. The luau starts in half an hour,” she said.

I waved at Matt, and then I headed upstairs to get ready. I threw on a pink, midi sundress with buttons down the front and straightened my hair. But when I opened the door to leave, I saw some flowers outside of it.

Who had given me flowers?

But I didn’t take long to find out. I reached down to pick up the flowers, and I laughed as I read the note.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO WILDFLOWER POACHING. —MATT

THE LUAU WAS JUST outside the hotel, and when we arrived, they put fresh leis around our necks and showed us to our table.

Matt showed up in a forest green collared shirt. He’d even done his hair a little bit.

“You look nice,” he said, nodding at my dress.

“I see you’ve dressed up,” I teased. “Hey, thank you for the flowers.”

He grinned crookedly. "You're welcome."

We walked up to the buffet, and I saw many foods I'd never seen before. They decorated the food with dark wooden plates and pink and red hibiscus flowers as well.

I stood in line, and I grabbed a big helping of a dish called poi. It looked absolutely delicious. I also took purple sweet potatoes, a pudding called kulolo, sweet bread, macaroni salad, and a fruit kabob. I was excited.

The night was magical, and we spent a long time laughing, eating, and watching the performances.

"Are you really going back again?" I asked Matt as he stood up.

"Yep!" he announced triumphantly, filling his plate for the third time.

The stars were out, and for the first time since the camping trip, I could actually see them. Jared wasn't too interested in looking at the stars with me, and he preferred hiking in the daytime.

"Look. It's the Big Dipper," Matt said, pointing up to the sky.

"I see it!" I was instantly reminded of the first time I'd learned about the Big Dipper.

He was quiet, searching for what to say next. "So...do you want to see some pictures from scuba diving? I took them with my GoPro."

"Sure."

He started scrolling through the pictures and pointed out each type of fish expertly.

"They're absolutely beautiful. I wish I could see them for myself," I said. He grinned and continued to show me each one by one.

By the time dessert came, I was sleepy and ready for bed.

"How's Jared doing at home?" Kristen asked me.

"He's good I think, but I miss him a lot."

"I'm going to get some more ice cream. Want some?"

"Sure, thanks."

She left, and then I saw Matt frown. He threw his napkin down.

"You move on fast you know that? Is he all you ever dreamed of?" he asked sourly.

I looked into his eyes, and all I could see was hurt. The smile he'd had on earlier was gone.

I put my spoon down and looked at him. "Where's this coming from? What's going on?"

He pushed his chair back angrily and stormed off.

"Matt!" I called, running after him. But he was faster than me, and he was gone before I could catch up with him.

I was barefoot since I slid off my shoes under the table while we were eating. I walked back down the damp grass to the table.

"Competition tomorrow," Kristen said as I sat down.

She filled me in on all the details of it, but I wasn't paying attention. I was really worried about Matt. I had hurt him. I really just didn't understand why he said those words. Matt and I were friends.

And then I thought about the flowers... did Matt like me?

PIPELINE



When I woke up the next morning, Kristen was already awake and looking nervous. She didn't say much during the day, but I heard her on the phone with Sam talking for a while. He seemed to be pumping her up and giving her some encouragement.

I was nervous, too. Everything I read about pipeline talked about how dangerous it was. The coral reef was right underneath the water, and it could seriously injure swimmers and surfers.

As I looked out the open window, the sea was blue and green today. The temperature was probably in the upper seventies, and I could see darker clouds in the far back of the sky. I hoped the weather would cooperate for Kristen.

"The swells are double overhead today," Kristen said, sitting down next to me.

"Is that a good thing?" I asked.

"It just means that the waves are going to be pretty big today. They can get to be two times my size," Kristen said.

"It's going to be okay," I said.

She pulled me into a hug. "Thank you."

I put on my blue rash guard over my bathing suit, and we were soon out the door and on our way to the competition.

When I climbed into the back seat of the car, Matt wouldn't look at me. He just looked out the window or at his phone. The awkwardness between us was palpable. My stomach felt like it was in knots. I wished I could switch seats with Kristen who was in the front seat next to her dad.

Mr. Johnson, on the other hand, was in a very good mood. He had on a blue hat and his blue rash guard, and he was giving Kristen pointers and tips.

"You have to watch out for Teresa. You know she's going out there today with her eyes on the prize. Try to beat her out in the first set and grab one of the first waves. It'll give you an advantage and more confidence in the competition."

I noticed Kristen's mood was lifted as they talked.

The North Shore was crowded with cameramen, announcers, and spectators. Kristen went to check-in while Matt, Mr. Johnson, and I found a great spot on the beach to watch her.

The sun was finally peeking through the clouds. Kristen was right about the swells—the waves were definitely massive today. I was a little worried for her, but I had been watching Kristen surf for months. Not only was she a natural, but she also had some serious talent. Surfing came easily for her.

She was stretching near some of the other surfers, a couple of which I recognized from Kristen's surfing magazines. When she was done, she walked over to her dad, and she chatted with him for a little bit. They were all business, and I could tell she was really getting in the zone. I decided to give them some space, and I walked around a bit.

About two hundred people crowded the beach as they awaited the competition. Some were standing, looking out at the ocean, while others sat on towels or beach chairs.

I could hear the announcers starting to speak as they talked about the different surfers that were here today. I knew that Kristen was good, but I don't think I realized until now what that really meant. Kristen was a pro.

I walked back toward Mr. Johnson. Kristen was lined up with the other surfers with her board ready to go.

When the horn blew, she ran into the waves and began paddling out. I stood with my hands on my hips and squinted out as I watched her paddle. She disappeared within the sea of surfers for a moment as a wave came by, and then I could see her again.

I looked over at Mr. Johnson. He looked intense with his arms crossed and his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses.

"Teresa's the one in orange," said Mr. Johnson, pointing her out. I noticed she was wearing a neon orange rash guard. "She's had a good season."

"Okay," I said. I looked at the darkening clouds. They seemed to be rolling closer to us. "I hope it doesn't start storming."

"It'll be fine," Mr. Johnson said.

Matt came back to join us with a sandwich in his hand. His appetite had been constant during this trip. Maybe he was going through a growth spurt?

I continued looking out at the ocean, and I could see why the rash guards were important—it was easier to spot Kristen because hers was blue. The surfers were still paddling out, but they were starting to form a line.

The first couple of waves went by, and then I saw Teresa stand up on her board and glide down a wave. She snapped off the top of it, but then the wave seemed to be barreling,

and I couldn't see her. A few seconds later, she popped out and threw her hands up high before dropping down into the water.

A lot of the spectators cheered, and I knew well enough that she was probably going to get a good score.

Another wave came. Kristen turned her board and paddled quickly in front of it before jumping onto her board. She came down the wave quickly. Her wave didn't quite barrel as much as Teresa's, but she was able to snap off the top a couple of times in long, smooth movements before jumping into the water. Mr. Johnson clapped and told us that it should score pretty well. And it did. The announcers said that Teresa scored an eight, and hers was a seven.

Other surfers took on waves, but then it was back to Teresa and Kristen. It was pretty clear that these two were the main competitors.

Kristen jumped on another wave before Teresa, and this wave was massive, at least twice the size of Teresa's earlier. It began barreling, and she extended her hand to graze the wave as she surfed. The wave hid her; we couldn't see her for a few moments. All of a sudden, she popped out from the barrel, and we all erupted in cheers.

"Woo! Atta girl!" screamed Mr. Johnson, pumping his fist in the air. She had scored an eight on that wave.

Teresa's next wave didn't go well for her. She received a four for the wave, and a few minutes later, they were both waiting for a wave. Kristen started paddling, but then Teresa paddled ahead of her and took the wave.

"How do you win?" I asked Mr. Johnson, as another surfer descended on a wave.

"It's the best two waves of a maximum score of twenty. So right now, it's tied. Kristen and Teresa both have fifteen points."

We waited a few minutes as other surfers continued to surf. Storm clouds started to roll in, causing the water to get rough and the waves to grow, and I felt my stomach churn as I watched Kristen paddle.

She paddled out and went for a wave that was larger than any of the others that day. She glided down the wave smoothly, although it was steep, and she was crouched low on her surfboard as she rode down. It began barreling quickly—the wave was collapsing in on itself. Suddenly, the wave overtook her, and we could no longer see her. I hoped she would pop out of the wave right away, but there was no sign of her.

The wave dissipated as quickly as it had appeared.

Her board popped up...but still no Kristen.

A rescuer on a jet ski rode out and circled the area where Kristen had gone down.

“Somebody help!” Mr. Johnson yelled, ripping off his glasses and starting to run into the water as other onlookers held him back.

She still wasn’t popping up, and by now, almost a minute had passed. Another wave was forming, this one as big as the last, and then it came crashing down. There were audible gasps as people realized what was going on.

I looked to the left, and people were cupping their faces with their hands as they looked out at the sea.

Rain began pouring down fast, and I could hear a rumble of thunder.

“Everybody off the beach!” I heard an announcer scream into his microphone.

There was a panic as people began rushing off the beach, but many were looking out at the ocean to find Kristen.

It was all a blur, and I don’t know why, but my legs seemed to be sprinting.

I didn't know what I was thinking or why I decided to do what I did next, but I ran into the waves.

CURRENTS



I dove into the water and went searching for Kristen. She had to be *somewhere*—had she been knocked unconscious?

I was swimming fast and could feel my heart racing. I braced myself on a large piece of coral as a huge wave rolled through the water.

I saw some honey-colored hair out of the corner of my eye and darted toward it. Kristen was floating, unconscious. The side of her leg was bleeding, and it looked like she had hurt herself on the coral. She was still attached to her surfboard by her ankle leash.

I took Kristen in my arms and braced myself one more time as I felt another wave flow against us and the rocks, careful not to let her scrape against the coral. When the wave was done, I swam to the surface.

I placed Kristen on her surfboard, and almost as soon as she was out of the water, she coughed up water. She was breathing, but her eyes were closed, and her hair was stuck

on the sides of her freckly face. She looked pale, and I hoped she hadn't lost a lot of blood.

Rain was pouring sideways, and it was hard to see the beach from here. I knew I had to get her back soon before another wave came. And I couldn't be seen.

I took off in the water, pushing Kristen fast toward shore, and then I ducked back under the water before anyone could see me.

I peeked up and watched as Kristen and her surfboard landed on the sand, and a crowd of people swarmed around her, including a paramedic team. Mr. Johnson stood by with his hands over his mouth, his eyes wide.

I took a deep breath and ducked under the water again and began swimming away. The waves kept coming one after another, and they were getting larger. The currents were stronger as well. I was pushing through the currents, or at least, I was trying to, but when I finally broke the surface, I had drifted several yards from the beach.

I began swimming toward it, but I was knocked back and sent spiraling as the waves hit me with their full force. I swam down to the ocean floor and held onto some coral and took a deep breath.

Wait, why was I breathing underwater?

I caught a glimpse underneath me, and I screamed. I needed to get out of here! I grabbed onto the coral as the waves continued to hit one by one, and I closed my eyes a moment. What was happening?

I took the sand in my hands and felt the strange sensation of wet, underwater sand as it drifted through my fingers and lingered, suspended in the water for a few moments. I looked up as I waited for the waves to calm down and saw the rain hitting the water's surface, and it looked like glass.

But the waves weren't calming down, I realized. They were only getting worse, and I was going to need to get out of here.

I tried to swim back to shore, but I kept getting knocked by waves and sent in all directions. The crashing of the waves created a huge white mist under the water, obscuring my vision. When I was saving Kristen, swimming felt so natural; I didn't have to think about it. But now, I was no longer strong. I was afraid.

I finally mustered enough strength and came out of the water and went toward shore. I looked to see if anyone was watching, and when the coast was clear, I hoisted myself out of the water and onto the sand. I turned behind me and saw my legs reappear, which was a huge relief. I stood up and began running back toward the crowd.

The rain was pouring sideways, and I could barely see.

"Katrina!" I heard in the rain.

I saw Matt's silhouette in the distance. He was walking around, searching for me.

"Matt!" I screamed as I ran through the rain.

He saw me, and we ran toward each other and then abruptly stopped.

"You're okay," he said.

"Yeah. I think so."

"We should head back then. The storm's getting worse!"

We ran up the beach. "Wait, what about Kristen?" I asked, panting.

"She's going to be okay. She's headed toward the hospital now. The medics said she needed some stitches and that she has a concussion, but she should be okay," he said. He looked over at me. "They said they were surprised she was able to get back onto her board and swim to safety."

I looked at him and said, "I'm happy she's going to be okay."

I looked behind me at the water one more time and then ran back toward the car to go to the hotel, knowing that nothing was going to be the same.

When we reached the hotel, I ran to my room and closed the door. I went into the bathroom toward the shower and looked at it. I had stared at water all my life. I had been afraid of water all my life. How had I not known this about myself?

I turned on the bathtub faucet and watched as it slowly started to fill up. I poured some bubble bath into it. As I watched the water swirl, I thought about the currents in the ocean.

I didn't want to go back into the ocean. I was scared of what I had seen, and I was scared of what I'd become when I was in it. I didn't want to be this. I just wanted to be *normal*. I wanted to be like everyone else.

But I wasn't like everyone else. I had a...tail. I didn't want to think about it.

I started to cry on the edge of the bathtub as I reached down and cupped some water in my hands, watching the little bubbles pop. If I slid in the bathtub, would I pop a tail?

I sighed and drained the water. Then I walked back and lay on my bed trying not to think about it.

I took my phone out, checking my text messages. I had three from Jared.

I put the phone down, not texting him back, and I put my chin on my knees as I watched the rain patter against the window. Water had a whole new meaning to me now.

My stomach rumbled, and I realized I was starving. I picked up the phone and ordered room service, knowing that I'd pay Mr. Johnson back for it later.

When I heard a knock on the door with the food, I jumped up and ran toward the door.

I sat down to eat, but then I suddenly lost all of my appetite.

They had the wrong order. Instead of a grilled cheese sandwich, on the plate sat a fish.

PEP RALLY



I woke up the next morning and glanced around the room. Kristen was in her bed, asleep. She had apparently ordered room service and gone back to bed. I was very hungry, so I took a peek under the lid. The eggs and hash browns were still warm, and there was a glass of POG. I ate the food and drank the juice quickly, feeling much better.

I replaced the lid quietly and tiptoed around Kristen, trying not to wake her, and I went out onto the balcony.

The scent from flowers wafted through the air, and I looked out at the sea. There was so much on my mind. I remembered yesterday so vividly.

I heard the balcony door slide open, and Kristen walked out, rubbing her eyes. "Hey," she said, yawning.

"Hi," I said, looking at her. She looked surprisingly good. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. But the doctor said I can't have any screen time for a few days, which means no TV and no phone." She sighed. "And I didn't win the competition. I came in second."

"Second place is good!" I said. "Do you still have a chance of making the Championship Tour?"

"Yeah, I do. But something's bothering me."

"What is it?"

"I feel like I remember something strange happening when I was underwater." I felt my stomach drop as she continued. "I remember being picked up—like someone had saved me. But they told me that no one else was out there. It's strange," she said. Then she looked at me as she wrapped the blanket that she was carrying around her. "I really think someone saved me. I think someone was there."

"I'm just glad you're all right."

"Thanks. I also wanted to say that I'm really glad we're friends. I know you might miss Chicago, but I'm happy you're here."

I smiled. "Me too."

BEFORE WE KNEW IT, our trip to Hawaii was coming to an end. On the last night, Kristen, Matt, and I sat on some rocks and looked out at the horizon.

"Why can't every night be like this?" Kristen sighed.

Her hair was up in a high ponytail, and she was wearing a lavender sundress. I pulled my hair into a messy bun and watched the blue skirt of my sundress billow in the sea breeze.

Mr. Johnson had taken us out to a fancy dinner, and we were stuffed from the food.

"Tell me about it," I said.

We watched dolphins playing in the distance. I took one last look around at the lush green and the beautiful hibiscus flowers and sighed. I was going to miss this.

"Thanks again for coming this week, you guys. I don't think I could've made it through without you here."

"Of course, Kristen! We wouldn't have missed it. Thanks so much for inviting us."

"Yeah, thanks," Matt said.

I looked over at my new friends, and I smiled. They had accepted me into their lives so easily and so effortlessly. I was grateful for them.

The flight home went by pretty quickly, but I kind of felt nervous as we touched down in California.

I had found the necklace, the next clue, but I couldn't even get it to open. I had broken it. What now? And what was I going to do about...I didn't want to think about it.

And I wondered how Jared was. *Oh, Jared.* I hadn't texted or called him since the incident in the water, and I knew I was going to have some explaining to do.

As Kristen pulled into the driveway, Jared was waiting for me there. He had his hands in his pocket, and he didn't look happy.

"Oh no," I muttered as I climbed out of the car and grabbed my bag from the backseat. "Thanks, Kristen," I remembered to say as I stumbled backward. She just waved and left.

I turned around and said, "Hey."

"Why didn't you call or text me the last few days?" Jared said. He looked really upset.

I felt my heart sink. "I'm sorry."

He looked down and said, "If we're apart, I'd still like to speak to each other."

I gave him a hug. "I know. I'm sorry."

He sighed and gave me a small smile. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," I said, reciprocating the smile.

"It didn't feel the same without you here."

"I'm back, though. And I brought you something!" I reached into my backpack.

"Thanks, Kate," Jared said, pulling the green sweatshirt over his head. "I like it." This seemed to cheer him up a little.

"So, tell me everything," I said, opening the front door. "What did I miss?"

"Well, it looks like we're going to the lacrosse state championship," Jared said with a smile on his face.

"That's awesome! I'm so happy for you!" I said, giving him another hug.

When I let go, he held my hands and looked deep into my eyes. "You seem different," he said, taking hold of my hand. "I don't know what it is."

I felt breathless for a moment. I was panicking.

He dropped my hands and checked his watch. "We'd better go if we're going to make the pep rally."

"That's tonight?" I asked. "I thought we'd be able to hang out."

"Maybe after, but for now we have to go."

I left Jared by the front door and flew upstairs to my bedroom. Did I really seem that different? What did he notice?

I threw the bags down, put on a little perfume, combed my fingers through my hair, and ran back down the stairs to meet him.

Jared grabbed my hand and led me toward the car.

When we pulled into the parking lot, he ran to meet his teammates. As I walked in, music was blaring, and people were chatting and laughing in small groups. It was getting dark out, and the field lights were on. When I looked past the field, I could see dark green oak trees swaying slightly with the wind.

The bleachers were packed with students. I wasn't sure

where to sit, but I saw Helen near the top row. I made my way up the bleachers and went to sit next to her.

"Taken," she said, putting her jacket where I was about to sit.

"There's a spot next to you."

"I'm saving this seat for someone else."

My cheeks flushed, and I turned around, feeling hurt and embarrassed. I didn't know where else to sit.... Was Kristen coming?

I texted her, but she said she was too tired from the trip.

As I looked around, I realized I hadn't done a very good job of making any other friends. I bit my lip as I looked around.

"You can sit with us," said a girl a few rows lower. She had a light brown pixie cut and was wearing light-washed jeans, dark gray boots, and a navy-blue jacket. I recognized her from the camping trip. She gave me a welcoming smile.

I made my way down the bleachers and sat next to her.

"I'm Grey," she said. She was pretty and willowy. She had a heart-shaped face and large gray-blue eyes, worn with light purple eyeshadow.

"Kate."

Then she leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "You need to watch your back, okay? You have to be careful."

"Did Jared tell you what is going on?" I said quietly.

She whispered, "I know a lot more than that. All I can say is that you need to be careful. It's not natural for girls like you to be on land."

Girls like me? What did she—?

I inhaled sharply. *She knew.* But how?

"Look, if you ever need anything, please come to me. I can help you," she said. Then she whispered. "Your hair gave

it away. It's a little too shiny. Not enough for most people to notice, but I can tell."

"Do you think anyone else will notice?"

"No. They won't," she assured me.

I hesitated and then asked, "Are you...?"

"Don't say it, and don't ask," she whispered. "We all have our secrets. I won't share yours if you don't ask about mine."

I nodded. "Okay."

"But I'm a friend to you, Kate. Know that."

The lacrosse team ran onto the field, and the band began playing even louder. Cheerleaders were waving their blue and orange pom-poms and dancing to the music.

The boys turned and started clapping as two other teams made their way onto the field. Not only was the lacrosse team going to state, but the girls' tennis and cross-country teams were as well.

Each team member's name was called out, followed by cheering from the crowd. After all the members of a team had been announced, they performed a dance.

When Jared's name was announced, there was more cheering than I'd heard all night—mostly from the girls—and he smiled triumphantly.

When the pep rally finished, Grey and I walked down the bleachers together. We soon reached the parking lot, Grey waved goodbye, and I waited for Jared by his car.

"I saw you sitting by Grey," Jared said as he walked up.

"Do you know her?" I asked. "I thought I saw you talking to her at the camping trip."

"She also volunteers with the Coast Guard."

"I thought only you and your cousins did that?"

"No, Grey helps out as well," he said almost curtly. "Are you ready to go home? I'm sure you're exhausted from your trip."

I was really tired, now that he mentioned it. We got in the car, but Jared didn't start the engine right away—something seemed to be on his mind.

"Is everything okay?" I asked him.

"What was it like in Chicago?" he asked me.

Chicago? Where was this coming from?

"Um, it was good, I guess. I liked living there. A lot. Jan worked at the aquarium there, too," I said.

He looked down and fiddled with the zipper on his jacket. "Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. "But then I met you."

He smiled at that, but only for a second. "Was there ever someone else?"

"Oh, um..." I said, looking down.

"You can tell me the truth. I've seen your social media," he said.

He had seen Brandon, then.

"I had a best friend in Chicago—Brandon." Just saying his name brought tears to my eyes, and I suddenly felt the ache of him.

"And?"

I shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "And he stopped talking to me the second I moved here."

"I'm sorry," he said, pausing. "Was he...were you guys...?"

"No, we were best friends, but we weren't dating," I said.

"So, he just stopped talking to you, then? Disappeared?" he said. I nodded.

He looked at me and said, "I wouldn't do that to you."

"Please, Jared," I said. "Don't make these promises."

"But I mean it, Kate," he said, taking my hand in his, and sending butterflies into my stomach. "I wouldn't do that to you. I care about you. I really do." When I looked into his

eyes, I saw love in them, and a wave of emotion crashed into me.

"I care about you too," I said. He brushed his thumb over my knuckles, and I wiped my eyes with my sleeve.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I sighed. "I'm just happy."

His eyes looked like the open sea on a clear day. He leaned toward me slowly and put his fingers on my cheeks. I closed my eyes and felt his lips on mine. He kissed me long and tenderly and then held me in his arms when he let go.

"Where did you come from?" Jared whispered as those ocean eyes poured into mine.

SALTWATER



Things felt normal for a couple of weeks. Jared and I settled back into our routine of hiking, trips to the abandoned lighthouse, and dinner dates. But I wondered if I had some kind of stomach bug. I wasn't feeling like myself lately—I'd thrown up twice in the last few days, and I was feeling worse by day. I debated taking a few sick days, but I wanted to be at school to see Jared.

I almost forgot I wasn't feeling well when I met Jared at school. He smiled and put his arm around me as we walked through the halls.

"How are you?" I asked him as we made our way past the long hall of blue lockers.

"I've been better," he said, frowning. "It's been a lot with the Coast Guard lately."

"Hey, did you ever find Mr. Thompson?" I asked.

His eyebrows knitted together in thought. "Well, he left town.... I'm not sure where he went. I bet he's still looking for his brother.... And I still find it weird that he had written

your name on a paper. I've tried contacting him multiple times, but he seems to have just disappeared."

"Strange."

"Yeah," he said. Then he paused to look at me. "I'll see you in Gym." He then walked away, and I watched him disappear down the hall.

It was like Jared had somehow suppressed the symptoms I'd been feeling because my stomach suddenly churned. I ran down the hallway, and I accidentally elbowed a girl as I sprinted into the restroom. I ran straight for the stall. I felt dizzy and nauseous as the world seemed to tilt, and I spent the rest of my free period kneeling next to the toilet, skipping lunch altogether.

When I finally came out of the bathroom stall, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked really pale. I reached for my bag to grab my water, and I pressed the bottle to my lips, but it was empty again—I was going through something like ten large water bottles a day.

I sighed and put the water bottle back in my bag, and I changed into my gym clothes and had a few breath mints. I sighed and headed toward the water fountain down the hallway.

As I approached it, I found Grey standing near it, looking at some notes.

"Hey," I said as I pressed the fountain button, watching as the water slowly rose.

"Are you all right? You look so pale," she said.

"I'm not feeling the best," I admitted.

She looked at me and lowered her voice. "You *have* been going into the ocean, right?"

I turned and met concerned eyes as I closed the lid on my water bottle.

"Not here," I said, looking up and down the hallway.

"Okay. Come on. Let's talk outside." Grey said.

I hadn't even thought that the reason I could be so sick was because I hadn't been going in the ocean. I'd never had this problem before, so why now? I mulled over these thoughts as she sat on a bench and crossed her legs. Grey was wearing black tights, black flats, and a gray skirt with a white blouse today.

"You have to go in the ocean at some point," Grey said, brushing some of her hair out of her face. "If you don't go, you'll only get worse."

The thought of going back into that ocean made me feel almost as sick as I already was, and I shuddered at the thought.

"I don't want to," I admitted.

"You have to," she said intensely. And then she sighed. "I know you're afraid, but you don't have a choice."

"None of this was my choice," I said. My stomach was starting to hurt again.

"Have you eaten anything today?" she said. I shook my head. "Here," she said, reaching into her backpack to pull out a granola bar.

I looked down at the bar, and I felt my stomach churn again.

"Please eat," Grey said. She then glanced at her watch and stood up. "I'm going to be late for a meeting. But, Kate, you have to go back into the ocean. It's not an option."

WHEN I ARRIVED at gym class, Jared was waiting for me. I was feeling slightly better—the granola bar did help.

"Do you want to be teammates?" Jared asked, wiggling his eyebrows. Jared was holding up a tennis racket and a neon-green tennis ball.

"Sure," I said, smiling slightly as I picked up a racket.

We were playing against Sam and Helen. Jared served first, and we volleyed back and forth across the net.

Sam and Helen scored first, and Helen gave me a dirty look and smirked.

"It's okay. We'll get the next one," I said to Jared.

This time, I swung and hit the ball as hard as I could. As I did so, a water bottle burst behind Helen and Sam, launching into the air and hitting Helen in the face on the way down.

Helen screamed and held her face in her hands. I tried to stifle a laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" Helen said. Jared and I made eye contact and started rolling with laughter. She stomped away, and the gym teacher did nothing as Helen ran for the bathroom.

Was that *me*? Did anyone else notice what happened?

But Jared and Sam seemed unfazed by what had happened, and they were already talking about lacrosse at the net.

I bounced the ball on my tennis racket as we took a break. Grey's words were on my mind. I didn't want to go into the ocean, but I also didn't want to keep getting sick. I felt awful...but I just couldn't face the ocean. I wanted to stay here with Jared and my friends. I didn't want to think about the possibilities of my life if I... I didn't want to think about it.

Jared came up to me, his eyebrows pulled together with worry.

"Hey, are you okay? Is something wrong?"

I smiled. "Do you want to get another round in?"

He smiled, the worry fleeing from his eyes, and he stood opposite from me. Jared moved so fast toward the ball—it

didn't seem fair. But somehow when he passed me the ball back, I moved toward it faster than I thought I could.

"You're good at this," Jared said as we passed back and forth. "You're fast."

Nobody had ever called me fast before. And by the end of it, I was panting on the side and starting to feel sick again as I watched everyone leave the gym. I did want to feel better, but maybe I didn't have to be in the ocean. I had an idea.

WHEN I MADE IT HOME, I found Jan sitting on the couch with her nose in a book. It must have been a good book because she didn't seem to notice me when I walked in. I dropped my backpack on the floor, and she jumped.

"Hey! I didn't see you come in. How was school? By the way, I could really use some help at the aquarium, and Matt has been asking about you. Do you want to come to the aquarium this week?"

I nonchalantly made my way into the kitchen and grabbed the salt from the cabinet.

"No, I'm sorry. Maybe another time," I said as I ran up the stairs.

"Is everything all right?" I heard Jan say.

I ran into my room and locked the door. I paced around the room, holding up the saltshaker and looking at the ocean. Grey said I had to go back into the ocean, but maybe I could replicate it. I felt like I was conducting a science experiment as I filled the bathtub up with water. I then poured the salt into the water and watched it swirl around and dissolve.

I laughed and shook my head. I had officially lost it.

I filled the bathtub up with bubbles, and then I slipped into the tub, holding my breath.

When I finally mustered up the courage to open my eyes, I saw a blue-green tail sticking out of the side of the tub.

I didn't want to think of the word, but I knew what I was: a mermaid. I stared at the glimmering scales, and then I looked away.

I didn't want this. I didn't want this at all.

But I was in the bathtub for a reason. I *needed* to feel better.

I splashed some of the makeshift saltwater onto my tail and waited patiently to see if it would help. As I waited there, the part of the tail that was not in the water started to feel itchy, so I flicked more water at it.

Nothing was working, and I didn't feel much better.

What if I *drank* the saltwater? A normal human would dehydrate if they drank saltwater. But if I was a mermaid, maybe this would work.

I cupped my hands and filled them with the water, bringing it to my lips. I took a sip, and I immediately felt my stomach calm down. It was working!

Grey was wrong. All I had to do was soak and drink the saltwater, and that would be enough. After about an hour, I climbed out of the tub. I no longer felt dizzy or sick. I felt almost giddy that I had found a loophole and a way out of this mess. I would just have to continue on with my life and drink saltwater. I could handle that.

FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, I filled up and poured salt in a water bottle before school started. It had been four weeks since I was in the water. But ever since last week, my legs had started feeling itchy. I tried saltwater baths and lotions, but the skin on my legs was drying up.

And this week, it seemed like I needed more and more

saltwater to keep from getting dizzy or sick. The shine in my hair was disappearing, and I was starting to look really pale again.

I was sitting at the table during lunch when Matt took my water bottle and waterfalled it into his mouth.

"No, don't!" I said, trying to stop him.

He started coughing. "Is this saltwater?" Matt said with a grotesque look on his face as he passed the bottle back to me.

Kristen laughed as my cheeks flushed. Helen didn't look up from her book.

"What are you thinking, Kate?" Sam asked. "You could dehydrate like that."

"Gross," Helen finally said, flipping a page in her book.

I felt embarrassed and just wanted to leave the cafeteria.

"Anyone want to go to the beach tonight?" Matt asked.

"Sure, that sounds fun," I heard Kristen say. I wasn't feeling good, and my stomach was starting to churn. I was going to be sick. I walked quickly to the restroom and threw up again. Afterward, I sighed. I wasn't going to be able to stay out of the ocean for much longer.

I splashed some water on my face and popped a few breath mints in my mouth.

When I walked out, to my surprise, Jared was waiting for me.

"Hey, I'm really worried about you. Are you okay?" he said.

"Do you want to hang out today?" I asked him, dodging the question.

"Are you sure you're okay...? If you're up for it, do want to meet me later tonight? We can go hiking," he said.

"Um, sure. Sounds fun," I said. I started feeling very dizzy, but I didn't want to alarm him. I tried my best to smile and fake my way through it.

“Cool, well I’ll see you later,” he said. “And feel better.”

I went to my locker to collect my things and then drank my saltwater again, hoping it would make me feel less dizzy. It had been working so well until just now.

I had ridden my bike to school today since it was nice out, so I grabbed my bike from the rack and began riding to the ice cream shop where I would be meeting Kristen.

On the way, I started feeling lightheaded. I was near the forest, and all of a sudden, I felt the whole world tilt. I fell to the ground as the trees spun above me. Then everything went blank.

“KATE, WAKE UP!” I heard in the distance. “Kate!” I heard again, closer. Someone was shaking my shoulder, and I slowly opened my eyes.

It was Grey, and she was holding a bottle of saltwater and a candy bar out to me.

“What happened?!”

“I don’t feel well.”

“Did you go into the ocean?” Grey said.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid, okay? I thought I could get by with just drinking the saltwater,” I said.

She sat down next to me and sighed. “How long has it been?”

“Over a month.”

“You’re smart with the saltwater, but either way, you’re lucky you’re not worse than you are. You have to go in. Today.”

"I have a date with Jared."

"I'll figure it out with Jared. You need to worry about going to the ocean."

She helped me up, and my legs wobbled beneath me.

"What is wrong with me?"

"This is normal for a mermaid who has been out of the water for a month. I'm actually surprised you're not worse."

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

"Because you need my help. Now go in." We were now at the beach. That was fast.

I hesitated, and she said, "I'll take care of Jared. Now go take care of yourself." I looked at the ocean and felt terrified. I didn't want to have to go back in, but I knew I couldn't stay the way I was now. And with a deep breath, I ran into the water and let the waves consume me.

HOT PRETZELS



I breathed a sigh of relief. I no longer felt sick. As I swam, the cool water felt like silk brushing against my skin.

I hadn't felt this good in a long time. Two weeks. I had two weeks on land before I became sick and ill. And then I guess another two weeks with saltwater before I became very sick. So that gave me about three weeks away from the ocean.

I guessed mermaids made the ocean their primary residence for this reason.

Swimming with my tail started to feel more natural, and pretty soon, I was gliding through the water effortlessly. When I closed my eyes and extended my arms, I felt like I was flying. I laughed as I soared through the water.

And then I realized something. I could sing down here, and no one would hear me.

I slowed down and began to sing as I swam closer to the ocean floor. I let my fingers slide through the sand, picking up shells along the way.

I loved music, the way it drifted around me as I sang. It floated through the sea kelp, bounced off the glimmering scales of the fish, and even caught a little bit of sunlight as it wafted through the rays that hit the ocean.

I swam through the sea kelp looking at seashells and all the different colors of fish. This beat any aquarium I had ever seen. I watched as a small crab scuttled across the sand, and I even saw a dolphin and a turtle swimming together.

I smiled and closed my eyes as I floated on my back for a moment.

When I looked up, an orange and purple jellyfish was floating above me. It was very large, and I recognized it as a black sea nettle. Fish swam through the coral reef. Sea plants were growing out of the sand and wrapped around the coral. I floated down onto the sand and watched the fish and the critters in their natural habitats, darting from place to place. A sea cucumber lay on the sand, and nearby were beautiful orange ochre sea stars and even some purple ones.

The ocean was so beautiful.

And I realized that I was now part of it, too. I was as much a part of the sea as they were. If I stayed away from the sea too long, I'd become sick and die too, like a fish out of water.

But there was this uniformity to this place. Every fish had its place. But where did I belong?

I turned my head to the right and saw the bright blue open sea, my hair slowly swirling around me.

I flicked my tail a few times and made my way up to the surface.

I peeked my eyes above the water to see if anyone was watching, and when I didn't see anyone, I lay on my back, lifted my tail out of the water, and felt the waves rock me back and forth as I watched the sunset.

The sky had now turned purple, and it was growing darker with each passing minute.

I was near some dark gray rocks, which had some algae growing on them, and I scooted myself onto the largest one.

Even in the evening, my tail was beautiful. I looked at the different scales and saw how they ever so slightly reflected off of the night sky.

I closed my eyes and tried to make my legs reappear.

However, when I opened my eyes, my tail was still there.

What?

I was panicking. I wanted to yell out for Grey, for anyone to come and help me. I could NOT be stuck like this.

I sighed, feeling helpless. Well, at least Jan was out of town, so she wouldn't have the police looking for me when I didn't come home tonight.

I heard voices approaching and scooched into the water. I hid behind the rocks, peeking around to see who it was.

Matt and Kristen were walking along the beach. Kristen had on shorts and a gray sweatshirt, and Matt had on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt he'd bought from Hawaii.

What were they doing here together?

Oh, right. They'd said something earlier about going to the beach.

"You're hilarious," Kristen said as they walked toward the water. They were only a few yards away from me now, and I wanted to hear what they were going to say.

Matt shrugged and said, "I have my moments."

They sat on the beach, and Kristen said, "I love it out here. I love the water, but sometimes I worry I'm not good enough. I've been working so hard to get into the Championship Tour, and I just don't know if it's going to happen."

"If it doesn't happen, it just means you're that much closer now than you were before."

"I just can't stop thinking about the accident. What if that happens again? What if I can't get over that fear?"

"You can do anything if you put your mind to it, Kristen. And you can't let that fear control you," he said, and he looked at her. "You've got talent, kid. I know you'll be able to move past this."

"Thanks," she said as she lay her head on his shoulder.

What was she doing?

I edged closer and felt the waves splashing against my back.

"Have you ever liked a girl? Was there ever a girl back in Michigan?"

"You don't let anyone have privacy, do you?" Matt said, laughing. He dug his feet into the sand and looked out into the ocean. "Yeah, there was. We were so close to getting together, but she slipped away from me."

"I'm so sorry."

"And the problem is, it's not her fault."

"What's not her fault?"

"I think she thinks that I left her, not the other way around."

Kristen looked at him. "Is there any chance you can get her back?"

"I don't know."

"You're a good guy. Any girl would be really lucky to be with you."

"Thanks," he said.

And then she turned her head, and the two of them locked lips. They were kissing.

She was kissing him.

And he was kissing her back.

Kristen? With Matt?!

Something inside of me wanted to scream. It was my

heart. It was in my heart. And I didn't understand it. I had Jared. This wasn't supposed to make me upset. Now I knew who Matt *really* liked.

Finally, it ended. Kristen gave him a hug. Matt's eyes were lingering toward where I was hiding.

I felt scared that I'd been seen, and so many emotions hit me like an avalanche. I dove into the water. I needed to get away from here.

I kept swimming faster and faster through the water. I had no idea where I was going, and at that point, I didn't care. I swam into an underwater cave and sank to the floor, not knowing what to think. Why was I reacting like this?

I looked up at the cave ceiling and stared at the water around me. The water was moving, and I put my chin on my tail as I looked around. There was something calming and protective about the sea. I saw an anemone floating its finger-like tentacles along the corner of the wall. I slid over a little to avoid it.

As I lay in the cave, watching fish zoom in and out of the cave, I felt so many emotions in my heart. There was sadness, heartache, and a lot of guilt mixed in there. I don't know why their kiss bothered me so much. It just hurt, somehow...but why was I feeling like this?

I flicked my fins and put my arms in front of me as I swam up to the surface. I floated on my back and looked at the stars, feeling tears slip down my cheeks.

And as I gazed at the sky, I was reminded of Brandon. Of camping trips with him, our fun at the Shedd. But I shook my head. Brandon was gone. And Jared was here.

Jared. My Jared.

I tried to push Brandon out of my mind. I had Jared now, and I loved being with him. I didn't need to feel upset. And then fear began creeping into my thoughts. Jared had

told me that I wasn't like other girls and that I was different.

Well, he was right about that, but what if he couldn't accept me? Accept *this*? Could *I*?

I felt a tear slide down my cheek. If I was on land too long, I got sick. If I went for a swim, I magically popped out a tail. I drank saltwater. How could I lead a normal life like this?

I sighed and fiddled with the locket around my neck. It *opened*. I gasped as I looked down at it. *Of course*. It could only be opened in water.

When I looked down at it, I saw a heart-shaped picture of me, as a baby, on the right. On the left was a picture of my parents. Tears streamed down my face, and when I went to touch their picture, it suddenly changed into a compass.

I looked at it, puzzled. Why wasn't it pointing north? It pointed toward...well, I couldn't quite figure it out. At first, it looked southeast, but when I turned, it changed again.

And that's when it hit me. I'd been so distracted and so sick recently. My brain had been muddled, but now it was clear as day. My mother, my parents...were they mermaids, too?

They'd found the boat after the storm, but not my parents. Could they still be out here? The map made much more sense now. All the locations were near the sea, and I had a feeling that my mother was a mermaid—or at least she *used* to be.

But what if the map could lead to her? Did she want me to find her?

I felt my heart lift, and I was hopeful for the first time in a long time. And then I remembered Mr. Key's instructions. I was supposed to go back to him when I knew who my mother was. I was going to have to make a trip to see him.

I swam over to a nearby rock and closed my eyes, exhausted, with thoughts of the locket, Dr. Keys, and the map swirling in my dreams.

I WOKE up to the sound of seagulls. Today, they were my own personal alarm clock. I raised my head and looked at my tail. It was iridescent in the light. I had drifted toward the caves near the rocks.

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Hey," said a voice.

I turned around and tried to hide my tail underneath me, but then I realized I was looking at another mermaid. She had red hair, porcelain skin, and freckles. Her eyes were blue, and her tail was a deep blue color, contrasting my lighter bluish-green one.

"Hi," I said back.

"I've never seen you here before," said the girl. She looked like she was in her mid-twenties.

"No, you wouldn't have. I'm, um, not from around here." That was an understatement.

"What's your name?" she asked, floating over gracefully to sit on top of some of the rocks. She wore a top that was more elaborate than just two seashells. She was covered in pearls, shells, and tiny starfish, and some kind of seaweed material that held it all together. It was more modest than what the movies portray.

"Kate," I said.

"Kate?" she asked as one of her eyebrows lifted.

"Um, yeah."

"Pretty. Nice T-shirt, by the way. Where did you find that?" she asked.

"Oh umm..." I said, looking down at the shirt. It had "Colorado" spelled out on it. We'd picked it up on our trip.

She tossed her flaming red hair and smiled, looking into my eyes. "My name is Lila," she said.

"Nice to meet you," I said, smiling.

"Where are you staying?"

When I didn't answer, she said, "Where are you from?"

I glanced at the coast, and then she put her hand over her mouth, slipping off the rock and pulling me under the water.

"You're from the land, aren't you?" I didn't respond, but she grabbed my wrist. "You have to come with me," she said earnestly. "Please. You can't be seen."

I wanted to turn around and leave, but there was something in her deep blue eyes that made me decide to stay. I could tell she wanted to help, and I hoped I could trust her.

"Okay," I said, and I followed her as I watched her fins flick away, unsure if I'd made a huge mistake.

"You're so lucky I found you before anyone else did," she said as I caught up with her.

I followed her through some caves and between coral reefs. She was fast. Her arms were straight out in front of her and her tail moved quickly. But it wasn't difficult for me to keep up with her. In fact, it was easy. For once, I wasn't the slowest runner or the exhausted hiker. I was a natural at this.

We traveled through the light blue ocean for what felt like miles. We swam through long strands of sea kelp, passed otters and brightly colored fish, and shot forward through the sea. She turned to me and laughed as we were swimming, sending large bubbles upward. And I smiled back. I may not want to be a mermaid, but I did love swimming. This I could do for hours.

"Where are we?" I asked Lila.

"Monterey," she answered.

Moments later, Lila was slowing down. She was ahead of me now and swimming toward a cave.

I lingered a moment as I watched her open a rock and swim in, her blue scales shining. I approached the cave tentatively.

"Come in," she said.

I swam through, and Lila rolled a rock back over the entrance of the cave.

"This is amazing," I said, looking around.

The cave was full of light; light filtered through tiny holes in the ceiling. I could see fish swimming above, glistening from the light that hit their scales.

She had a four-poster bed on the sea floor, a dresser with delicate combs and brushes, and a long mirror on one side of the cave. There was a chest adorned with different pearls and seashells sunk into the sand, and a coat hanger laid in the corner and was decorated with seaweed and long necklaces. The room was beautiful.

"Where did you find all of this stuff?" I asked.

"I've found them in lots of places," she said, smiling proudly. "Come on. I'll give you a tour of the rest of my home."

She took me through some tunnels that connected to other parts of the cave. Smaller fish swam through the natural holes in the walls and shimmering sea plants grew from the seabed. I felt their slimy touch as I skimmed them, and I noticed a lot of pink starfish. One tunnel seemed to act as a passageway to outside of the cave; another led to a part of the cave that was completely bathed in light and filled with a collection of seashells.

One tunnel led to a kitchen and connected to it was what looked to be the largest part of her home.

The kitchen had light pink coral and gray stones that

made up a counter, and she had food on it as well: mussels, shrimp, clams, seaweed, and a few things I didn't recognize.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, pulling apart a mussel and handing it to me.

"Yes, thank you," I said, taking it. I wondered when I'd last eaten.

I must have made a face because she laughed and said, "It's not bad. You'll like it. It may not be coffee or hot pretzels, but it's pretty good."

"Hot pretzels?" I asked with a smile as I took a bite. "You know what those are?"

She sighed and sat on a rock, manipulating a current above her so she would keep from floating.

"How did you do that?"

"Oh, this? You can probably do it, too. And aren't hot pretzels what humans eat?" she asked.

"We eat much more than that," I said. Then I sighed. "I guess I'm not human though, am I?"

She looked at me, concerned. "Did you only just find out you're a mermaid?"

"Yeah," I said, looking at the scales on my tail.

"How did you manage to stay out of the water all this time?"

"Oh, I just never went in it."

"Interesting. Most of us are born in the sea, but if you were born on the land, I could see how that could happen. I'll have to try to read more about it."

"Mermaids have books?"

"Sure," she said, pointing at a bookshelf that took up an entire wall of the cave. She had a large collection. The books stacked up the shelves, and they shimmered from the light a little.

I then thought about last night.

"I tried to get out of the water last night, but my legs didn't come back.... Am I stuck like this?" I asked.

"No," she said. "At night, if we are in the water, we cannot go on land."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. But you should know that since you've gone into the water now, you'll start to get sick if you're on land too long."

"I know about that," I said. "I didn't go in the water for a month."

"A month?!" she asked, her lips parted and her eyes widened in surprise. "How did you survive that long?"

"Barely. I was really sick."

"I'm sure you were," she said in disbelief.

"I was drinking saltwater," I said. "It seemed to help."

"That's interesting," she said thoughtfully. She then went up to the bookshelf and pulled out a notebook and scribbled down something with what looked like a quill. Only instead of the feather at the end of it, there was seaweed.

Then she looked at me and said, "Do you know your talent yet? Every mermaid has something they're good at."

"I'm not sure."

"It doesn't usually take a mermaid long to figure that out. Even the youngest mermaids find out their talent by the age of ten at the latest."

"What's your talent?" I asked her. But she frowned and kept writing in her journal, so I changed my question. "Do you know of anyone with any interesting talents?"

"Oh yes, plenty. There are many," she said, looking up at me. "Like our queen."

"Queen?"

"Each pod of mermaids has a queen and a king. Or just a queen or just a king. We're made up of royalty."

"Can I ask what hers is?"

"You'll probably find out on your own," she said.

I huffed, annoyed. "Why is everything so secretive?"

"It didn't use to be," she said. "It all changed when Miranda became queen. Most of us are afraid of her, so we try to keep to ourselves." She averted her eyes and started playing with her hair nervously.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be," she said, letting go of her hair. She flicked her eyes back to me. "Kate. Is that your real name?"

"It's Katrina."

Something in her eyes lit up when I said that. *Did she recognize my name?*

"You'll have to go by that from now on," she said, swimming toward me. She looked behind her shoulder to make sure no one was peeking through the holes and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Listen to me, Katrina, you are going to have to be careful. Mermaids don't typically just wander off in the middle of the sea. You're going to need a purpose for being here." She backed away a little bit and looked me up and down. "You know, you look like a northern mermaid. And your name..." she said, her voice back to its normal volume. She swam around me and lifted my hair up so she could look at my back. "Yes, just as I thought. You're definitely a northern mermaid. You have a birthmark on the back of your neck just like they do."

"What's a northern mermaid?"

There was a knock on the large rock that sat at the entrance.

"Quick. Hide," she said.

I swam into one of the tunnels and waited nervously.

I heard a new voice coming closer. "Hey, Lila, would you mind helping me make a new brush? I got a little too close to

shore, and a wave took it and brought it onto the beach." I peeked around the corner and saw a beautiful mermaid with hazel eyes and a green tail. She had golden-brown skin and a dazzling shell headband on top of her long, dark brown, wavy hair.

"Sure, in a little bit. There's someone I want you to meet."

I slowly swam out of the tunnel. The new mermaid gave me a really nice smile. "Hola, I'm Junopia. June for short," she said.

"Katrina," I said.

"Who is she? I've never seen her before," June said to Lila.

"She's from the land."

June's eyes went wide as she looked at Lila, who shrugged.

"She looks like a Northerner."

"She *is* a Northerner," Lila corrected.

"Have you ever been in the water before?"

"Once, in Hawaii. That was about a month ago. And now I'm back in again."

"You were out of the water for a month?"

She looked at Lila in bewilderment. Lila nodded.

"You could have died!" June said, turning back to me.

"I passed out yesterday; that's why I finally came back into the ocean."

"You're lucky nothing worse happened to you," June said. Then she added, "Do you know anything about mermaids?"

"Um...no, not really."

"We have a lot to discuss, then," Lila said.

"*Can you hear me?*" Lila said.

She was communicating to me through our minds.

"Yes," I said, shocked.

"*We can communicate like this or by talking. But I prefer talking. Communicating like this gives me a headache.*"

"Can three people hear each other?"

"Yes. June?"

"Hey, Kate," June said.

"This is cool."

"Let's talk like this," Lila said aloud. "You're welcome to stay with me if you have nowhere else to go."

"Thanks, but I'll probably have to come back and forth. I'm in high school."

"High school?" they asked, puzzled.

"Don't you have mermaid school?" I asked.

"We have a library in the kingdom," Lila said. "I've heard of the human concept of 'school'. We have teachers, but not schools. Mermaids of all ages are encouraged to constantly be studying and learning."

"You have a kingdom?!"

"Yes. It's not too far from here...but I don't go there much," she said.

"Does Miranda know she's here?" June asked in a hushed tone.

"No, I don't think so," she said to June, but then she turned to me. "Katrina, the only reason a mermaid would be traveling by herself is for two reasons. One, she was unhappy about her pod and wanted a switch, or two, she's a traveler."

"What's a traveler?"

"A traveler is a mermaid who goes from pod to pod, traveling the ocean and learning. It's an honor for mermaids to travel—it increases their status as a mermaid as they collect beads. Each pod will assign them missions in an effort to improve the pod or test the mermaid. Often, beads will be engraved based on what you accomplished or did. The missions can be easy or sometimes dangerous. You are going to need to go to Miranda and say that you would like to complete a bead. Miranda will likely make you go on some

missions, and if she likes you, she'll offer you a place in the pod. If you pass the missions, you'll receive a bead."

Lila showed me her necklace. Hers had four beads, and June's had one.

"What's the most you can have?" I asked.

"I met a mermaid who had ten beads," Lila said. "Even having three is a big deal. Three or more means you're a brave or strong mermaid. Missions can be very difficult." She paused and looked at me. "If you're going to pass as a Northerner, you're going to need a Northerner hairstyle."

She swam behind me and braided my hair. That wouldn't be hard to remember. She added some seashell clips and aquamarine stones, and when she was finished, she pulled my arm until we were at her long, floor-length mirror. I barely recognized myself.

June looked at me and said, "I'm surprised that you are a Northerner mermaid."

"Why?"

"Northern mermaids have a different way of doing things," Lila said. "They do not collect human things the way we do, and they believe in building everything themselves. They keep to themselves and are just very free, very much like the way we used to be. It's just surprising that you somehow made your way to the land."

"Do you get cold?" June asked. "I've always wondered this."

I shook my head.

"That's amazing," June said. "I'm from the Gulf seas, so I'm used to warmer temperatures. This is about as north as I like to go before it starts to get cold for me," she said.

"Where are Northerner mermaids from?"

"They start around Oregon and go up through Alaska, some even in the Arctic. It's why you don't feel cold."

Northern mermaids can dive deeper than most mermaids and withstand freezing temperatures.”

“What if...what if I just don’t see Miranda?” I said.

“She’ll throw you in jail if she finds you. Unless you meet her and establish some kind of connection, she will lock you up. Mermaids can’t loiter indefinitely through kingdoms...at least not with Miranda,” June said.

I shuddered at the thought of being thrown in mermaid prison.

“So...” June said, raising an eyebrow and changing the subject. “Have you been swimming much?”

“No, not really.”

“Then try to keep up with us,” June said, smiling and dashing out of a window of Lila’s cave. Lila followed her, and I went out the window, a little slower than they did, making sure I didn’t bump my head.

They were fast ahead of me, making a small wake with their tails, and I swam fast, trying to catch up to them. It was no problem at all, and in fact, I felt so fast. Soon, I was much ahead of them.

We stopped for a moment, and they were panting.

“You’re fast for someone who hasn’t done a lot of swimming,” Lila said.

“Maybe it’s her talent,” June said. “You’re probably faster than any of the other mermaids or mermen I know...but we won’t know for sure if it’s your talent or not for a while.”

June swam up to the surface suddenly, her green fins swaying as she swam, but then she was back quickly.

“It’s that time a day,” June said with a grin.

Lila sighed and crossed her arms. “All right, let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

June answered. “Every day we—”

“Shh,” Lila said. “Miranda’s guards might hear us,” Lila whispered.

We swam through the kelp, instead of around it. I had a feeling they weren’t supposed to be doing what they were going to do, and so they were trying not to be seen.

We headed back the way we came, and we swam for miles before ending up underneath a pier. We swam up, breaking the surface and staying hidden behind the poles of the pier. I held onto them so I wouldn’t drift off.

I then understood how Lila knew about hot pretzels; there was a stand for them on the beach. The beach was very crowded today, and it made me a little nervous we’d be seen.

“Can’t people see us under here?” I whispered.

“Shh,” they said, giggling as they looked at the people on the beach.

“I can’t believe you actually live here,” June said.

I saw Matt sitting in the sand and looking out into the ocean, and I ducked behind a pier leg.

They saw me looking at him. “Do you know him?” June asked. I nodded. “Do you like him?” June said, a knowing smile on her face.

“No, we’re just friends.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” June said.

“Yes, I do.”

“Katrina, it’s dangerous to fall in love with a human,” Lila said, her dark blue eyes filled with worry.

Oh no. Jared.

I gasped—today was the lacrosse championship!

I panicked. We must have been at a beach in Santa Cruz if Matt was there. I had to get home and get to the lacrosse game.

“I have to go, but it was nice meeting you!” I said as I dove into the water and swam off.

“Katrina, wait! Where are you going?!” June said, trailing behind me.

Lila caught up to me first. “You are going to have to meet Miranda at some point.”

“I know; I’ll come back. I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Lila shrugged.

We swam farther past the beach toward some rocks. The rocks were blocking the beach from here, and I didn’t see anyone watching.

I apprehensively climbed on some rocks and got my legs back. Lila and June watched me with wide eyes. Waves crashed against the rocks, and I watched as they bobbed up and down.

Lila reached out and grabbed my arm with her pale, almost translucent hand. “Be safe. Okay?”

I nodded and turned around and ran up the beach. I had just spent my day with *mermaids*.

GAME DAY



When I got home, I couldn't help but look in the mirror. I had seaweed on my face and in my hair, and my legs were covered in sand. I took the stones out of my hair, and I unwound the long braid Lila had given me. Had what just happened been *real*? It all seemed like a dream: the bright fish, the coral, and Lila's magical home....

"Kristen, hey," I said, putting my phone up to my ear after I had showered.

"Are you coming to the game? It's about to start."

"Yeah, I'm on my way! I'll meet you there."

"Hurry!" she said.

When I arrived at the game, the bleachers were packed with people who were talking loudly, and music blasted from speakers. I went around the corner, scanning up and down for Kristen. Kristen saw me first and gave me a wave.

"Just in time," Kristen said as I took a seat.

"Hey, Helen, it's good to see you."

"Nice seaweed," Helen said, laughing as she pulled a piece

of seaweed from my hair. "How did that happen? Were you swimming?"

I felt my cheeks turn red, but thankfully, the players came out before I had to answer her. They wore shiny black uniforms, and their team name was called the Crows. They looked pretty intense.

"We're playing our rivals. Jared's cousins are on the other team," Kristen said.

Matt saw us and gave us a wink and a wave, and Jared seemed in the zone already. I wondered what Grey had told him when I disappeared yesterday and didn't make it to our date.

Grey was sitting next to Steve. We made eye contact, and she gave me a slight smile. I liked Grey. It was nice to have someone watching out for me. Aside from Jared, obviously. But now that there were other things happening, it was nice to know that Grey understood...or it seemed that way. Regardless, she helped me yesterday, and I was grateful for it.

Finally, the game started. Jared had the ball first and began running up the field. He went to score when suddenly the ball was gone from his lacrosse mesh. An O'Connor from the other team was running with the ball up the left side of the field. The O'Connors were like machines as they ran up and down the field so quick and fast.

Sam was holding the ball now and passing it back and forth with Jared when Sam threw the ball into the net.

We stood up and cheered. Sam flashed a smile as Jared patted him on the back. However, an O'Connor on the other team scored as well. It was one to one. Then it was one to two. Then it was tied at two to two. Then it was two to three. Then two to four.

We were losing. There were three O'Connor cousins on the team. The other teammates were good, but it was easy to

see that Sam and Jared were the stars of our team. Matt wasn't getting in again.

"Matt should be in there," I said.

"I talked to Matt about that last night. He said Mr. O'Connor and Jared don't like him."

"I've noticed that too, but it just doesn't seem fair," I said in a quiet tone, remembering their kiss. I wanted to ask her about Matt and if they were together now. But I decided not to; now wasn't the right time.

I looked at Matt on the bench, who was sitting on the edge of his seat. He looked like he was anxious to be in there. We were down by three, and there were only twenty minutes left in the game.

I saw Matt get up and say something to the coach. Mr. O'Connor had his arms crossed over his chest. He said something to Matt. Matt walked away and started to warm up on the sideline. Mr. O'Connor then gave Matt a sharp nod.

Matt went into the game, and one of the other teammates ran out and sat on the bench.

Sam passed the ball to Matt, who quickly ran down the field and scored a goal. We all erupted in cheers. Then, almost right away, Matt stole the ball away from the other team and scored again!

We were now down by one, and there were ten minutes left in the game. Eight minutes passed without a goal. They were both working extremely hard, and the ball whizzed back and forth down the field.

Two minutes to go. I anxiously looked at the clock, and I hoped there would be enough time to change the score.

Jared was lightning fast down the field and shot the ball into the net like a rocket.

"Yes!" Kristen and I screamed as we stood up and cheered

along with the rest of the students and people at our side. The game was now tied.

They were all panting, and even from here, I could tell that sweat was pouring down their faces. They looked exhausted.

The game started again, and Matt had an interception after the second pass. He sprinted down the field. He then passed it to Sam, who launched the ball into the goal.

Cheers exploded, and then we heard the sound of the buzzer when the time ran out. The boys were jumping with excitement, and people were storming the field.

"Kristen," I said, turning to look at her. But she was already gone.

I ran down the bleachers, trying to find Jared. When I finally saw him, he grinned and lifted me into the air, spinning around and cheering.

"You did it!"

"Thank you for coming!" He then pulled me in his arms and kissed me.

I pressed my ear to his chest as he wrapped his arms around me, wondering how long this happiness would last.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, Jared met me in the hallway as I was walking to class. He had a huge grin on his face.

"I think it's time you met the family," he said, a mischievous look in his eyes.

"Your family?" I felt my chest tighten.

"Yeah, my dad wants to introduce you to the cousins, my grandparents, and the rest of the family. Plus, you still haven't met my mom."

I swallowed nervously. "Sure, yeah. I'd love to meet them," I said, trying to hide my hesitation.

"Good," he said, putting his arm around me and walking me to class.

I smiled weakly. I'd met Steve, his dad, and Luke, but I had yet to meet everyone else. Would they like me? And, more importantly, would they suspect that I was different?

FAMILY FEUD



Jan was home when I walked through the front door after school. I put my bag on the floor by the couch and said, "I need help picking out an outfit. I'm meeting Jared's family for the first time tonight."

"Well, that's exciting!" she said, putting her book on the coffee table and getting up from the beige couch. "Let's go upstairs."

When we got to my room, the hangers rattled together as Jan looked through my closet.

"We want something that says you're classy, yet sophisticated," she said, perusing through my blouses and dresses. She stood there, thinking a moment, and then she pulled out a white short-sleeved dress and some light brown booties.

"This would be cute, don't you think?" she asked, her eyebrows raised as she held it out to me.

"Yeah, I think so," I said, hesitating as I took the dress and shoes. I sat on my bed. "Jan...what if they don't like me?"

"You're smart, fun, and easy to talk to. They would be crazy not to love you!" she said.

"Yes, but what if they think I'm...different than they are."

"What do you mean?" Jan asked.

I wanted to tell her everything at that moment, but instead, I put the shoes on the ground.

"Katrina, they will love you. Just be yourself, okay? And have manners. It is a dinner party, right?"

I nodded. "Yes, I will. Thanks, Jan."

She kissed the top of my head, and I smiled as I watched her leave the room.

After I was dressed, I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I hoped that they wouldn't notice my hair was a little too shiny like Grey had. I hoped they wouldn't see right through me.

I heard Jared's truck pull up. I looked out my window and smiled as he walked up the driveway. He looked nice in a blue button-down shirt and khaki pants.

"Wait. Don't run out the door. I'd like to meet him," Jan said as I came down the stairs. My heart pounded as Jared came up to the door, and I let him in.

"Hi, my name is Jared," he said, extending his hand to her. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Hi, Jared," Jan said, shaking his hand. "You and Kate have been together for a while now."

"Yes," Jared said, smiling at me.

We talked for a couple of minutes. He was so charming and talked with her easily, and he listened patiently as she talked about a new exhibit in the aquarium.

Jan smiled and winked at me and said finally, "Well, Jared, it was great to meet you. I know you two probably have to get going."

We said goodbye to Jan and walked down the driveway to Jared's truck. He opened the door for me, and I slid in as he

started the engine and turned on the radio. I listened to the music and hummed along for a little bit.

"You have such a beautiful voice. I wish you'd sing more often," he said.

I gave him a small smile and looked away. A pit formed in my stomach.

"Nervous?"

"A little," I admitted.

"They're going to love you," he said with a smile. He grabbed my hand and stared into my eyes. I got lost so easily in those eyes of his.

We pulled up after a few minutes. The house was made of stone and log, and it had a long, curvy driveway. The cabin was adjacent to the forest, and beyond it, I knew we would find the redwoods.

Jared took the keys from the ignition and turned to me.

"You ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Okay, let's meet the family," he said.

I saw Grey walk through the front door ahead of us.

"What's she doing here?"

"Oh," Jared said, pausing before we stepped inside. He lowered his voice slightly and said, "Grey is Steve's girlfriend."

I furrowed my eyebrow, confused.

Jared must have seen the look on my face because he said, "They've been together for about a year now. I know they seem like an interesting pairing, but Grey is good for Steve. And they really love each other."

I remembered seeing Grey sitting by Steve in the stands. Grey was Steve's girlfriend? But Grey was so nice. And he was so...well, not.

Then I realized that I knew nothing about their relation-

ship. And the truth was, I didn't really know anything about Grey. She had helped me, that was for sure, but beyond that, she was still a stranger to me.

We walked in together, and I immediately felt overwhelmed. There were so many of them. Jared's family members crowded the room. They had this energy about them. Their voices were loud, and the room buzzed with their constant chatter. I had never had a family like this before. Back in Chicago, our family parties consisted of Jan, Brandon, and me—they'd never looked anything like this, and I felt a longing that I'd never experienced before.

"Kate, these are my cousins," he said, nodding to the six teenagers that had walked up to us. "Guys, this is Kate."

"Nice to meet you," said a lanky blond teenager. "Jared's told us so much about you. I'm Miles, and these are my brothers: Joey, Blake, Link, Logan, and Caleb."

I heard one of them whisper, "She's hot," which sent them rolling with laughter.

My cheeks flushed, and I looked at my shoes, feeling embarrassed.

"Guys, relax," Jared said, but he was smiling.

Pretty much everyone was male. All of his cousins were boys, and he had two brothers. As far as I could tell, his aunt, his grandmother, his mother, Grey, and I were the only females in the house.

His mother waved me over, and she invited me to come into the kitchen to talk. His grandmother was cooking something on the stove, and the smell of warm chocolate chip cookies wafted through the air. For the first time, I felt what it would be like to have a grandmother around. I had heard people talk about how their grandparent's baking reminded them of their childhood, and now I understood why. The

cookies had a homey feel and smell to them. I was so excited to try them later.

The kitchen was small but pretty. I liked the woodsy feel of the home, and it was all so warm. The walls were green with a beautiful brown marble backsplash. Pictures of the forest covered the walls, and there was a small rustic-looking kitchen table in the corner.

I looked over at Jared's mom, and she was smiling. She had jet black hair, very light fair skin, and blue eyes that closely resembled Jared's.

"Kate, I've heard so much about you. I'm Annette," she said as she came over to take my hands. "Oh, look at you. You're so beautiful," she said, and then her eyes welled up with tears. "Excuse me," she said, leaving the room quickly. Jared's aunt followed close behind her, throwing me a confused glance.

I was shocked and unsure of what I should do. Had I done something to upset her?

His grandmother turned around and said, "Don't worry about her, honey. Come over and help me."

I went over, and she handed me a potato peeler.

"I'm Grandma Mabel. Peel the carrots, would you?" she asked.

As I peeled them, Grandma Mabel started telling me stories about Jared when he was younger.

"He was an explorer. Always up to something," his grandmother said as she stirred the soup on the stove. "Jared used to collect all sorts of interesting things: seashells, feathers, bugs. He used to bring them all to the lighthouse. But as he got older, he stopped doing all that, and he became so serious."

She looked at me and smiled. "But with you, it's like you've brought him back to us again. I cannot tell you how

grateful we are for that. I haven't seen Jared this happy in years."

"I really like Jared," I told her as she added the peeled carrots to the pot.

"Oh, I think it's more than that." She was right again.

I was in love with Jared. I couldn't believe I'd just admitted that to myself. I couldn't help smiling.

"He's special. I've never met anyone quite like him."

"He's not the only one who's special. Love can come from anywhere, can't it?" she said, bringing the wooden spoon to her lips to taste the broth.

My breath caught, and suddenly my cheeks flushed with heat. Did she *know*?

I jumped as the oven timer went off.

"Oh, there's my potatoes. Give me a hand, dear."

I put on a hot mitt and took the potatoes out of the oven. The smell of the onions and potatoes were strong, and my mouth started to water.

I looked out at the party, and I could see everyone laughing and having fun.

"You have a beautiful family," I said, placing the potatoes on the counter.

"They're certainly something," she said, chuckling. "Do you have a big family?"

I turned to her. "I don't. My parents passed away in a storm several years ago. It's just my aunt Jan and me," I said.

She looked up at me and took my hands. "Family isn't always just about this. Family is about who you love, who you can put into your heart," she said.

A wave of understanding washed over me. She was right. I smiled warmly at her.

"You go join the party. I will be just fine here," she said, squeezing my hands and returning to her soup.

I went out to the living room and found Jared talking with Grey and Steve in the corner. They stopped talking when I approached and became fidgety and awkward. I could tell by the looks on their faces that they were worried. Did it have to do with the Coast Guard? Was there another emergency?

Jared put his arm around me and smiled, the worry escaping from his eyes as he looked at me.

"How was meeting Grandma Mabel?" he asked.

I looked back toward the kitchen, and Mabel winked at me. She was so funny. I couldn't help but like her.

"She's great. I really like her." I said, smiling.

"Yeah, she's a riot," he said.

Steve coughed, obviously signaling him.

Jared said, "We have to go outside and talk. It's urgent. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Okay," I said. "Do you know where the bathroom is?"

"Yeah, it's just down that hallway," he said, pointing to my left. "See you in a little bit." His hand slid off my shoulder, and he went toward the back door with Steve and Grey. Grey looked over her shoulder at me and mouthed "Sorry" as they walked away.

I walked down the hallway and went into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I looked in the mirror as I washed my hands in the stone sink, and then I fixed my hair.

I could hear voices outside, and I turned to look at the window.

"No, I can't go now and leave Kate alone. I dragged her all this way."

"I don't care if you dragged her out this way. We have to go," Steve said.

"I'm sure it's no big deal," Jared said.

"You know, ever since Kate has come into your life, you

don't even seem to want to do this. Well, wake up, Jared. This is real life. And there are real people in danger. You can visit your little fantasy girl later, but you're coming with us."

"I hate to say this, but I agree with him, Jared. This is urgent."

I usually didn't care what Jared was doing with the Coast Guard, but I found all of this strange.

Grey suddenly looked toward the window. I ducked away and accidentally hit my head on a shelf that was hanging on the wall.

"Ow!" I whispered, rubbing my head and feeling tears rush forward in my eyes. I blinked a few times, and I left the bathroom, my fingers pressed against the throbbing point as I tried to rub my head a little.

I went back to the party, and as soon as I sat down on the couch, the back door opened. Jared scanned the living room, looking for me. When his eyes met mine, I gave him a small smile. He walked over, looking guilty and annoyed.

"I have to go. I'm so sorry. You deserve better than this," he said, kissing the top of my head.

"I understand."

"No, you don't get it. You're really important to me, and this night was really important to me," he sighed angrily. "This is not how I planned it to go."

He stalked off into one of the bedrooms to change and slammed the door behind him, making me shake a little.

"Hey, what's going on?" Miles asked, sitting down next to me.

"Jared has to leave," I said.

"Oh." He looked over his shoulders and called to his brothers, "You hear that, boys? They might need some help."

As if on cue, Steve came into the living room and said, "We need two of you tonight. Miles, Blake, let's go."

I heard a few groans and some sighs. Miles looked at Steve and gave him a curt nod. He seemed to be the oldest of the brothers. Miles motioned to Blake, who jumped up and followed them out the door.

A few moments later, Jared walked out of the bedroom. He looked so serious. His face was stiff, and his eyes were clouded. He waved goodbye and headed out the door, closing it swiftly behind him.

I stood there feeling awkward—I was at this party alone now.

“Dinner time!” Grandma Mabel announced to the room.

I stood up and looked out the window as they all piled into Jared’s blue truck. We made eye contact for a moment, but then Jared pulled away.

I turned and made my way to the kitchen, following the buffet line. Grandma Mabel served chicken and vegetable soup, dinner rolls with butter, potatoes, fruit salad, grilled asparagus, and chocolate chip cookies.

I found my place card at the table, and I would be sitting next to Logan and Grandma Mabel. I sat down and began eating, but I didn’t have much appetite. My mind was on Jared. Was he going to be safe?

All of a sudden, I looked down, and my face was soon hot. Someone had filled my glass with saltwater, and I’d already downed half of it while thinking about Jared.

Someone here *knew*.

I glanced around the room, looking to see if anyone had noticed, but everyone was just talking and eating as if nothing happened.

I looked down at my cup again. I willed myself not to take another drink out of fear that someone was watching, but I wasn’t sure who would have done this.

Grey. Grey knew. Maybe it was her. We had place cards at

the table, so she might have done it. Was this some kind of a joke? I didn't think so...but I didn't touch my water glass again after that.

When dinner was over, I began wondering how I was going to get home. Walking home alone definitely wasn't an option. I called Jan, but she said she was busy at the aquarium, so I texted Kristen. She said she could pick me up in twenty.

I didn't see Jared's mom much the rest of the night. At dinner, her eyes looked a little red, like she had been crying earlier, but while I was waiting for Kristen, she said, "I'm sorry for being so rude earlier. Next time, I would love to hear more about you, Kate."

"Next time. Thank you for having me over." I knew better than to ask what she had been upset about.

"You're so sweet," she said, hugging me goodbye and walking into the kitchen.

Kristen's car pulled up a couple of minutes later. I tried to find Grandma Mabel to say goodbye, but she was nowhere to be seen. I waved goodbye to the other guests and walked out the door.

"Thanks for picking me up," I said, climbing into the passenger seat.

"No problem, but why isn't Jared driving you home? Did something happen?" she asked.

"I think he got called in for the Coast Guard, but I'm not really sure."

She reversed her car out of the driveway and drove out of the neighborhood.

"That's kind of rude. He just left you there with the family?"

I nodded. She said, "Are you and Jared okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. But I just hope he's safe. He doesn't tell

me much when he has to leave like that, but it's not like I ask a bunch of questions about it."

She nodded, her eyes on the road. I thought back to her kiss with Matt on the beach. I hadn't talked with her about it yet, and I felt anxious.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and asked, "So, is there anyone you like right now?"

"Um, random question, but no, not really," she said. That didn't answer my question.

"You wouldn't happen to like Matt, would you? I feel like you two have gotten close lately."

"Sure, we're close," she said. "I mean, we did all just go to Hawaii for a week together."

"Do you two ever hangout...alone?"

Kristen just laughed nonchalantly. "Not usually. Matt comes by the house about once a week to spend time with my dad, though. They've become close."

"What do they do?"

"He talks business a lot with my dad. My dad's been kind of a mentor to him since he doesn't have any parents in his life. And then usually he'll stay and have dinner with us. He really does have a huge appetite, doesn't he?" Kristen said.

"Yeah, he does. That's cool of your dad to help him," I said.

"It is," she said.

I didn't ask her any more questions as she began talking about some upcoming competitions. Kristen didn't say any more about her and Matt. I guess Kristen wanted to keep that kiss a secret. I didn't blame her, but I wish I knew what was going on between them.

We pulled into the driveway, and I hopped out.

"Thanks, Kris. I appreciate it."

She waved, and I watched her headlights as she backed

out of the driveway and drove down the street.

I felt the first few drops of rain on my head. As I looked up into the sky, the drops became harder, and soon it was pouring. I closed my eyes as I felt the rain meet my skin. I seemed to get lost in that rain as I stood there, letting the rain fall on me. The rain wasn't cold—it was warm and inviting, like the waves.

I saw a flash through closed eyes, and I heard thunder bellow. I looked toward where the coast was. Jared was out there tonight...

I turned around, unlocked the front door, and walked inside. Jan was already home.

"You're soaked," Jan said, watching me come inside. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm okay," I said. "A storm's coming in."

My hair was dripping, and water fell to the floor.

"I'm going to go up and dry off," I told her.

She nodded, but I'm sure I looked strange as I raced up the stairs, completely soaked.

I dried my hair off with a towel, and I changed into my blue pajamas. I paced back and forth as I looked out the window.

Rain was pattering against the window, and with each passing minute, the rain seemed to grow louder and more ferocious. The thunder was rolling in, growling like a predator moving in toward its prey, and lightning zig-zagged through the sky. Feared gnawed at me—I didn't know what I'd do if something happened to him. Part of me wanted to run toward the beach and into the waves to make sure he was okay. But as another lightning bolt cracked through the sky and thunder drowned out the rain, a shiver ran down my spine.

Oh, Jared. Please be safe.

MIRANDA



The next day, I scanned the cafeteria to see if I could spot Jared and Steve. I looked through the sea of students, but I couldn't find them. Jared and I usually walked to our classes together, but I hadn't seen him once today.

I did, however, see Grey eating lunch with some of her friends at a table in the far corner. At least she was all right.

"Are you okay?" I heard behind me.

It was Matt.

"I'm managing," I told him with a small smile, remembering to breathe.

"I never see you at the aquarium anymore. What's going on?" he asked me. His green eyes were filled with concern and loneliness.

I flicked my eyes back to Grey. She was packing up her books.

"Oh, I..." What kind of explanation could I give him?

I'm actually a mermaid, so I've been trying to navigate that. My boyfriend keeps putting himself in serious danger, and I have

to go on dangerous missions, or otherwise, I'll be thrown in mermaid prison...

"I've just been so busy," I said finally.

He raised his eyebrows, unconvinced.

I saw Grey walk out of the cafeteria. "Sorry, I have to go. I'll see you later," I said, and I started walking away.

"Promise me you'll come to the aquarium soon," he called.

I looked back, and I could see in his eyes that he really wanted me to go. And Jan would probably appreciate the help. "I promise!"

"Thursday?"

"Thursday," I said.

He smiled, and I darted out of the room.

I caught up with Grey. Thankfully, she was walking alone, and she smiled when I approached her.

"Hey, Kate. What's going on?"

"Where are Jared and Steve?" I asked her.

She looked around, checking to see if anyone was listening. "They were up really late last night working for the Coast Guard."

"What happened?" I asked. "Are they okay?"

"It was the same as usual—some people needed to be rescued," she shrugged. "Jared's safe, don't worry. Give him some credit, Kate. He's strong, and you know that."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad he's okay."

She turned to me and said, "How are *you* doing?"

I thought back to the saltwater at dinner. "You didn't happen to fill my glass with saltwater yesterday, did you? I drank most of it before I realized what it was. I'm scared someone knows."

Her eyebrow furrowed. "No, it wasn't me. Are you sure you weren't imagining it?"

"No, I know what saltwater tastes like, Grey."

"I'm sure you do," she said, sounding apologetic. I think she could tell that I was stressed. "It's possible someone knows, but I have no idea who would do that. Just be careful, okay? I have to go." She glided down the hallway and disappeared into a classroom.

AFTER SCHOOL, I went straight to the ocean. I needed an escape, and I needed to think.

I took off my sweatshirt and flip-flops, revealing my light lavender swim top. I had been wearing my swimsuit under my clothes each day since last week—the last time I'd been in the ocean—just in case.

I placed them under a rock, hoping no one would take them, and then I hesitated. As I looked at the water, my memories from the last time I'd been in the ocean seemed like a distant dream. It just couldn't be real. But regardless, I dove in.

I smiled as I swam to the ocean floor, extending my arms so that I could feel the sea kelp. There was a lot of it where I was. I looked up from the bottom of the sea floor and marveled at how they stretched to the surface of the water. They were like the redwood trees, stretching up higher than the other plants and marking their territory.

I lay on the sand, digging my tail into it to stay down, and watched as my blonde hair floated around me like the strands of a willow tree. I watched as light reflected off the fish as they swam around and above me, disappearing into the kelp forest. Some shown gray and yellow, many were bluish, and others had stripes on them. I recognized the squiggly spots of the blue rockfish, its scales appearing to change from gray to turquoise as it propelled itself forward.

I knew I should be thinking about everything that was

going on, but when I was in the sea, it was hard to. The beauty and vastness of the ocean made the problems on land melt away. It truly was another world here.

I thought about my days as a child, peering in wonder into the tanks at the Shedd Aquarium. I only had a small glimpse into this world, but down here, I could see it fully. Everywhere I looked, there was a new fish or shell that I hadn't come across before.

I started to swim again, picking up shells along the way. I leaned down to grab a particularly shiny one when I suddenly crashed into a light gray dolphin.

"Hey! Watch where you're going."

"Sorry," I said.

We both stopped and turned around.

"Can you hear me?!" the dolphin asked.

"I-I guess I can."

"Wow! Hey, George, come over here!"

A green sea turtle turned around and made its way toward us. The sea turtle had a large olive-colored shell with four costal scales on it, and as he came closer, I could see a small number of green algae growing on the shell which looked like green fuzz.

"What did I have to come all the way back here for?" the turtle said grumpily, waving his flippers.

I had to be imagining this.

"Hi," I said.

The turtle looked at the dolphin, and the dolphin appeared to be smirking.

"Well, hello. I've never spoken to a mermaid before."

"I've never spoken to a turtle," I said.

"I'm George. This is Henry," he said, pointing at the dolphin with his flipper.

This wasn't real. I couldn't possibly be having a full-on conversation with marine life.

"I'm Kate. I mean, Katrina. This is so weird," I said to them. *"Can you hear all my thoughts? Try and guess what I'm thinking."*

I then thought of a sea urchin, but I didn't communicate it. When I was communicating, I had to propel my thoughts forward.

"I got nothing, kid. Sorry," George said. *"Hey, can you tell your merpeople friends to stay away from the coast today? My wife is hatching her babies, and I don't want any of them to accidentally get knocked."*

My mouth gaped open a bit.

"I-I can try. I don't know very many merpeople yet, just Lila and June."

"You mean you haven't met Miranda yet?"

"I'm not exactly from around here."

"Well, you'd better introduce yourself before the guards find you first. The last mermaid who came here to travel didn't introduce herself fast enough, and Miranda was furious. She locked her in prison for a week. Good thing she hasn't found the mermaid who was singing."

"Singing?"

"A little while ago, there was a mermaid singing. Singing is banned here. It has been for many years. We heard her ourselves."

"That was me."

They looked at each other, and George said, *"You have to be careful. Miranda was really upset."*

"Why did they ban singing?"

"We're not the right ones to answer that."

"Where is she? Miranda?" I asked. I'd hoped I could wait a little before meeting Miranda, but I didn't realize meeting her was this urgent.

"Go straight for two miles, then right at a coral bank, and then straight again."

"Um..."

"Let's just take her ourselves," Henry said.

"We'll take you half the way. I don't want to be anywhere close to Miranda if she's in a bad mood today," said George.

"Agreed," Henry said.

We had almost reached the halfway point when I saw Lila swimming up to us.

"There's Lila. I can take it from here, guys. Thank you," I said to them.

"Bye, Katrinal!"

I watched as they swam away, and Henry did a flip before he kept swimming.

Lila looked at the sea animals and said, "It looks like you had escorts. Come with me."

She looped her arm through mine, and we ducked into a cave and swam through a tunnel.

She then took something out of a bag that appeared to be made of seaweed.

"I made you this," she said quietly. She pulled out a top that was intricately woven with seashells and kelp. It looked similar to hers. "You can change in private."

I was surprised by how comfortable and light it was, considering how many embellishments were on it. She braided my hair and put stones in it as she had before.

"Okay. Let's go."

We had only been swimming for a little bit before I saw it.

My jaw dropped. In front of us was a large, shimmering kingdom. I could see a castle from far away, but before that, there were buildings crafted in what appeared to be stones.

"How can humans not see this?"

“Jellyfish extract, seaweed, and a few other plants do the trick. It has something to do with our eyesight.”

As we went inside, I noticed the homes were really interesting. The first difference was the lack of front doors. Mermaids didn’t have to worry about gravity, so it appeared to me that there were door fixtures on the sides of the homes or even above them. The second difference was the size. Some of them seemed to extend into caves, and they didn’t all go in a neat row. It seemed the buildings blended in with the nature. Seaweed, coral, starfish, and anemones lined many of the homes. And there was a lot of sea kelp and seaweed around here, and we had to swim around it or through it to continue. It was all so beautiful.

As we were moving toward the castle, I noticed some mermaids and mermen out swimming. They wore solemn looks on their faces.

“They look so sad,” I said as I weaved my way through some sea kelp.

Lila pulled me, and we were now floating in the middle of this kelp forest.

“You need to keep your voice down. The merpeople aren’t happy here. Miranda is cruel, and there are so many rules...so many things we can’t do anymore,” she said as her brilliant red hair swirled above her. “So they’re sad. They live in fear, Kate. There are so many mermaids in prison.”

“For doing what?” I asked.

“Not following her rules,” she said. “And she tracks down anyone caught leaving and throws them in jail for it...and the singing...” Lila frowned.

I remembered what George said.

“Why is singing banned?” I asked.

“Miranda can’t sing, so she doesn’t allow anyone else to,”

she said quietly. She looked around to make sure the coast was clear. "Come on. Let's go."

"Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, I could always just stay in the waters near Santa Cruz."

Lila shook her head. "It's not that simple. She'd find you."

She took my hand and swam forward through the kelp until finally, we were out. As we moved closer to the castle, I noticed there were guards all over the kingdom. They wore protective dark gray shell armor with spikes and carried spears.

"Those are Miranda's guards?" I whispered to Lila. They looked at us threateningly as we swam, and my heart started beating a little faster.

"Yes. Miranda likes the extra protection, and they enforce the rules."

"Protection from what...?" I asked Lila, whispering.

"Shh. We can't talk now."

Suddenly, a young mermaid passed by us, and another one zoomed toward her. They were playing tag, and Lila and I laughed at the sight.

But then, the guards moved toward them, and they ducked behind the coral, and we went silent.

"No playing inside the kingdom. Only in your homes or outside of the kingdom," one of the guards said.

I sighed. How many rules were there here? And they all seemed to lead back to one thing: no fun.

Finally, we reached Miranda's castle. Dark green seaweed scaled the sides of the castle, and black sea urchins covered the floor of the ocean.

"It used to be prettier," Lila mumbled as I looked. "For some reason, she likes the seaweed overgrowth. And don't eat the black urchins—they're poisonous to mermaids."

"I didn't even know mermaids could eat sea urchins," I said.

We reached the stone gates, and guards were on either side of the entrance, barricading it with their spears.

"What are you here for?" one of them asked menacingly.

"This is Katrina," Lila said timidly. "She needs to meet Miranda. She would like to do some missions for a bead."

The guards nodded and let us in. We swam through the gates, and I was surprised to see a front door leading us into the castle. When we swam in, a mermaid with gray-colored hair was writing with one of those seaweed quills I'd seen Lila using.

"Right this way," she said after Lila stated our purpose for being there. "Miranda's been expecting you."

I felt nervous. We swam through long halls that were covered in beautiful things: paintings, starfish, gold trim. There were long tables covered in necklaces and jewelry, and I stopped to look at it for a moment.

"Come on," Lila said dragging me away from the table.

"Where do they get all of that jewelry?"

Lila ignored me, and we continued following the mermaid.

Finally, she led us toward a ballroom—or at least, that's what it looked like to me. There were mirrors everywhere, and a gold chandelier etched out in seashell shapes hung from the ceiling.

I caught a peek of myself as we swam by one of the mirrors. My blue-green scales were glimmering in the light that was filtering through the windows of the castle, and my light blonde hair was slightly shining in the long braid.

And then I saw it...it was a crown. And it was beautiful. I wanted to look closer at it, but I knew better than to go near it.

"Crown please," I heard a voice say. A crab popped up and grabbed the crown. It then scuttled toward the mermaid, who grabbed it by using a current to propel it toward her. My mouth parted in surprise...could she talk to animals too? But when I looked at Lila, she didn't look surprised. In fact, her face looked emotionless. I hadn't seen Lila look like that before.

She slipped the crown on her head, and then she came toward us. It was Miranda.

"You must be Katrina," she said.

How did she know my name?

Miranda had amber-brown eyes, and her tail was the color of amethyst. Her strawberry hair was streaked with orange, and her knowing smile highlighted her pronounced cheekbones.

"This is Bryn and Coralina," she said as she gestured to the mermaids behind her. Bryn had deep brown skin, wavy hair, and seemingly permanently rosy cheeks. She was one of the most beautiful mermaids I had ever seen. Her tail was gold. Coralina had blonde hair and ivory skin. She was delicately thin, and her tail was more of a sea kelp green. From far away she appeared to have blue eyes, but when she came a little closer, I saw that one of her eyes was green.

"You're a Northerner," Miranda said in a shocked tone.

"Yes," I said.

"I have never met a northern mermaid. Your people like to keep to themselves. What are you doing here?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I would like to do some missions," I said.

"Interesting," she said, examining me. She touched my arm with her cool fingers. "Yes, you are warm. But not as warm as I would've thought. I've always been interested in

how you can withstand freezing temperatures. It amazes me. Have you ever swum in the Arctic before?"

"No."

"Pity," Miranda said. "But I will have to take advantage of this. You can do some missions. I need you to go back up north a little, to the slightly unpleasant waters. And I need you to find an abalone pearl. It goes well with my décor," she said. "Hmm...and a diamond this big," she said, forming a circle with her hand.

I looked over at Lila, my mouth gaping. She had to be kidding. But Lila's face was as still and emotionless as before.

"Yes, I think those will do," Miranda said, smirking. "Where will you be staying?"

"With me," Lila said.

"Ah, Lila. I see you've come out from under your rock. How's the water feel out here?" she asked coolly.

"The water is fine," Lila said.

The queen turned away from Lila and said, "It was a pleasure meeting you, Katrina. You really are darling," she said, brushing my cheek with the back of her hand. But then she grabbed my arm, squeezing it tightly, and hissed, "I know it was you who was singing. Don't try that in my kingdom again."

She let go of my arm, and I tried not to gasp at the pain. She turned to Lila and gave her a little head pat. Lila again looked emotionless, and soon, Miranda was swimming away.

Coralie and Bryn lingered a moment, and I remembered what George said to me. "Turtles are hatching, by the way, you might want to steer clear."

They heard what I said, but said nothing, and I watched as they swam away.

I looked down at my arm and saw a few red-colored streaks.

"Are you okay?" Lila asked, looking at it.

"Yeah, it just stings a little," I said, rubbing my arm.

"It'll feel better in a little while. Swimming will help. Let's go," Lila said.

We darted out through a window and swam away from the castle.

When we made it back to Lila's, we swam inside, and she pushed the rock over the entryway. She slid down to the sand.

"I'm glad that's over," she said.

"How are we supposed to find a diamond the size of a golf ball?" I asked.

"I know," Lila said. "I was expecting her to ask you to find some kind of jellyfish, not a rare pearl and an enormous diamond."

"How long do I have to complete the missions?"

"A couple of months, at least. Maybe more," she said.

"You said that no one is allowed to leave the kingdom. What about me?"

"Travelers have permission to leave."

"That hardly seems fair," I said.

"It's not fair," Lila said.

"But then...why are you allowed to live out here? Outside of the kingdom?"

"I'm not really outside of the kingdom," she said. "Miranda controls all of this up through Santa Cruz. She has guards that line either end of her borders to make sure none of us swim off."

"Couldn't you just escape on land? Why doesn't anyone stay?"

"Mermaids don't usually go on land...many are afraid..."

"Hey, guys," I heard suddenly. June floated in through a window.

"We just got back from meeting Miranda," Lila said.

June saw me holding my arm, and she came over to me. "Are you okay?" she asked, gently lifting my fingers away. My arm was still red from where Miranda squeezed it.

"I'm fine," I said, averting my eyes.

I looked up. The sun was no longer peeking through the ceiling, and the water was starting to go dark.

"It's going to be sunset soon," I said. I swam out of the window of the cave and up toward the surface.

I swam to the surface and scooted myself onto a large rock, but it was too late. My legs wouldn't turn back. What was I going to do? What would Jan think when I didn't come home tonight? I hoped she wouldn't get the police involved.

I sighed, slipped back into the water, and swam back down Lila's cave. June and Lila were waiting for me when I got back.

"You can spend the night here," Lila said. She then put a rock in front of the window. "We keep it boarded up at night. You know, in case of sharks."

As the evening turned into nightfall, I expected it all to turn dark. But that wasn't the case. A glowing seaweed-like substance covered the walls in an array of dots, and they became more pronounced as it grew darker in the cave.

"Bioluminescence," Lila said, noticing my stare at the wall. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

The blue hue of the dots shone, and I swam as I looked at the wall. They were really beautiful. They seemed to take on different shapes as I looked at them. Some were in the shapes of flowers, and some were in the shape of starfish.

"Did you do this?" I asked Lila.

She smiled. "No, June did. June is marvelous at drawing."

June swam over to look at the wall, and she smiled.

"It's not that hard, really," June said. "And I got the design

of the flowers from what I've seen at the beach. Flowers on land are so beautiful."

"Yes," I said.

"Are you ready for dinner?" Lila said as she motioned toward the kitchen.

I sunk onto a stone to eat my dinner, but my thoughts were onshore. I wished there was a way I could contact Jan. If she contacted the police, I had a feeling that Kristen would find out from her uncle that I was missing. And what if it got to Mr. O'Connor...and then to Jared?

I watched a small fish swim by as I put my chin on my hand.

"Are you okay?" Lila asked, her red hair floating above her. "Is it Miranda? I hope it's not the mussels," she said.

"No, it's not that..." I said, trailing off. "Lila, I have a boyfriend on land. How am I going to keep this a secret? My aunt doesn't even know I'm here. She could be out looking for me right now. She might have even called the police. I just...I don't want this."

Lila looked down. "You know, being a mermaid isn't all bad."

I kicked a rock on the ground with my fin and watched as it tumbled into the wall.

"Try being a mermaid and having a boyfriend on land at the same time," I muttered.

Lila sighed. "Do you really think it's a good idea to have this boyfriend? I mean, if he found out who you were and went looking for us...it could be bad," she said.

"Yeah..."

There was silence for a few moments.

Finally, Lila said, "If you do love this boy, you will eventually have to tell him."

She got up off her rock and swam over to the bookshelf.

She grabbed a blue book that was wrapped in some kind of waterproof substance. The books were also dotted in the bioluminescence, so that they could be seen easier in the darkness.

"Here," she said, holding it out to me. "I want you to have this. It might give some answers about being a mermaid. It's basically a mermaid survival guide."

"Thanks," I said, taking it from her. There was no title to the book.

Lila swam over to a small chest on the floor and pulled something out of it.

"June and I are going to go swimming," Lila said as she held up a flashlight.

"Where did you get that?" I asked as she flicked it on and off.

"I found it," she said.

"We're going treasure hunting," June said, holding up a flashlight of her own. "Want to come?"

"I don't have a flashlight, and it's kind of dark," I said.

"Mermaids have good night vision. It won't be as dark as you think it will be. Come on," she said.

Lila moved the entryway rock, and I suddenly felt nervous. What if there were sharks?

"I'll be fine here. I have some reading to do," I said, motioning to the book.

"Bye," they said as they swam off into the night. I flicked my fins and drifted into the sand. I was all alone in this cave.

I looked down at my book, and when I opened it, the pages glowed. Wait.... This penmanship was familiar.... It was my mother's handwriting!

I flipped it back to the front, and I didn't see my mother's name. But I knew it was her.

As I turned the pages, I saw that the book was written in a series of notes and thoughts like a journal.

Entry #12: During sunset, a mermaid's legs won't turn into fins for a short time if she goes into the water.

That was interesting. I continued reading.

Entry #18: We can communicate with some of the sea animals by singing to them...it can help make them feel less threatened or help us not to be threatened by them.

Entry #4: Sea turtles know more than they let on. I once followed one to some caves that I'd never even seen before...it took forever...

Entry #17: Just like how we can camouflage...we can create bioluminescence too. Don't use it at night...it attracts sharks...

Camouflage...bioluminescence? We can...camouflage? But...how?

I flipped through the entries looking for the word camouflage again.

Entry #27: Camouflaging is easier than mermaids make it out to be...I usually just close my eyes and visualize my appearance.

I couldn't help but want to try it. I closed my eyes, and I tried to picture luminescence coming from my tail. I wondered if that would work. I opened my eyes, and my tail looked like stars. I gasped at how beautiful it was. It was patterned in so many ways, kind of like the wall. As I flicked my tail out in front of me, I saw the luminescence shimmer slightly. And my fingernails and hair had taken on a strange blue color.

I wondered what it would be like to swim out at night like this. I was like a flashlight, and I could see very easily. I closed the book and placed it on the ground, and then I swam over to the large rock.

As I floated near the entrance, I saw what looked like a

shark's fin. That's when I remembered what my mom said about the sharks.

I darted back into the cave and closed the rock quickly, my heart racing.

Maybe staying in was a better option. I let the bioluminescence fade, and then I lay on the floor to keep reading, but my eyelids were getting heavy and exhaustion had consumed me. I sank into the sand underneath me and couldn't help but close my eyes. The sand felt like a soft pillow.

I had been asleep for a little while when I heard the rock roll open. I sat up and saw Lila and June come in, looking worried.

"Hey," I said, stifling a yawn and stretching. "What happened?"

"We had a bit of a run-in with a shark," Lila said. "Thankfully, we were okay, but there was one outside this cave."

"It was my fault," I said. "I changed my tail to bioluminescence and went outside for a moment."

Lila laughed. "Did you read that in the journal?"

"Yes, and I'm so sorry for endangering you like that."

"It was written as a joke. The mermaid who wrote that had a big sense of humor. It wasn't your fault," she assured me.

"Oh..." I said.

"But you should know that I'd never even thought to try that until she helped me herself."

"Who?" I asked. Did Lila know my mother? Clearly, but I wasn't sure if I should tell Lila that just yet.

Lila didn't answer that, and June interjected. "Look what we found!"

She showed me a metal blue water bottle. The initials on it read MAB, and my jaw dropped.

"Hey, can I see that?" I asked. She handed it to me. The water bottle was the same one that I found in the woods. "Where did you find this?"

"Near a beach in Santa Cruz," June said. "Why?"

"Something happened to me on a camping trip a couple of months ago. I woke up in the middle of the woods, and there was a huge bear. This exact same water bottle was nearby. I found it."

Lila looked at me with a puzzled look on her face. "That's strange."

"I think someone's after me," I said. "A man in all black chased me down the street a few weeks after that trip, and I'm starting to wonder if it's related. And if so, it might have something to do with the person with these initials. Maybe if we leave it at the beach, they'll come back for it?"

June and Lila looked at each other and shrugged. "It's worth a shot," June said.

Lila looked at me, concerned. "You really think there's someone after you?"

"Yes," I said.

"You need to be extremely careful, then," she said. "Does anyone else know you're a mermaid?"

"I was at a get-together and someone filled my glass with saltwater. I think someone might know."

"Do any of them have the initials MAB?" she asked.

I didn't know the names of all of the people at the dinner party. Grandma Mabel seemed to know something, but she seemed like she was on my side.

"I'm not sure, exactly," I said.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the beach, and we'll see if anyone comes back for it," Lila said.

We all went to Lila's room and chose our sleeping spots. Lila settled in the bed, and June and I slid onto the sand.

“What’s it like up there?” June asked me. “On land?”

“Oh...” I said. “It’s different. It’s faster. Mermaids move at a slower pace down here,” I said. “Humans have work and commitments and a schedule to follow. Everyone’s always in rush.”

“What are they like?” she asked.

“Why don’t you meet them yourself? You can come visit me onshore,” I said.

June smiled and closed her eyes. “I would love that,” she said as she sunk into the sand a little.

Lila yawned and rolled away from us. “We’ll see about that. Good night,” she said.

“Good night,” I said.

WATER BOTTLE



I woke up, and I flicked my tail a few times to get the sand off it. Lila and June were still sleeping. I grabbed the book and the water bottle, and I slipped out of the cave to head back to Santa Cruz. I didn't want to waste any time.

When I finally reached the beach, I put the water bottle on the shore and waited. An hour passed, then two hours. Then three.

I sighed. This was tedious. As I waited under the pier, I saw a little girl. She was waving at me. I couldn't help but wave back at her and smile.

"Mommy, look! There's a girl under the pier," she said.

She was tugging on her mother's leg, and then the mom bent down to look.

I dipped under the water and saw a figure approaching. It was Lila.

"Hey," I said. "I'm sorry I left this morning, but I wanted to get here early."

"I understand."

We headed back up to see if anyone had taken the water bottle. Just as I went to the surface, a huge wave hit me, and Lila and I both went tumbling. The left side of my body slammed into one of the posts.

"Are you all right?" Lila said.

"Yes, I'm fine," I gasped, clutching at my side.

I slowly swam back up to look for the water bottle, but it was gone. Someone had taken it. I scanned the crowded beach to see if anyone was holding it, but there were too many people clustered together to tell. I leaned my head back against one of the posts, still clutching my throbbing side.

Lila popped out of the water.

"The water bottle's gone," I said.

"Did you see who took it?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault."

"I have to go. Thanks for coming. Here's your book back," I said, giving it to her.

She shook her head. "No, please keep it. Read it. I think you'll find it more useful than I will."

"Thank you," I said.

"The next time I see you, be ready to start the missions."

I gulped. "Bye," I said.

"Bye," she said, sinking back under the water.

I swam toward the rocks where I'd put my flip flops. I put down the book and hoisted myself onto the rocks.

The wind pierced against my scales before I let my legs come back, and when I stood up, I walked along the rocks until I found the my sweatshirt and flip flops.

I ran toward my Jeep, which was still parked where I'd left it. I felt for my keys in my pocket. I opened the door and slid in, putting the book down and picking up my phone.

I had several missed calls from Jan and Jared, and a few

texts from Kristen. But after looking through the texts, nobody mentioned the police. That was a relief.

I drove home, feeling worried about Jan. When I pulled up, Jan came running out of the front door and gave me a huge hug.

“What happened?!” she asked. “I had no idea where you were! No text? No call?”

“Jan, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I led her into the living room, and we sat on the sofa. I looked at the picture of a sea turtle sketch in the corner, and I took a deep breath. I wasn’t sure if I should tell her this, but she needed to know. And truthfully, I suspected she already did.

“I was in the ocean last night.”

Jan didn’t say anything, and so I took another deep breath and said, “It happened in Hawaii the first time. Jan, I’m a mermaid,” I said.

“I’ve known all your life.”

“The condition, right?” I asked.

“Look,” Jan said. “I knew there would be a day where you’d have to go in the ocean, and I knew moving her would expedite that. But, Katrina, you have to be careful in there. It’s dangerous. What did you do about sleeping?” she asked.

“I stayed with a friend,” I said. “You know this means I am going to have to be going back and forth to the ocean?”

“I know,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared upstairs for a moment. When she came back down, she had a jewelry box in her hands. She sat back down next to me and smoothed her hands over it.

“This belonged to your mother. I think you should have it now,” she said, handing it to me.

“I thought the only thing we grabbed when we left was the picture in my room.”

Jan frowned. "Your mother gave me this before the storm," she said. "Open it up."

"But, Jan...how did you know about my mother?" I asked before I looked down at the box.

"She told me. She worked at the aquarium," she said. "You've seen the picture, right?"

I nodded. "But what happened? Why did she leave the ocean?"

Jan sighed. "I'm not sure why she left the ocean, but there's something else you should know. My brother wasn't your dad. He married your mother after she became pregnant with you. Your real father passed away.... He was a merman," she said.

I leaned forward and pressed my fingers to my head. I didn't know how to process this. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"You're not my real aunt, then?" I sobbed. The tears were spilling out.

"Of course, I'm your aunt. Katrina, I love you so much," she said.

"All of this is so much," I sighed, trying to wipe my eyes.

Jan nodded and said, "I know it is. You've been through so much."

"Thanks, Jan," I said, cradling the jewelry box in my arm, making my way over to the stairs.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night, Jan...thank you for telling me this."

I walked up the stairs and closed my bedroom door, sinking to the floor. I put my knees to my chest and rested my head on my arms as I cried. I opened my eyes a little, and I took a peek at the jewelry box.

I wiped a tear, and I reached down to look at it. The box was adorned in seashells, and when I opened it, I saw many beautiful pieces of jewelry: aquamarine stones, dried starfish

clips, earrings, seaweed necklaces, and a beautiful pendant with a pearl on it. As I was looking at the jewelry, I realized I'd missed something. I pulled out a beaded necklace. On the necklace, I counted five different beads. My mother had been a traveler. There were drawings on the beads, likely signifying the adventure. I saw a jellyfish on one of them and what appeared to be seaweed on another. I wasn't sure what the other beads signified.

I put the jewelry box on my desk, and suddenly a gust of wind blew in, causing the blue curtains to flow.

I went to close the window when I saw the picture I'd hung up next to the curtains. It was the picture I'd taken with Jared at the Boardwalk.

It had only been weeks since we'd gone to the Boardwalk, but it felt like such a long time ago. So much of my life had changed since then, and part of me wanted to reach out to the girl in the picture. Part of me wanted to be her again.

I hesitantly picked up my phone and called Jared, knowing that he was likely worried as I looked at the picture. Jared looked so beautiful in the photo; his bronze hair was shining slightly from the sun.

"Hey," I said, bringing my phone up to my ear.

"Where have you been? Why weren't you picking up your calls?"

"I was busy," I said as I sat on my bed.

"Okay," he said. "Do you want to meet me at the beach tomorrow night? Not the one by the abandoned lighthouse. The beach off of Cliff? We can meet by the wharf," he said.

The beach. Why did he want to go to the beach?

"I thought you didn't want me near beaches," I said.

He hesitated and said, "Just meet me there, okay?" He sounded off.

"Sure."

We said good night and hung up.

* * *

"WE'RE all supposed to be voting on themes for the homecoming dance. Do you want to go vote with me?" Kristen asked at lunch the next day.

"Sure."

We walked toward the voting table. A small girl with large glasses was sitting behind the table and smiled up at us. "This year our prom theme choices are Enchanted Forest, Paris, and Under the Sea."

I quickly scribbled down Paris and put it in the bucket.

"What did you vote for?" Kristen asked as we walked away.

"Paris."

"Me too!"

Just then, we saw Helen crying as she walked down the hallway. Kristen and I turned toward her to see what happened.

"What's wrong?" Kristen asked.

Helen leaned her head on Kristen's shoulder and glared at me as she let Kristen pat her back. "Go away," Helen told me.

My cheeks flushed a little. "Okay, feel better," I said, and I walked down the hallway away from them.

A tear slid down my face, and I ducked into the bathroom so that I could get away from everyone. I went into a stall and shut the door behind me. But I heard yet another girl crying in the stall next to mine. I looked down and recognized the dark gray boots that she liked to wear. It was Grey.

"Grey, it's Kate. Are you okay?"

"Don't go to the beach today, okay?" she said, sniffing slightly.

"How did you know about that?" I asked.

"Just don't go."

"Why not?"

"I can't say."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"Can you get me a tissue?"

"Yeah, no problem." I passed her a tissue under the stall.

"Grey, do you want to talk?" I asked. Why didn't she want me to go to the beach? I thought Jared seemed off last night, and now Grey was warning me. What was going on?

"I'd like to be alone. But thank you," she said.

"Okay, see you later," I said. I walked out of the bathroom quickly.

I wanted to see a friend, but it seemed like everyone was either busy or did not want to see me at the moment. So I decided I'd search for Matt. I looked for him at our lunch table, but I didn't see him there. I knew there was only one other place he could be, so I went upstairs to the student lounge. He wasn't there either.

I gave up looking for him, so I decided I'd just go and sit in the library by myself. When I arrived, I went to one of the computers.

I opened up a browser and was a little shocked at what was on there. It was an article about mermaids.

What was going on? I needed to get out of here.

I swung my bag over my shoulders, and I rushed out of the library. I passed Steve along the way. He didn't say anything, and my heart started to race.

As I went down the stairs, I turned back around. Class was starting in a few minutes, and I had forgotten to print my assignment. As I went up the stairs, I suddenly ran into Steve. He was standing at the entrance of the library with his arms folded.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I have to print something," I said in a shaky voice.

When I tried to go around him to get in through the doors, he stepped in front of me.

"Let me through. I have an assignment, Steve."

"I'd bring tissues if I were you for your date," Steve said, finally letting me through.

What?

I turned around to look at him, but he had already gone down the stairs. I clutched a chair as I let all of this process.

Was Jared breaking up with me? Regardless, there was something I needed to tell him.

SECRETS



I pulled into a parking spot near the beach and saw Jared sitting in the sand. I took a deep breath. It felt like leaving Brandon all over again. My legs were heavy, and I felt all shaky.

I managed to get out of the car, and as I did, I realized something. The pull toward the ocean...it was gone. *That was new.*

I grabbed my bag and began walking toward him. I was there in a matter of seconds, somehow.

"Hi," I said as I sat down next to him.

"Hi," Jared said as he looked out at the ocean. He seemed removed and not like himself.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. My heart dropped into my stomach as I looked at his sullen expression.

"Not really."

"What is it?" I asked him, softly touching his arm.

"It's the job. It's becoming too hard."

"With the Coast Guard?"

"Yeah. Kate, I just want to run away. From all of this."

He then looked over his shoulder, and, to my surprise, I saw Steve watching us from a distance.

"Maybe you *should* run away," I said.

He sighed again. "I can't run from this. People here need me. I can't just get up and go."

As I looked out at the water, I saw that the sun was setting on it.

"What about you, Kate? Is there anything you're running away from?"

"Jared, I want to tell you something," I said as I took his hand and walked toward the water.

I took his hand and began moving toward the water. I sighed a moment as the wind tousled my hair, and the water brushed against my feet.

We both waded through the water.

"Well, the one thing I don't want to run away from is you," I said.

"What did you want to tell me?" he said.

"Jared, I love you."

Suddenly, his lips were on mine, and he kissed me long and passionately. I didn't want the kiss to end, and as he kissed me, he wrapped his arms around me, the sounds of the ocean fading away.

When we broke from the kiss, Jared took my hand and pulled me out of the water.

"I haven't felt right in years, but you've changed that for me. Kate, you're the last thing stopping me from leaving all of this behind—this place, this job." He smiled and then paused. "Kate, I love you too," he said, looking at me with those piercing blue eyes.

Every time I looked into his eyes, it was like reading a new chapter of his story—they were scattered, skipping from one

chapter to the next and back again. But today, I saw something I hadn't seen in his eyes before. It was like a new chapter was being written in front of me. His eyes told the story of love.

But as I looked into his eyes, I realized that it was his heart that I loved the most. There was something true in it, and it was strong. Jared's heart was the kind that beats past a lifetime.

* * *

I WAS WALKING NEXT to the tanks at the aquarium, my hand sliding along the glass. I watched the fish, the same as the dream before. I was again looking at the turtle, but this time I could hear its thoughts.

"Be careful."

The turtle pointed to the right just like last time.

This time, the glass came down, but instead of me being able to run through the water, I watched as my feet disappeared, and a tail formed. I tried to swim, but the gushing of the water made it difficult. I struggled through the water, and soon, I noticed a shark like last time. It opened its mouth, and I closed my eyes the same as before.

When I opened them, I saw that the water around me was calm. I swam forward a little, and I hit glass. *What?*

Then I saw them. There were several people crowded around me, taking pictures, pointing, and laughing at me. I realized I was in a tank.

I tried to swim backward, looking for something to hide in, but cameras were flashing one after another.

As I looked around, I saw familiar faces in the crowd of people. Helen was in a corner laughing at me, and I could feel my face turning hot. And then I saw Jared. He was

staring at me, but his face was blank. He looked apathetic—bored. I swam toward the tank.

“Jared, help!” I screamed, pounding at the glass.

I could hear laughter, and Jared was walking away.

I closed my eyes, and I sunk to the bottom of the tank. But then I felt something on my elbow: glass. I opened my eyes, and I gasped when I saw that the walls of the tank were closing in on me. I extended my arms, trying to keep the walls from crushing me. I closed my eyes, preparing for the worst.

I woke up gasping and gripping the covers. It was still dark outside, and I turned on my lamp and sighed. Today was Thursday. I’d promised Matt I’d go to the aquarium with him today.

WHEN SCHOOL LET OUT, I drove to the aquarium. Matt was waiting for me at the entrance, and he smiled when I approached.

“Hey, blondie,” he said.

“Hi.”

“You don’t look well. Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m all right,” I said.

“That’s been your go-to response lately. How are you really?”

That was the thing about Matt. He really cared.

“Um,” I said, looking down. I didn’t really want to say anything.

He didn’t press me about it. “I know what will cheer you up. For one, the great white shark is gone. It’s been gone for a while. And then there’s one other thing. Come with me.”

We went upstairs to the otter tank. Matt pointed to the newest one: a baby. He was a small, cute ball of fur.

"We found him the other day on the beach. He was all alone, so we took him in."

It was swimming with its foster mom and seemed to be having fun.

"Isn't that great?" he said.

"He's adorable!" I said, smiling.

He grinned. "See what you miss out on when you don't come to the aquarium?" he said. I shrugged. He smiled and said, "Come on. We have work to do."

First, we helped prepare food for the animals. Then we fed them, tossing the pellets and pieces of chopped fish into the tanks. After that, we washed the floor, and Matt laughed while he tried to spray me with the hose.

I felt this intense joy when I was around Matt. I could be myself, and things were easier with him.

We took a break from working to do homework. We sat on some benches and looked at the sardines as they swam together rhythmically.

"No, that's not how you do it," Matt said as I was doing a calculus problem.

He showed me a much easier method and got the solution seconds later. I looked at him and said, "You're really smart, you know?"

"Nah."

"That's probably why your head is so big," I said, trying to hold back a laugh.

I then caught his eye, and we both laughed so hard that a woman nearby shushed us.

Matt pretended to zip his lips, and I tried to suppress another giggle.

The minutes turned to hours, and people were shuffling out of the aquarium.

Jan came toward us from the sea of people. "Glad to see

you two are still here," she said. "Could you two lock up before you leave? And then I need you to sweep the floors."

"But, Jan, that could take a long time," I said.

"I know, but you don't have to do it too thoroughly. Just so it's clean for the morning."

"Sounds good," Matt said.

We began sweeping, and soon it was dark outside; we were the only two left in the building.

"How's the map coming?" he asked.

"Oh, that," I said as I swept. "I got the locket to open."

"How did you figure it out?"

"It only opens underwater," I said.

"No way. Can I see?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, unclasping the necklace. We went into a nearby office and filled up a water bucket.

I dipped the necklace in the water, and I opened it and showed him the picture.

"It's your parents," he said, looking at it. "Oh, look at you!" he said when he saw the baby picture of me, which made him smile.

"It's also a compass," I told him, and I showed him the other half.

"It doesn't point north," he said, studying it.

"I'm not really sure what it points to," I said.

"So, what about the map?"

"I need a break from the map, I think." I had so much going on, the map was going to need to wait for a little while, including talking to Keys.

"Okay. You can always talk to me if you need it," he said, ruffling his fingers through his brown hair.

"Sure, thanks," I said with a smile, putting the necklace back on.

We walked back out to continue sweeping the floor. A

few minutes later, Matt said, "Hey, I'm going to go to the office real quick. I'll be right back. Will you be okay in here?"

"Yeah, sure."

I watched him disappear into the office. I had started sweeping again when I heard something behind me.

I turned around and saw a man in a hoodie walking toward me.

"It's closed," I said as I started to back away.

The person kept walking closer, not saying anything. I turned around and picked up my pace, trying to get away as quickly as I could. I ran through the aquarium, but he was getting closer. I stood in the shadows next to a jellyfish tank. It was dark in this room, and I tried to go through it quickly so that he wouldn't be able to see me. If I could just get to the stairs, I could climb them and run to an office.

I darted out of the room, and I went to go upstairs when I saw a hand reach out and try to grab me.

I screamed and sprinted up the stairs. I looked behind me for a moment and saw him running to catch up to me. I went down a hallway and disappeared into the first room I came to and locked the door. I went through another door in the room and pulled it shut behind me, frantically locking it as I heard him burst through the first door.

I wanted to scream, but I was too terrified.

I looked around, panicked. The room I was in, I realized, extended into one of the tanks, and the cover was in the middle of the floor.

I wasn't sure how much longer it would be until he broke through the next door, and I was desperate.

I jumped into the water and felt my legs meld together. I went toward the sea kelp and camouflaged my tail and body so that it matched the sea kelp. As I looked at my hands, I

realized I was almost invisible. I held my breath as I tried to stay still.

A few moments passed, but then I saw him. He had gone back down the stairs and was staring into the tank.

It was Steve.

Suddenly, Matt came running out and saw him.

"What are you doing here? Where's Kate? I heard her scream."

Steve swung his fist at Matt, but Matt caught it. Steve was struggling in his grip.

Matt faked a punch at Steve.

"Get out of here," Matt said to Steve.

Steve looked into the tank one more time and ran out.

A few moments later, Matt said, "You can come out now." I moved away from the sea kelp. I changed back but kept my tail looking like the sea kelp.

"Cool," Matt said, looking at it.

I swam over toward where he was sitting at the tank. He put his hand on the glass, and I put my hand on the other side of the glass.

Matt smiled at me, and I smiled back at him. As he looked into my eyes, I could see then that he accepted me for who I was. He accepted the whole me.

"How can we get you out of here?" he asked.

"Can you hear me?" I asked. He nodded. "I can't come out until sunrise."

"Really?" he said as he raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah."

"Well, in that case, you get some sleep, and I'll make sure no one else comes in here."

"Thank you, Matt," I said.

"See you later, Katrina," he said, and he walked away from the tank.

I went toward the sand at the bottom of the tank and watched the other fish swimming above me. I could feel my eyes starting to feel heavy. Soon, I was asleep.

I WOKE up to a light tapping on the glass.

Matt was standing there with bags under his eyes. "It's sunrise," he said.

I swam to the top of the tank and opened the cover. I scooted myself out and my legs came back, but I was soaking wet. I toweled myself off and went downstairs.

Matt was waiting for me near the entrance.

"Did you get any sleep?" I asked.

"No, but you're safe. That's what matters."

"Thank you so much," I said. "You'd better get home and get some rest."

He laughed and said, "I'm fine. I'm driving you to school and then I'm going to make sure Steve doesn't bother you again."

"No, I'll be okay. He won't bother me at school."

"Are you going to tell your boyfriend?" he asked. I noticed he was careful not to say Jared's name.

"I don't know. I'm not sure how I'd be able to give him the whole story without telling him that I'm a mermaid."

"You'll have to tell him at some point." Matt's mood had suddenly turned sour.

"I'm going to shower off real quick," I said. "Then let's go to school?"

He nodded. When I had showered, I met up with him. "Let's go. But after you drop me off at school, please go home and sleep," I said. "And, Matt, you're a really good friend. Thank you for what you did."

"Anything for you," he said. "Let's get out of here."

As we were walking out, we ran into Jan.

"Why didn't you come home last night?" Jan asked. "Matt, you look tired. What's going on?"

Matt and I looked at each other and shrugged.

"He knows now," I told her.

"Oh," Jan said as she looked at Matt. "Well, then, we'll talk after school, Katrina."

"Okay," I said. Matt yawned as he walked me to his car. "Want me to drive?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, handing me the keys.

I got into the car and said, "I thought your car was busted up."

"I fixed it."

"You fixed it? By yourself?"

"Yeah, I like working with cars. I just had to save up some money for the parts."

"Nice. It looks really good."

"Thanks, Kate," he said, and he fell asleep as I began driving.

I DROVE TO SCHOOL, and forty minutes later, I nudged Matt's shoulder to wake him up.

"We're here."

Matt slowly opened his eyes. "That was fast."

From far off, I could see Jared getting out of his car further down the parking lot. I wondered if he could see me.

"Bye, Matt," I said, putting the keys on the passenger seat.

"I'm not leaving," Matt said, grabbing his backpack from the back seat.

Jared was waiting for me by his car as we started walking toward the building.

"See you later, Kate," Matt said. Jared glared at him as he passed by and gave me a confused look.

I didn't have time for this today. Jared was clearly in a mood, and I had a lot on my mind.

"Hey, slow down," Jared said, jogging to catch up to me.

I slowed down a little, not meeting his eyes. "Why was Matt Hughes driving you to school?" he asked.

"He gave me a ride from the aquarium," I said.

"You were there this morning?"

"Yes."

The air between us was tense. His eyebrows knitted together, and then he straightened up. "I have a surprise for you tomorrow. Meet me at my house after school and dress up."

He walked away to his first class.

Tomorrow was December 15th—my eighteenth birthday.

I tried to pay more attention in my classes—I was determined to get my grades up before the end of the semester. But when lunch rolled around, I was afraid to step into the cafeteria.

I passed through a hallway and saw Matt and Steve talking.

"If you ever try something like that again..." I heard Matt say.

I saw Steve walk the other way as I approached them. I went up to say hi to Matt, but he turned around and disappeared down the hall.

It was difficult to focus in my classes after that. Why was Steve after me? How did it all fit together: the camping trip with the bear, the beach, chasing me down the street, and now the aquarium? I thought about the water bottle again. Steve's initials obviously weren't MAB, but could the water bottle still belong to him? Was Steve behind all of the events?

And what about the saltwater at the dinner party? That couldn't have been him; he had left already.

I sighed. I didn't know how to make sense of it, and my head was starting to hurt. One thing I knew for sure was that Steve was after me, and I needed to know why.

EIGHTEEN



Today was my eighteenth birthday. Eighteen represented so many changes.

Today, I was officially an adult. I didn't feel like an adult—far from it, actually. There was still so much about myself and the world that I didn't know. However, I also knew that I wasn't the little girl who used to play at the Shedd Aquarium anymore.

I put on a little eyeshadow and mascara, and I pulled a jacket on over my dress as I got ready for my birthday date with Jared. I sipped on some saltwater as well—I'd been avoiding the ocean. I knew that the next time I went in, I was going to have to face those missions, but for now and for today, I was going to enjoy myself.

I grabbed my purse and went down the stairs.

"Happy birthday!" Jan said. She had a present wrapped in blue and green ribbon waiting for me.

"It's an underwater flashlight," Jan said as I tore off the paper. "I thought it could be helpful for you."

"Thanks. This was a good idea," I said, hugging her.

"Do you have any plans for today?" Jan asked as she served me a late afternoon birthday lunch.

"Jared has a surprise for me. But I'm not sure what he's planning."

"Sounds like fun," she said as she pulled out a large book. She brought it over and put it on the table. "I made something for you as well."

"Jan, you didn't have to do this."

"Well, I wanted to do something special for you. Open it," she said, leaning on the edge of the table.

I opened the book, and I realized that it was an album. I flipped open the first few pages and smiled as I saw some pictures of my parents that I hadn't seen before. As I kept going, I frowned when I saw pictures with Brandon. My heart sank a little as I looked at those pictures, the two of us making goofy faces for the camera or smiling widely in front of beluga whales.

I kept flipping through the photo albums and saw my volleyball team from when I was younger, pictures from when we moved here, and even some from Hawaii.

"I got some of the pictures from Mr. Johnson. Kristen's been helping me with it," she said.

And then there were the most recent pictures of me. I'm not sure if anyone else could tell, but my hair *was* a little shinier than the other pictures since I had become a mermaid.

The last photo was of Jared and me. I remembered when Kristen took that photo after the lacrosse championship. The two of us looked so happy.

"Thank you so much," I said as I pulled her in for another hug.

"I know you don't want to talk about Brandon, but I want to say something. Even though he's not in your life anymore,

I want you to still be thankful for the time you had with him. You two were so close,” she said.

I flipped back to the pictures of us, and I realized she was right.

“I have to head over to Jared’s. Thanks again, Jan,” I said.

She smiled, and I went upstairs to put the album away. As I put the album on one of my shelves, I noticed my mom’s jewelry box on my desk. I went over and opened it, pulled the pearl necklace out, and I slipped it on.

I arrived at Jared’s later, and I saw that he was dressed up. He had on a blazer over his jeans and his hair was flipped slightly to the side.

“Happy birthday, Katrina,” he said as I approached.

“Thank you. So, where are we going?”

“It’s not too far from here. Let’s go.” He took my hand, and we began walking the trails behind the house. We were getting ready to go into the forest when he said, “Close your eyes.”

I did, and he slowly guided me into the forest. I could hear the crunching of our feet on some of the leaves as we walked.

“Jared,” I said, laughing. “I feel like I’m going to run into a tree branch or something.”

He chuckled. “Just trust me. Come on—we’re almost there.”

We walked a few more steps like this, and then he said, “Okay, open your eyes.”

I gasped. Jared had set up a whole area for us. Strands of lights were stretched across tree branches, and there were lanterns and cozy blankets on the ground, showing off a picnic he’d made. A canoe sat in a river on the right, and there was a gift wrapped in white paper on one of the seats.

I looked at him and smiled. “Jared, it’s beautiful.”

“Happy birthday,” Jared said. “Kristen helped a bit.” He smiled and said, “Do you want to eat first? Or open your present?”

I walked around the area he had set up, and I looked at the lights in the trees. They twinkled a bright yellow light, showing off some of the green of the leaves next to them.

“Jared, this really is beautiful,” I said again as I looked around.

He smiled. “So, what is it?”

“Oh...maybe the present?”

“Sure,” he said, laughing.

We went and sat in the canoe, and he handed me the gift. I looked up at him and smiled, and then I opened the white wrapping paper.

Inside, there was a small box with hand-painted flowers on it. I opened up the box, and “Amazing Grace” played softly.

“It’s a music box. Jared, thank you.”

“Can I take you for a boat ride?” Jared asked.

“Sure, I’d like that.”

“Why don’t we bring the food with?” he said. “I don’t want it to get cold.”

We picked up the plates, grabbed the picnic basket, and headed back to the boat.

We chatted a little, but it was mostly quiet as we ate dinner and listened to the sounds of life around us in the forest. He’d brought a lantern with us, and as it grew darker, Jared’s face seemed to glow slightly.

He had packed spaghetti and marinara and a key lime pie that his mother had made. When I opened the pie, there was a note on the white box it came in.

Happy Birthday, Katrina. I hope we can meet again soon.

With Love,

Annette

"This was very thoughtful of your mom," I said as we rowed.

"I know you haven't had a lot of time to talk to her, but you'll meet her again soon. I promise."

"The pie is delicious," I said, taking a bite. "She made this?"

"My mom and grandma are both really good cooks and bakers. She picked the recipe up when she was living in Florida," he said.

"Did she grow up there?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "No..."

As we were rowing, I saw something. I noticed there was a figure standing next to the river.

"Slow down," I told Jared as we approached. "Grey?"

Grey's eyes were wide, like she'd been caught in the act of a crime. And she was soaking wet.

"What are you doing out here? Can we give you a ride?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine. I didn't know you'd be around here tonight, Jared."

"Sorry, Grey," Jared said.

Without another word, she turned and ran away.

"Will she be okay out here all alone? I asked.

"She knows these woods well, and we're not that far away. She'll be okay," he assured me. "She lives around here."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. Grey was in the river—what was she doing there? Was she a mermaid? But then I realized we were well past sunset now. She couldn't have been a mermaid.

"Are you ready to turn back?" he asked.

I nodded.

When we got back to the campsite, we pulled the canoe out of the water and then sat down on the blanket.

"So, how would you rate your birthday?" he said, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear.

"Hmm, maybe a four?" I said. He looked worried, and I laughed. "Kidding. I'd say a nine."

He smiled. "That's more like it."

"Thanks for setting all of this up," I said.

"No problem."

I looked up at the lantern lights. Every so often, I could see a bug buzzing toward one of the lights.

"You know, even though we've been together for a while, I still can't seem to figure you out," Jared said, brushing his hand against my cheek.

I felt like I couldn't breathe. I didn't know what to say, so I just looked down and let my hair frame the side of my face. He picked some of the hair and put it behind my ear.

"I'm so glad I found you," Jared said.

"Me too," I told him. He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. He then leaned up against the side of a tree and began reading one of the books he'd brought with him.

As he read, I realized Matt was right about what he said. Not today but someday, I was going to have to tell him about being a mermaid.

DECK THE HALLS



We were only a few days away from Christmas, and I hadn't bought any presents yet. I decided to call Kristen to see what she was up to.

"Hey, Kristen," I said when she answered. "Have you done your Christmas shopping yet?"

"No, thank you for reminding me. Let's meet at the mall. Does eleven work?"

"Sounds good! See you there."

When we walked in, Christmas music was blasting from the speakers, and kids were lined up to see Santa.

"It doesn't feel like Christmas. I'm so used to it being cold and snowy by now," I said to Kristen.

"Welcome to California," she said, laughing. "Where do you want to go first?"

I thought about all the people I had to buy for, including Lila and June. I wondered how they were doing; it had been weeks since I'd seen them. I wasn't feeling my best, but I knew I had at least a few more days before I'd have to return

to the water. I would wait until after Christmas, I decided. And then I'd have to start my missions.

But how was I ever going to find what Miranda wanted? I had a better chance at winning the lottery than finding a diamond that big.

"I want to buy some scratch-offs," I said.

Her eyebrows raised, and she said, "I get it. You just turned eighteen," she said. "There's a stand over there."

I went up and bought a few tickets. As I scratched them off, it appeared I had won five dollars. *Great.*

"Oh, well," she said. "Are you ready to actually shop?"

I nodded, and we walked into a department store. As I walked through the aisles, I remembered how interested Lila and June were in human things.

I found a magnifying glass that worked underwater for Lila and a pearl headband for June. For Kristen, I bought a sailor's knot bracelet since I'd seen her eyeing it earlier. For Jan, I bought a pretty blazer that I thought she'd like for her job.

As we passed by another store, I saw a miniature telescope in the window and instantly thought of Brandon.

Our Christmas tradition was that we would buy each other little knickknacks. Whoever had the better knickknack would win, and we'd have to watch whatever movie the other person wanted to watch.

I told Kristen to wait, and I went in and bought it. I turned it over in my hand. This definitely looked like something Brandon would like.

I'm not exactly sure why I bought it. It wasn't like I was necessarily planning on giving it to him. But I couldn't help myself. I guess I didn't want to break tradition.

As I thought about Jared's gift, I thought again about that first mission. I was going to need time, at least a couple of

weeks to get the missions completed, and Christmas break would be the only time I'd have off from school. I needed to get Jared out of town.

We sat down on a bench, and I looked up golfing trips in California on my phone. It was the best idea I could come up with, and I was pretty sure that they wouldn't feel comfortable going much further than this.

Plus, Jared needed a break. He really needed a break and this golf resort seemed like a great idea. It would get him away from having to work for the Coast Guard. *I hope Jared knows how to golf.*

"Hey, do you want to hang out at the beach tonight?" Kristen said as we were finishing up our shopping trip.

"Sure."

After the mall, I changed quickly into my one-piece blue bathing suit, shorts, and a sweater and headed to the beach.

Kristen was waiting for me as I parked my car.

"Come on," she said, tugging my arm toward some large rocks on the beach. She was smiling, and she was dressed in a sundress and flip flops.

We ran around the corner of the large rocks on the beach.

"SURPRISE!"

Several people were on the beach smiling and shouting my name. Kristen, Sam, Bri, Matt, and Jared were all there. I also noticed some of Jared's cousins along with a couple of girls Kristen knew from surfing.

Jared came running up and spun me around in a huge hug. He was smiling and looked so happy tonight.

"This is crazy!" I laughed. "Whose idea was it?"

"Mine," Kristen said with a huge smile on her face. She was pretty proud of herself.

"Thank you for doing this."

"You're welcome," she said. "You deserve it."

"Thank you for setting this up," I said.

"I just want you to know that I'm so grateful to have you in my life," she said. "You've been such a blessing to all of our lives. And you're my best friend," she said.

"You're my best friend too," I said with a smile.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. Kristen had set up an entire table with lemonade, water, soda, pizza, and a fruit salad. There were some gifts as well.

As we ate, we all talked and laughed together on the beach. I was having so much fun, but I wished that June and Lila could be here as well.

When I was finished with dinner, we played beach volleyball for a while. After, Jared handed me a present.

I opened it, and inside was a barrette with blue and green stones. It was exquisite.

"I thought of you when I saw this. It matches your eyes," Jared said. "I know it's kind of early, but I was thinking you could wear it to the prom. I didn't want to come to the party empty-handed," he said.

"It's beautiful," I said. "You're asking me to the prom?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his neck slightly.

"Okay," I said, smiling at him. "Yes, let's go."

"My turn!" Kristen said, suddenly coming over and handing me an envelope.

I opened it up and saw that there were plane tickets.

"Tickets?" I asked.

"We're going to Chicago!" she said. "My dad said I could invite a friend. He's going there for a work event, and I thought maybe we could visit some of your friends."

I smiled and hugged her. "Thank you! When do we leave?"

"Around March. I know it's early, but I wanted to give you the heads up now," she said.

"Thanks, Kristen."

As I looked at the tickets, I was excited, but I also felt sort of nervous. I hadn't spoken to Brandon in four months. If I did go, would I just knock on his door? Would he even want to see me? Thinking about him still hurt.

Matt came up to me, and Jared gave him a dirty look. He said, "My gift's really small. It's more of a dual birthday-slash-Christmas gift. But I thought you'd like it."

I opened it up, and it was a stuffed chameleon.

We both burst out laughing, and I wiped tears from my eyes.

"What's so funny?" Jared said, looking upset.

"Oh, it's a long story," I said.

"Give the girl a break," Matt said to Jared.

"What did you say?" Jared glared at Matt. Matt stared back at him. There was obvious tension between the two of them, and my heart quickened. Why couldn't they just get along?

"Thanks, Matt," I said, breaking the silence. He nodded and walked away.

I turned to Jared and said, "I loved your gift, too. Please don't be upset."

"I'm okay," he said with a small smile. "Let's get back to the party."

The rest of the night went fast. We listened to music, played more beach volleyball, and watched the sun kiss the ocean as it set into the water. As I looked out at my friends, I knew how grateful I was for them. Nobody had ever planned a surprise party for me before.

* * *

ON CHRISTMAS MORNING, I went over to the window and looked outside. It was so green and warm—a stark contrast to the cold, slushy December weather I was used to in Chicago. Some days in Chicago, the snow would wrap itself around branches and lay out a soft white blanket all over the grass. Icicles would drip from the rooftops, and everything seemed frozen in time.

It was different now.

“Merry Christmas!” Jan shouted up the stairs. I could smell waffles from my room.

I slipped on a pretty green dress and went downstairs.

Jan had prepared a feast: waffles, pancakes, syrup, eggs, fruit, and hash browns filled the table.

After breakfast, we headed for the car.

“It’s weird that there’s no snow, isn’t it?” she asked as we drove to church. I nodded.

I loved church on Christmas Day. It was always so joyful, and the church had brought in poinsettias. At the end of the service, we sang “Joy to the World,” and a lot of people were giving hugs.

I noticed Matt in a pew a few rows behind ours. He was wearing a button-down and corduroy pants.

“Hi,” I said as I approached him. “You should have set next to us. I didn’t know you were here today,” I said.

“I sat with the other volunteers. We’re running a food drive,” he said. “Do you happen to have any non-perishables with you?”

“I saw a sign for it last week. Here,” I said, pulling out a couple of canned goods from my purse and putting them into the bin he was holding.

“When did you start volunteering here?” I asked.

“I’ve been volunteering here since I moved here,” he said.

"That's great," I said. "Take care, Matt, and Merry Christmas," I said as Jan approached.

"Merry Christmas, Matt!" Jan said as she walked up and hugged him. "I'll see you at the aquarium next week."

"Merry Christmas!" he called as we walked away.

When we got home, I saw some gifts under the tree. When I looked over at Jan, she looked like she wanted to say something.

"What is it?" I asked.

She hesitated. "I invited Dr. Keys over for dinner tonight."

"Why?"

"Well, we've been seeing each other," she said, not meeting my eyes.

"What?! Since when?"

"A couple of months."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know. You weren't around. And anyway, now you know. We have to get the house cleaned," she said.

"Jan, it is clean."

"Well, it needs to be cleaner. Hurry!" she said as she ran up the stairs.

"Wait. Let's talk about this!" I said.

She shrugged and came down the stairs. "Dr. Keys is a wonderful man, and I love him," she said. "So he's coming for dinner."

"You *love* him?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well..." I said. "I'm happy for you."

"Yes," she said. "Now let's get this house straightened up. I'm going to change."

I vacuumed, dusted, and even set up a few more Christmas decorations. Jan liked velvet, and so there were

lots of beautiful red velvet bows and ribbon adorning the house.

When I was done, I went up into my room and closed the door while Jan was getting ready. I checked my phone to see if Brandon had texted. We used to text each other on Christmas Day right when we woke up. But, as usual, there was nothing.

I sat at my desk and played around with the little telescope knickknack I had bought for him. I sighed and put it down on the windowsill and turned to wrap my presents.

"Ugh! This won't work," I heard Jan say from the other room.

I walked into her bedroom. She was wearing a fancy dress, short black heels, and she'd done her hair and makeup.

"You look beautiful!" I said.

"Is it too much?" she asked.

"No, I'm wearing a dress."

She walked over and sat on her bed, putting her head in her hands. "What are we going to do about Christmas dinner?"

I smiled and said, "We'll just order in."

"Somewhere nice," she said. "Good idea."

I nodded. She ordered the food, and I went downstairs. There was a gift with a note sitting on the doorstep.

It was from Jared.

LOVE YOU, KATE. MERRY CHRISTMAS!

It was a miniature snow globe with a note that said, "SINCE YOU DON'T HAVE SNOW THIS YEAR."

I smiled and called Jared.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Kate."

"Thank you for the present. For both presents. You really didn't have to do that," I said.

"No problem," he said.

"I have a present for you, by the way. When can I come and give it to you?"

"Does now work?" he asked.

"Aren't you busy with your cousins?"

"Yes, but you should still come over here. It would be for a short visit. I promise."

"Okay," I said, smiling on the phone.

I grabbed the gift and my keys from the kitchen counter.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jan said, her hands on her hips.

"I'm going to drop off Jared's Christmas gift. I'll be back in an hour. I promise."

"Okay, but you'd better be back in time for dinner," she said.

"I will."

"Wait. Give this to the parents," Jan said, handing me a box of chocolates.

I nodded and walked out to my Jeep. As I looked out the window, I still couldn't get over the lack of snow or harsh winter winds that I was used to in Chicago.

When I pulled into the driveway, Jared was waiting for me outside.

"Merry Christmas," he said as he pulled me into a hug. "Come on in."

When I went inside, I was again surprised at the difference between my home and Jared's. It was quiet at my house, but not at Jared's. His cousins were here, and everyone was having fun and drinking hot chocolate and eating food, and I could hear some of the guests singing "Deck the Halls" off-key in the living room. They were laughing.

"Wow!" I said, raising my eyebrows and looking up at Jared.

He laughed and said, "Let's get you some food."

Jared's parents were enjoying some hot cocoa in the kitchen. Mr. O'Connor said, "Well, if it isn't the aquarium girl. How are you?" he asked. He was wearing a funny Christmas sweater with huge snowflakes on the front.

"Merry Christmas," his mother said with a smile, but then she disappeared into the other room.

"Um, these are for you," I said, handing Mr. O'Connor the chocolates.

"No need, but thanks, Kate. Jared, your mother hasn't been feeling well today," Mr. O'Connor said. "Let's get you a mug of hot chocolate."

I turned around, and Logan said, "Hey, Kate. We haven't seen you in a while. How's it going?" He was wearing a red ski sweater with snowflakes on it.

"Good. How are you?" I said.

"Good. Wish they'd let me go out more often with the Coast Guard," he said. "I'm usually stuck babysitting. I think it's time for a job promotion." He was smiling and raising his eyebrows at Jared.

Jared laughed and said, "Enough, Logan. You're too young."

"Can't say I didn't try," Logan said as he put his hands up and walked back into the living room.

"Here you go," his dad said, handing me a gray mug filled with hot cocoa and topped with marshmallows. I noticed Steve and Grey standing near the Christmas tree.

"Thank you," I said as I took a sip.

Grey was wearing a glittering silver dress. She waved when she saw me and came over, Steve still lingering in the corner.

"Katrina," she said as she pulled me into a hug, splashing some of the cocoa on me.

"So sorry," she said as her shoulders shrugged.

"It's great to see you," I said. "And I love that dress!"

"Isn't it pretty?" she said as she twirled in it. "You look nice, too. I love your hair," she said, running her hand over my braid.

"Thanks," I said.

"Well, I'm going to go back and talk to Steve, but it was so good to see you," she said, skipping back over to Steve.

I turned back to Jared. "Here," I said, handing him the envelope with the tickets and resort information for the golf trip.

I stood back, and he opened it.

"It's a golf trip for you, Steve, and your dad," I said. "You leave in a couple of days if you want to go."

"Dad, did you know about this?"

"Yep. She called me the other day," he said.

Jared looked at Steve, who met his eyes, and walked over.

"What's going on?" I heard Steve say.

"We're going on a golf trip," Mr. O'Connor said as he hugged the two of them.

"What do you have planned?" Steve said as he suddenly glared at me. "We can't go on a golf trip. Not with the Coast Guard."

"Fine," his dad said with a smile. "You can stay here, and Jared, me, and your mother will go on the trip. Katrina, thank you for this generous gift."

Jared looked excited. "Where did you come up for the money for this?"

"I received an inheritance when my parents passed," I said.

He looked down for a second and then said, "Thank you."

"Well, I know you've been wanting to get out for a little bit, and I thought this could be a nice trip for you."

He hugged me.

"I think I should be going. We're having a guest over for dinner," I said. "Thanks so much for having me, Mr. O'Connor."

"Anytime, Kate. And thanks again for the great gift!"

I waved goodbye to the rest of the family, wondering if his mother was all right.

Jared walked me to my car and said, "Thanks again for the trip. Will you be okay without me over Christmas break?"

"I want you to enjoy your present. Don't worry about me," I said, smiling. I kissed him on the cheek and got in my car. I waved as I backed out of the driveway and headed home. As I looked in my rearview mirror, I felt a twinge of sadness. I didn't really want to leave the party. It was loud and fun, and I wanted to stay. But I promised Jan I wouldn't be gone long.

I thought about Annette and how she left the room as soon as I'd entered. I thought she wanted to meet me. She'd made me that pie...what was going on?

Jan was waiting for me when I walked inside.

"You're just in time. He's going to be here soon."

I turned around and went to the kitchen when I heard the doorbell ring. Jan looked nervous, but when we answered the door, it was just the delivery guy. We set the food up quickly, lit a few candles, and turned on the holiday music.

When we heard the doorbell again, Jan smoothed her hair and opened the door for Dr. Keys. Her face lit up as soon as she saw him.

He was quite handsome, which I hadn't noticed before. He was wearing a suit, and I was glad Jan and I dressed up.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey," he said, greeting her with a smile and a kiss on the cheek.

I gave them some privacy for a little bit and watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which was playing in the living room.

As I heard Keys talking to Jan, I thought about how he told me to talk to him once I knew who my mother was. I had been deliberately avoiding him and the map. I needed to get through these missions, and then I would talk to him.

"Come back in, Katrina. We have dinner on the table."

I went back, and the two of them were smiling. I served the Italian food while the two of them stared lovingly into each other's eyes, catching up on what had been happening in each other's lives.

"We have to say grace," I said.

When we were done praying, we began to eat the dinner.

"How's the aquarium going?" Keys asked Jan.

"Good. We just took in a baby otter," she said.

"That's wonderful," he said. And the two of them talked about the aquarium for a while.

"How are you doing, Katrina?" he asked finally.

"I'm good. Thank you," I said.

"That's good to hear. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

When I looked at him, I knew he was talking about Cassandra.

"Are you having a nice Christmas?" I asked, dodging the question.

Keys looked a little disappointed in this, but then he said, "I am. And I have a surprise for both of you. Can we head to the beach after dinner?"

"Well, I don't see why not," Jan said.

After we cleared the dinner plates, we walked to the light-

house. My hair was blowing behind me, and Keys was pointing at something.

"Look," he said as we got closer to the water.

Baby turtles were hatching and heading toward the sea.

"This is so wonderful," Jan said, reaching for his hand. "To see it this close."

He smiled and said, "Can you two wait a moment?"

"Sure," Jan said as she watched him walk away. She came over to stand next to me. We both watched the turtles as they crawled their way toward the water.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "How's the mermaid thing?"

"It's okay," I said.

"You're struggling, aren't you?" she said quietly.

I sighed. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"What?" she asked.

"I have missions I need to go on," I said.

"Are they safe?" she asked.

"I don't know. I hope so," I said.

Jan frowned and asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"A few days, maybe weeks," I said.

"How will I know you're safe?"

"I'll try to call you," I said.

"Okay," she said as she hugged me. "Please just be careful."

I looked at the lighthouse. "You really do love him, don't you?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Yes. We actually wanted to get married so many years ago. I think he was going to propose. But the storm came, and we had to leave," she said.

As the wind was blowing her hair around, I could see the sadness on her face. What had she given up for me? I felt slightly guilty as we stood there together.

But then Dr. Keys showed up. He was smiling, and then he suddenly got down on one knee.

My mouth gaped as I looked at him.

"Janice, will you marry me?"

She smiled and began crying.

"Yes!" she said. He smiled, sliding the ring on her finger.

"I've been saving it for many years."

I was completely shocked. But if this was going to make her happy, and if it's what she wanted, then I could be happy for her. Of course, I was happy for her. I just...this was just a lot to take in.

"I have a cool present for you. You're going to like it," Jan said as we began walking home.

When we got home, she disappeared into the other room and came out carrying a light blue surfboard with a pink sea star on the front.

"Jan, you know I can't use this," I said.

"Sure, you can! Just paddle out and jump on the board."

Dr. Keys looked suspiciously at me, but I didn't speak more on it. I wasn't ready to talk to him yet.

"Thank you," I said, taking the surfboard from her. When I turned it over, the bottom was decorated in scales, which was a nice touch.

Part of me longed to get on that surfboard and ride a wave, but would this really work? I didn't know.

At the end of the night, we ate Christmas cookies shaped like trees and ornaments, and then Jan kissed Dr. Keys goodbye.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you more," she said back.

Jan looked so happy, so full of joy.

"Can you believe it?" she said after he'd left.

"I'm happy for you," I said, hugging her.

"I know it's probably unexpected," Jan said.

"It is. But, Jan, I just want you to be happy. If you love him, and it seems right, then I want that for you."

"Thank you, Katrina," she said, hugging me and staring at her ring.

"Well, Merry Christmas," I said. "Thank you for such a wonderful day."

"Merry Christmas."

I lay on my bed that night and replied to all the Christmas messages I received from my friends.

I got up and opened the window and let the salty air come in. I sighed. This Christmas definitely was different. I reached down to touch the telescope that I had bought for Brandon, but my fingers brushed the windowsill. I looked around, confused. I lifted papers off of my desk, and I searched the floor and under the bed, but I could not find it.

Maybe it fell out? I went down the stairs and out the door to look for it, but it was nowhere to be found.

Oh well, I thought, sighing.

It was time to pack.

JOURNAL



I went back upstairs and grabbed the aquamarine stones out of the dish and my flashlight, and then I set out my mermaid top, which I would wear under a shirt, jacket and shorts on my way to the beach.

I went to my desk and picked up the book that Lila had given me. I wondered if my mother had written anything about abalone pearls. Maybe it could give me some information on where to find some.

As I scanned the pages, I couldn't find anything on abalone pearls. However, I did land on a page titled "Northerners," and I began to read it.

Entry #29: I've found Northerners to be beautiful creatures. They are different from us. They don't live in castles, but rather, they live in caves and enjoy the ocean around them. They seem to know all the names of the animals and spend their time learning more about the sea. I think most of us often forget how beautiful the ocean really is. The Northerners are so gentle when it comes to humans, and I find it extraordinary. I find it interesting that they can dive deep into the water and withstand the

freezing cold waters of the Northern Pacific so comfortably. There are many of them, and they begin at the middle of Oregon and extend up through Alaska, even into the Arctic Ocean.

Northern mermaids all have such unique talents. I've read that rarely one of them can communicate with animals. It's a gene that gets passed down and skips some generations. How wonderful it would be to know what a seal thinks about. Or a crab! But it's hard to meet them. They aren't very friendly merpeople to others who are not Northerners. It has something to do with our clashing cultures. Either blend in with them or just leave.

I would be interested in doing some traveling there and see what that might be like. Maybe meet them and get to experience their culture. Until then...

I shut the book for a moment. That meant that my father was the Northerner, not my mother. My mother must have met the Northerners after all.

Which meant I likely had family there. Cousins? Grandparents? But then I thought about what Jan said. My mother had remarried when my birth father had died. Did my family even know I existed? Why had she left with me?

I thought about what the book said about talking to animals. It was a rare gift, but it meant I was not the first person to have it. It had been passed down to me.

I really wanted to meet the Northerners. But what were these Northerners like? I wanted to go and meet them, but I was scared of being rejected. What if they didn't like me? What if I was too different to blend in with their culture? I'd spent most of my life on land and had been raised by a human, after all.

But that wasn't important now. I had a mission to go on, and as I lay in bed, I mentally prepared myself for what the next day might bring.

ABALONE PEARL



I left early in the morning and went down to the beach. I came up to the same group of rocks that I'd been to last time and hid my jacket, tucking it and my keys underneath a rock.

I sighed as I stared out at the ocean. The water was a pale gray, reflecting the sky. I felt unprepared for my missions. Typically, before a test, I could prepare, but this wasn't something I could really prepare for. I tried looking on the internet for abalone pearls and where they might be, but they're extremely rare.

As for the diamond, I didn't know what to do. I took off my flip flops and slid them underneath the rock, and then I went toward the ocean. I jumped in and felt the silky-smooth water brush against my face. Then I set off to find Lila and June. I knew I was going to need their help.

It was hard to know exactly where I was going, but I knew I just needed to go south and stay along the coastline. Lila's cave was just beyond a large patch of coral and sea

kelp. The coral I was looking for was shaped a little bit like a heart. I just needed to find that, and then I'd be at Lila's cave.

On my way, I saw Henry and George hanging out by some coral a little ways from Lila's.

"Hey, guys," I said, approaching them.

"We haven't seen you here in a while. How are you?" George said, moving his flipper in a wave. "How was meeting the queen?"

"A little scary, I have to admit. She's intimidating," I said.

"She sure is," said Henry.

"Be on the lookout, today. I've seen a lot of Miranda's guards around here."

"Thanks. I'm looking for an abalone pearl. It's my first mission for Miranda. Would either of you know where to find one?"

"I have no idea," Henry said.

"I might know a place," George said. "You need to go up the coast. It's about a two days' swim. You'll find a long cave shaped like a flower. It's quite unique. Abalone mollusks live near the coast, so you might find one there."

"Thank you," I said.

"Can I come?" I heard a voice behind me. I turned around and saw a dolphin. I recognized it as a Pacific white-sided dolphin. He was a mix of shades of gray, black, and white.

"Um, sure," I said. "I'm Kate, and you are...?"

"Call me B," the dolphin said.

"Okay, B. We have to go up the coastal waters of the Pacific, and it's a two-day trip to get there. You sure you'll be okay?"

"You can count me in," B said.

"Thanks, George!" I said, waving to them as B and I began swimming off.

"Best of luck!" he called.

"Okay, B, we have to meet my friends Lila and June. They will be coming with us. Are you okay with that?"

"Sure thing, blondie."

We swam through patches of warmth where the sun hit the sand, reflecting a rainbow of colors. The ocean floor looked like it was swaying and moving as we swam. I swam by orange, beige, and white coral and waved at some sea turtles. I weaved through large kelp that I recognized from the aquarium. They were long and extended very high, maybe about fifty feet. The kelp felt slimy on my tail, and I flicked it a few times to get through. When I looked down, I saw a crab with purple legs scurry underneath us.

"Wow!" I said to B.

"It's pretty amazing," he said.

Finally, we ended up at Lila's cave. I knocked on her door and waited patiently for her.

B went to the surface to catch a breath and swam back down.

"Who is it?" I heard.

"Katrina," I said.

"Good. I'm glad to see you," she said as she opened the rock door. *"It's been a while since we've heard from you."*

"I've missed you," I said, giving her a hug.

"Me too. Looks like you made a friend," she said as she nodded at B.

"Yes, this is B. He said he'd help us."

"You can hear it?" she said, her eyes widening. *"Get in here,"* she said as she grabbed my arm and pulled me inside, leaving a rush of bubbles in my wake.

B swam in behind us. Lila took my hands and said, *"No one can know."*

"Why not?"

"Because you could control the sea!" she exclaimed. Her eyes were filled with worry, and she lowered her voice. *"You*

pose a threat to other mermaids, especially queens. Your gift is beautiful, but also rare and dangerous.”

“Please don’t tell anyone,” I said. “You too, B.”

“You can trust me. I won’t tell.”

“Your secret is safe with us,” June said as she came out of the kitchen.

“What are your talents?”

“I’m good at navigation,” Lila said proudly. “If I’ve met you, I can find you from anywhere. It’s rare, but not as rare as yours.”

“Talents are often passed down, but it’s not always the case,” she said. “You have families who all have talents that are similar, and some not at all. For example, my father’s talent was navigation too, but brother’s talent is different but similar. He has a really good memory—he can remember every place he’s ever gone to, exactly how to get there, person he’s met, small details. You name it!”

“That’s cool,” I said. And then I wondered what my mother’s gift was. “What about you June?”

“You can tell her,” Lila said to June. But June didn’t say anything. She kind of shrugged.

“I’ll tell you another time if that’s okay.”

I nodded. “I talked to a sea turtle earlier about an abalone pearl. He said that we can find one up the coast near a flower-shaped cave. It’ll take us two days to get there. Do you know where he’s talking about?” I asked Lila.

“Yes. It’s called the Anemone Caves,” she said.

“Are there a lot of anemones there?”

“Strangely, no,” she said as she began packing a bag for our journey. “Anemones are the ‘flowers of the sea,’ which is why some people refer to it as the Flower Caves.”

“I have something for both of you,” I said as I pulled out my Christmas gifts for them. The tape was no longer

sticking to the wrapping paper, and the glittery foil was gently floating in the water.

June lifted up one of the corners and looked at the pattern on it.

"Interesting," she said. She smiled brightly as she opened her gift. She took the headband, tried it on, and rushed over to the mirror to look at it. "This is beautiful! And nothing like the ones I already have. Thank you," she said.

"This one is for you, Lila," I said, handing her the gift.

Her eyes flashed with excitement as she removed the paper. But as she examined the gift, she looked up at me with a confused expression on her face.

I laughed. "It's called a magnifying glass. You hold it up to your eye to see things more closely."

Her eyes widened as she looked through it. "Wow!" she said as she began swimming around her cave and looking at her knickknacks. "Everything looks so much bigger!" She swam up to B, who opened his mouth, but she jumped when she saw his teeth up close. B made a noise that reminded me of a chuckle.

She then placed the magnifying glass in her bag and said, "We have gifts for you, too."

"I made this for you myself," June said, handing me what looked like a metallic long-sleeved shirt. "It's a special top you can wear to help you stay warm. It absorbs the sun's rays and keeps the heat in for a long time. I am not sure you are going to need it, since you are a northern mermaid, but I thought it could be helpful just in case. I'm wearing one for the journey."

"Thank you," I said, looking at it. The top was woven with seashells, thin pieces of seaweed, and some silvery thread.

Lila came over to me and said, "This is for you."

She handed me a backpack made out of seaweed, rocks,

and pieces of discarded plastic. It didn't quite look like the backpack we use on land, but it worked better than I thought it would.

"You made this?"

"I can't take credit for it, but I think it's going to work better than the one you have now."

My bag was falling apart in the water, so I took everything out and placed it, along with my new top, in the new backpack. I'd brought with me the flashlight Jan gave me, the map (which did not fall apart in the water), a brush, some granola bars, and a bar of soap which I kept in a plastic bag. I liked the seafood, but there was something comforting about having the granola bars with me—even if I'd only brought a few.

"Okay, are you two ready to go?"

"We should probably bring some snacks," Lila said as she swam into the kitchen. She came out a few moments later with some mussels, seaweed, and oysters. "We're going to be doing a lot of swimming, and you're going to get hungry," she said, placing the food in my pack.

I placed the straps over my shoulders, and after double-checking that we weren't forgetting anything, we headed out.

"Are you sure you guys want to do this with me?" I asked. "It could be dangerous."

"You're our friend. Friends help each other," June said, putting on a backpack of her own.

"All right, let's go," I said.

We headed out. The sun was shining on the water today, and it made it fun to swim in the sunrays through the water. And it was really clear today. Lila's deep blue tail was shining brightly next to June's green one.

As we swam up the coast, we didn't say much to each other. Every six minutes or so, B went up to catch his breath.

There was so much to look at, and there were so many different fish in so many different colors.

WE DRIFTED THROUGH SEA KELP, pausing a few moments to take a break. June was really good at spotting different fish.

"That one is a barred surfperch," she said, pointing to a light gray fish with yellow stripes. "And see that blue one? That is a blacksmith. And there's a squarespot! Do you see the orange one with the little pink spot on its side? They are some of my favorites." The orange and pink fish was very brightly-colored.

"They're all your favorite," Lila said as she smiled and shook her head.

Small white clouds began forming beneath the surface of the water as large waves passed over us. B darted up and popped out of the water to jump through the wave. We laughed and swam to the surface to watch him.

Some people saw the dolphin, and I could hear them clapping for him.

"Do you want to try it?" B asked me as we dove back down.

"No thanks. Humans would see me. Looks like fun, though."

"You're missing out," he said.

We continued swimming until my fins started to hurt. I was exhausted, and my stomach was growling loudly. It had been several hours since our departure from Monterey, and the sun was starting to set.

If June and Lila were tired, they hid it really well. B seemed a little worn out, and I felt bad for him.

"Do you guys want to stop for the night?" I said.

"Si, I'm so glad you said something. I'm beat; estoy cansada," June said, sliding down to the ocean floor and stretching out along the sand.

I took a granola bar out of my bag to eat, and the girls looked at the others in my bag.

"Do you guys want one?" I said, handing them the other two.

"Yes! But...what is it?" June said, looking at the strange wrapper.

"It's a granola bar. Just open it," I said.

I showed them, and they did the same.

"It's good," Lila said, examining it.

"I'm not sure about it..." June said. She finished it, but then she dug through her bag for something else.

Meanwhile, B was staring out into the ocean in the other direction.

"Kate, you have to come over here."

"What is it?"

"Look!"

"It's a fin whale!" Lila said as she looked at it. It was enormous and very long. It had a gray top and underneath, it was white.

"Can we go ride it?" I heard B say as he drifted toward the whale.

"B, what are you doing?"

"It's-o-kay, you-can-come-o-ver-here," I heard from far off.

I swam closer, Lila and June following closely behind me.

"Hi, I'm Katrina."

"I'm-Blue. Do-you-need-a-ride?" The whale said, pausing between each syllable.

"That would be excellent. Thank you."

"No-prob-lem. Just-hop-right-on-my-back, but-be-care-ful-not-to-cov-er-the-blow-hole."

"Lila, June, this is Blue. He says we can get on."

"This is so cool," June said with a smile as she swam up to Blue's back and climbed on.

"But don't cover his blowhole."

I followed behind her, and so did B and Lila. On Blue's back there were swirls of pattern on it. It was really interesting.

I looked behind me, and B was holding onto the dorsal fin toward the whale's tail.

"Where-to?"

"Do you know the Anemone Caves?"

"The-Flow-er-Caves! No-prob-lem."

I lay down and sighed in relief. My tail was very sore from all the swimming.

"We should definitely get there a lot faster this way," Lila said as she lay next to me. "Also, Katrina, this is really special. I've never done anything like this before."

"Same," I said, watching the surface of the water.

I ate some mussels and seaweed and closed my eyes, feeling the whale's back move up and down as he glided through the water.

I fell asleep quickly. Who knew sleeping on a whale would be so comfortable?

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, light was shining on me. We were still moving, and I turned over on the whale and looked at my friends. They were both sleeping, but I saw that B was awake.

He waved at me with his fin.

When I sat up, Blue was approaching the caves. I could now see where it got its name. Rocks jutted out of caves, surrounding it like the tentacles of the anemones.

"We're-here," Blue said.

"Guys, we're here," I said, gently shaking Lila and June awake.

June opened her eyes and just stared at the water above her.

Lila groaned and draped an arm over her eyes.

"Come on," I said to Lila.

We hopped off of Blue's back, and I swam around to the front.

"Thank you," I said. "There has to be something I can do in return."

"There-is. See-those-herr-ing-o-ver-there? Could-you-get-them-to-come-this-way? I'm-ver-y hun-gry."

I swam over and tried to communicate to them to go toward the whale, but it didn't work.

I wondered if I could push the water the way Lila and June could. I'd seen them do it before, but I hadn't tried it yet. I swam behind the fish and pushed them forward. The whale opened its mouth, and the herring fell in.

"Thank you so much, Blue."

"Good-bye, North-er-ner. I-hope-we-can-meet-a-gain."

He slowly turned away from the mouth of the cave and swam into the open water. I watched him swim away and went back to find my friends.

Lila looked like she was having a hard time opening her eyes. I found her on the sand with her arm over her eyes again.

"Come on, Lila," I called.

She opened her eyes and groaned. As she swam toward us, I saw light blue circles under her eyes.

"Let's split up," I said. "Stay close. Don't wander off too far, but just try looking everywhere. Look under rocks and in small places."

"I have my magnifying glass in here somewhere," Lila said as she dug through her bag, her red hair in a swirl above her head.

"Okay. June and B, you guys are a pair. Lila and I will look around here."

"Got it. We'll start over there," June said, flicking her green-colored tail as she and B swam toward a pile of rocks.

I dove down to the ocean floor. Rocks and pieces of seaweed littered the sand. Orange ochre sea stars were draped over some of the dark rocks, and I tried not to disturb them as I searched. I dug under the rocks with my hands, and each time I overturned one, a plume of sand would fly up into the water and linger for a few moments.

I came across a few abalone fish and picked up numerous rocks. I found lots of seashells, but no pearl.

"Anyone find anything?" I shouted. It had been hours.

"No!" I heard.

I kept swimming around, checking every nook and cranny. Abalone pearls were rare, but I expected to have found *something* by now.

B swam over. "*Giving up?*"

"*No. Are you?*"

"*No way,*" he said and went back to searching.

It felt pointless. I floated down to the sand and put my arm over my eyes as I sighed and tried to get in a quick nap.

"*I FOUND SOMEONE TO HELP US!*" B called down to me.

I opened my eyes and looked up. A seal was bobbing next to B.

"*How's it going?*" said the seal as I swam toward them.

"*We could use all the help we could get. Thanks!*"

I went to see how things were going for Lila and June. I went over and found Lila with her eye pressed up against her magnifying glass.

"Did you find anything?"

“No, but look at the cool shells we found,” she said, opening her bag to show me. “This is a moon shell,” she said, showing me its interesting, twisting shape.

Suddenly, I noticed something gleaming underneath us, sticking out under a rock.

“I found it!” I yelled.

There it was—a perfect abalone pearl.

“It’s beautiful,” June said in amazement. It was a swirl of colors: green, purple, orange, and blue. The pearl was about the size of my fingernail. It was exquisite.

“Amazing!” Lila said.

And then we heard the seal yelp.

THE GREAT WHITE



I saw a large fin swim by, and I recognized it immediately—it was a great white shark.

Lila, June, and I ducked into a nearby cave as we watched the shark go by. The seal swam away quickly, but the shark was still here.

“We need to leave. Now,” Lila said urgently.

“No, just wait a moment,” I said.

The shark’s teeth flashed as it passed the mouth of the cave, and the three of us tried our best not to make a sound. I held my breath, and we backed away slowly, our backs hitting the cave wall. I grabbed onto a piece of seaweed, and some bubbles floated upward.

We waited a few minutes, and the shark seemed to have disappeared. I breathed a sigh of relief, but I was still nervous. We knew we couldn’t stay in this cave forever. It would be more dangerous if the shark found us in here than if we swam away.

“Let’s get B and go,” I whispered to June and Lila.

“You know we can talk like this,” June said.

"Oh, right."

"B, hurry!" I said. *"Meet us outside the cave."*

We met up with B, and then the three of us swam away as fast as we could.

B was swimming behind us. I looked over my shoulder and saw the shark gaining on us.

June and I were keeping pace with each other, but Lila had fallen behind.

I swam back to her and pulled her out of the way as the shark opened its mouth. I closed my eyes and braced myself when suddenly I heard a yelp.

B had jumped in front of the shark, and the shark had one of his fins between his teeth.

I grabbed B and pulled, his fin scraping against the shark's teeth. I held B as I hurried toward Lila and June, and we hid in the kelp until the shark swam away.

LILA PEEKED her head out of the kelp. "I think it's safe now. It's gone."

We edged out of our hiding spot and started making our way home. B was swimming slower than usual.

"B, are you okay?"

"I'm managing."

I looked down and saw his fin was bleeding. I called for Lila and June to stop.

"B, why did you jump in front of me like that?"

"I couldn't let that shark hurt you.... I feel a little dizzy, can we stop for a minute?"

"Yes, we can stop."

It was night now.

"B's hurt," I said as they came over to us.

"Here. This should help." June found some seaweed and

wrapped it around his fin.

"That feels better."

"He said it feels better."

"Good."

"B, thank you. I don't really know what to say. Thank you."

"Anything for you, Kate."

I gave the dolphin a hug. It was getting dark outside.

I nodded. That was a relief, but as I looked at B, I felt so worried. What could we do?

It was dark now, and I knew B needed more than just seaweed for his wound. Could I go on land and try to find someone to help?

"I'm worried about you."

"It's not that bad. Just get some sleep," B said.

"What are we going to do?" I said to my friends.

"Dolphins have amazing healing abilities. He's going to be okay," June said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, and I wrapped it in seaweed to help as well. Although, I'm not sure he'll need it.... We should get some rest. He'll be okay," June said.

I wanted to do something more, but B had already floated up to the surface to sleep. My entire body was aching with exhaustion, and I was asleep as soon as my head hit the sand.

WHEN I WOKE UP, sunlight was flooding my eyes. I used my hand to shield my eyes from the brightness and looked around. Lila and June were gone.

"June? B? Lila?" I called.

June and Lila came swimming over quickly. "B's gone," June said, worried.

"What?"

"Yeah, we can't find him anywhere. He must have swum away." June said.

"For some reason, I can't locate him. It's strange. Maybe my talent doesn't work on animals," Lila said sadly.

"Okay, well, I think we should go soon before any more sharks come."

"He will be okay," Lila said.

I looked around one more time to see if I could find B, but they were right. He really was gone.

As we started back to Lila's cave, I thought about Jared. I wondered how he was and whether or not he had tried to call me from his golf trip. And I thought about how Jan wanted me to call her. At some point, I'd have to find a way to contact them.

When we arrived back at Lila's cave, June went inside. I started to follow her in, but Lila stopped me.

"You have to go see Miranda," she said.

"But I'm so tired," I said.

"I know, but you need to give her the pearl and show her that you're serious about your missions."

I sighed and nodded. She was right.

"Good luck," she whispered.

When I reached the castle, the guards recognized me and let me through the gate.

When I went inside, I waited in the ballroom with the long mirrors, examining my reflection. Some days I didn't recognize myself, and this was one of those days. My blue-green tail was glittering from the light filtering in, and my blonde hair was in a long braid. I went closer to the mirror and touched the glass, looking at the strange reflection looking back at me. Then I saw another figure appear next to me, and I turned around. I was face to face with Miranda.

She took my chin and pointed it at the mirror, so we were side by side looking at the reflections of each other.

"Did you find me an abalone pearl?" she asked, speaking to my reflection.

I held it out in my hand. She snatched it. "These beauties are incredibly hard to come by. Where did you end up finding it?"

"The Anemone Caves," I said. But she wasn't looking at me; she was captivated with her own reflection.

"There are sharks around there," she said absently, combing her fingers through her hair. "It's dangerous. Did you see one?"

"Yes, but thankfully we made it out alive," I said.

Her eyes flicked over to my reflection.

"You know, I've never met a Northerner mermaid before. But, somehow, you seem different than the rest of them," she said. "And you should know something. You should be *very* careful."

"Careful?"

"I know you've been disappearing into the human world," she said. "I don't have the guards following you there. Not yet, at least."

I turned to look at her, but she grabbed my chin again so that we were both staring into the mirror.

"Clearly, you're curious. And I'm not going to stop you yet, but be careful," she said. "I expect the diamond soon, but well done." Her reflection left the mirror and swam away.

I looked one more time at the mirror and shuddered, and then I swam off, her words echoing in my mind.

When I got back to Lila's, I went inside and slid to the sand, exhausted.

"What did she say?" Lila said.

"She wants the diamond," I said, not wanting to tell her

everything. Miranda had been watching me. What else did she know?

"Thank you so much," I told them. "You were so brave to do this for me, and I couldn't have done it on my own. I'm sorry that I put you in danger."

"You're welcome. But it wasn't all bad." Lila held out a closed fist. "I have something for you both."

When she opened her hand, she showed us three multi-colored abalone pearls. They were iridescent in the light.

"How did you—" I began.

"Once I saw the abalone pearl you showed me, I was able to find these other ones very quickly. It's the talent, remember?"

I opened my locket and put the pearl in the small compartment behind my photo.

"We are leaving first thing tomorrow, so get some rest. You look like you need it," Lila said.

I didn't want to leave again tomorrow. I was drained and aching. Everything hurt from swimming for so long, and I yearned for my bed at home. But I couldn't fight with her about this. I needed to get these missions done quickly, and I'd already been gone for two nights.

I laid my head and my tail on the sand and watched the sun peak in small rays through the holes in the cave's ceiling.

I closed my eyes, and everything went blank.

I WAS STANDING IN A FIELD. Long pieces of grass were swaying in the wind. In the distance, I could hear the sound of the waves.

Jared was a few yards ahead of me, facing the ocean.

"Jared!" I yelled excitedly. His bronze hair was shining in

the sunlight, and I ran into his outstretched arms when he turned around.

"Hey, Kate," Jared said as he gave me a long hug.

"I missed you," I said into his shoulder.

"Kate...we can't be together," Jared said, suddenly dropping his arms to his side.

"What? Why not?" I whispered, feeling dizzy suddenly.

"I can't date a fish," he said, his face twisted with disgust.

My knees felt wobbly, and everything hurt.

Suddenly, Helen materialized by his side.

"I'd like to introduce you to my new girlfriend," he said.

Helen took off her glasses and gave me a smug smirk. Jared swept her into his arms and gave her a long kiss.

I dropped to the ground, my tail forming underneath me, and the water was coming up to the beach and flooding the grass.

Helen and Jared laughed as the water overtook me and swept me back into the ocean.

I sat up in the cave, breathing heavily. *It was just a dream*, I told myself.

But what if wasn't just a dream? I had to tell him eventually, and I had no idea what his reaction would be. I brought my tail up and hugged it with my arms and put my head down on my slightly slimy tail. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. The emotional weight was taking its toll.

It was dark in the cave; I must have slept longer than I thought, but I had no idea what time it was. I did feel more well-rested than yesterday, and my tail was not as sore.

I tried not to think about the dream as I went into the kitchen to find some breakfast. As I passed Lila's bookshelf, one book caught my eye.

The label read *Northerners*. It was thin, and it didn't appear like there was too much in it. As I flipped through the

pages, I landed on one that talked about a war that broke out when a certain king took power a few hundred years ago.

A merman named Delmar rose to power and was named the "White Commander." He had a rare ability to speak to animals, and he used the marine life to help him defeat his enemies. He was able to bring peace to the Island of the North, which had been oppressed by an evil king for fifty years.

"What are you doing?" Lila asked from behind me.

I jumped. "Oh! I was just reading," I said, snapping the book shut.

"We need to get going for the next mission," Lila said.

"You could find an abalone pearl pretty easily after you'd seen it. Do you know where we might find a diamond?"

"I mean, I know the general vicinity of where one could be, but I'm not sure," she said. "When we get closer, it will be easier. It's not like people. I could find a person from anywhere. Objects work, but not as clearly."

I was fiddling with my necklace when I remembered something—it had a compass.

I let Lila see. "It's called a compass. Humans use it to help them navigate. They usually point north, but this one doesn't, and I'm not quite sure where it points."

"That's not just a compass—it's a tracking device! It's really cool technology. Basically, it points toward wherever the other part of this necklace is: the tracker. Say you found a cave in the ocean. You could stick the tracker onto the cave and use the compass to find your way back to it. Or you can turn this switch and use it as a regular compass."

"Do you think it would be worth trying it?"

"I don't see why not! And maybe you could find the other piece of it," she said. "It won't tell you how far away you are from the tracker or how long it'll take you to find it, but the other piece would be good to have."

Maybe that's why my mom left me the necklace—she wanted me to find the other half.

WE WENT UP to the surface a little while later after the sun had come up. The ocean was a clear blue today, and when I looked up, I couldn't see a cloud in the sky.

I looked at the compass. It wasn't pointing directly along the coastline. I hadn't ventured out into the open sea before now, so I was a little nervous. I preferred to stay along the coast.

"Are you sure we should follow this compass?" I asked.

"Don't be nervous. I've swum in the open sea many times. We'll be okay," she said. "What I'm more worried about is finding the diamond. Do you know how hard it's going to be to find a diamond this size?" Lila said, making a circle with her fingers.

"Yeah."

"Are you ready?" Lila asked. Her blue eyes widened, waiting for me to give her an answer.

"I'm ready."

I took a deep breath and began swimming away. I felt nervous as I felt the coast drifting away behind us, but I tried not to think about it.

The compass had us turning toward the right, going a little further south. I watched the silver compass needle closely as it changed a little bit, and we adjusted our path accordingly.

We kept swimming and swimming. As we continued south, the water was becoming slightly warmer. Even though I was faster than Lila, she had better endurance, so she led the way, her blue tail flicking as she swam through the water.

It had been several hours, and we went a little closer to

shore and held onto a dark gray buoy for a brief rest. We floated with our heads above the water as Lila grabbed some mussels and oysters out of her bag. The waves made us bob up and down, and I closed my eyes for a moment.

I thought about what my friends were doing right now. I imagined that Kristen was probably out surfing. Jared was hopefully enjoying his trip and golfing, and Matt, I pictured diving at the aquarium. I wondered what they would think if they knew where I was and what I was doing. This was some Christmas vacation.

I sat on the buoy for a moment and watched a flock of seagulls diving down to scoop up some fish. Lila hopped onto the buoy next to me and handed me some mussels.

"Thanks for coming," I told her as I took the mussels.

"You're welcome," she said, eating a couple herself. "I wasn't going to let you do this by yourself. It's too dangerous."

"Why isn't June here?"

"For your second mission, you can only bring one person," she said as we looked out at the seagulls still.

"You know...I feel like I don't know anything about you," I said.

"Maybe that's for the best," she said.

"Why?"

"Some things are better kept in the past," she said, her hands gripping the buoy as she stared at her reflection in the sea.

"I don't mind whatever happened in your past. We're friends, right?"

Lila made a circle in the water with her tail, and I watched as the ring of water spun around a few times before disappearing.

She looked at me and said, "I'll tell you my story another

time. But I will say this: Miranda and I aren't exactly on good terms."

"Why not?"

"When she took over, my best friend disappeared. She and Miranda had different beliefs, and I agreed with my friend."

"And what does Miranda believe?"

"She thinks humans are bad," she said.

"Why?"

"Not for one big reason, just a bunch of little reasons. Pollution. How our coral reefs and ways of life are being threatened. Poachers." She shrugged. "And I'm sure Miranda has her own reasons."

She pulled herself off the rusty buoy and slipped into the water below.

"Now let's go. We might have a long way to go."

I followed her and went down.

I looked at the compass, and it began pointing west. We would be going further into the open sea again.

As we swam, Lila came up next to me, and we spotted a boat ahead of us. We gasped as we looked at the compass.

It was pointing straight at it.

CAPTURED



We swam up to the edge of the large boat and peered between the gold rails. It looked like a ginormous yacht. Young men were working on the deck, some of them resting in leather chairs. They wore blue jeans, polos, and a couple of them had red bandanas. They looked like they had been on the water for some time.

The boat was moving fast, and the two of us jumped out of the waves and held onto the rails. Lila had a smile on her face as she landed on the back of the boat.

I hoisted myself up and looked over the edge at the men.

We watched as some of them cleaned the decks, and a few sat on the side playing cards and smoking cigarettes. They didn't look very clean-shaven, and I wondered how long they'd been at sea. Many of them had their feet up in the sun. But what stood out most to me were the piles of stuff around the ship: baseball caps, clothing, lots and lots of gold, cash, even a few diamonds.

I turned to point out the piles to Lila, but she was no

longer next to me. I looked around and saw her working her way around the deck.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

She put her finger to her lips and then kept sliding her right hand along the top. I held onto the side as a large wave crashed against the boat. I heard her tail flop against the side, but it didn't stop her. She continued climbing the boat until she disappeared around the front.

I sighed and followed her around the boat, my arms shaking from having to hold on.

She found a landing on the side of the boat that was hidden from the rest of the boat. She pulled a dress and sweater out of her bag.

"How did you keep those dry?" I whispered.

She slipped on the dress and threw on the sweater, and then she handed me a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and a sweatshirt.

"Put these on. We have to check out the ship," she said. "The other piece of the tracker is on here somewhere, so we need to find it."

After she changed, her tail disappeared, and she struggled to stand up.

"I've never done this before," she said.

I changed too, and we both stood and looked around the corner.

"How are we going to get past them?" I asked as we looked at the crew.

"We'll just have to be careful," Lila said, stumbling slightly as we moved forward. As we were trying to slip by the crew members, I saw something. Two large diamonds were sitting on top of a pile, glistening in the sun. Lila went down to reach for one of them.

Why were there two diamonds on here? And that's when I realized who these men were: pirates.

"Lila, don't!" I whispered.

She grabbed one of them, and a moment later, one of the men grabbed her wrist. I gasped. Suddenly, all the pirates were staring at us. We had been caught.

"Well, look what we have here," he said. He was wearing boat shoes, cutoff jean shorts, a blue polo, and sunglasses. He made eye contact with me. "And she brought a friend."

Some of the crew members walked over to see what was going on. Lila and I stood together, afraid.

"Who are they, Captain?" one of them asked. The captain looked at us and smiled. Then he peered over the side of his ship.

"Hmmm," he said. "I don't see a boat around here, so they must have swum to the boat. They both have shining hair, and one of them seems to be struggling to stand." He turned to the crew and said, "They must be mermaids."

My heart quickened, and I looked over at Lila whose mouth gaped. How did he know about mermaids?

Suddenly, the crew backed away from us, looking afraid.

"Boys, tie them up," he said.

Suddenly, our hands were tied behind our backs, and two men pushed us to the ground.

"So, what to do," he said, pacing back and forth on the deck as he looked at us. He put his hand under his chin as he thought. It was silent for a few moments. "Should we let them go?" the captain asked. "Or should we keep them?"

I tried to fight my way out of the bonds, but the rope was too tight. Lila was very still. When I looked over at her, she had the same emotionless face she wore when she was talking to Miranda.

"I think we are missing something. Don't you?" he yelled

at the crew. He went toward Lila and grabbed her head in his hands. "I think you have something of mine."

She said nothing.

He extended his hand. "Now," he growled.

She did nothing, her eyes defiant.

"Give it to him!" I yelled.

"The voice of reason," he said, looking at me now.

He held his hand out underneath her mouth as he looked at me.

She spat out the diamond she had placed in her mouth.

"Thank you," he said.

"You could've choked on that, Lila."

"Yeah, that was a bad idea."

"She gave it back to you," I said, my voice shaking. "Now let us go."

He laughed. "Let you go?" He pulled a pistol from his back pocket and cocked it. "Now why in the world would we do that?"

He placed the barrel under my chin. "Men," he yelled, "what do we do when someone steals from us? Should we kill them or let them live?"

"Kill them," a few of them said.

I tried to thrash against the guards behind me to break free, but they grasped my shoulders and firmly held me in my place. I gave him a nasty look.

"What was that?" he said, putting his hand behind his ear and pressing the gun tighter against my throat.

"Kill them!" the crew yelled.

The captain looked me in the eye, and I glared back at him and held my breath.

He then took the gun from my throat, and I exhaled, relieved.

A few crew members started to protest, but the captain

put his hands up and said, "This one wasn't the one who tried to steal from us. Maybe we kill her...", he said, turning the gun on Lila, "and let the other one go."

"No!" I screamed. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "What do you want?" I asked desperately.

"What do I want?" he said, chuckling. "Look around, sweetheart! I have everything. I have gold, money, jewels, and two precious mermaids from the sea worth a fortune." He took off his sunglasses and looked at me closer. "Why? Do you have a better option for us?" he asked.

Lila closed her eyes.

"I do have something better," I said. "What if I told you I could help you find your next treasure? There has to be something you've been looking for."

"You're a smart girl," he said, putting his gun away. "A mermaid negotiating. Have you ever heard of this before?" he said to his crew.

Lila opened her eyes, looking relieved.

He came toward me again and looked me in the eyes. His eyes looked kind, not cruel like I'd expected.

"Let's escort them to their room," he said. "We'll talk at dinner." We stood up, and we were guided into a large bedroom. After they let us in, I heard a key lock us in.

"I'm so sorry," Lila said, sitting on the bed in the middle of the room. "This is my fault."

"We can't steal. If we're going to find a diamond, it can't be stolen," I said, sitting down on the bed.

"Agreed."

I looked around the room and noticed how beautiful it was. The bedding was a dark, navy blue, and the bulkheads, the walls, were patterned in blue and gold. The maple-colored furniture was neatly arranged.

There was a closet full of expensive-looking dresses and

outfits that I assumed only a model would wear. And I even noticed a small kitchenette and bathroom adjacent to it. I practically ran toward the kitchenette to see what I could find.

“Are you hungry?” I asked Lila as I searched the cabinets.

“No, I lost my appetite,” she said as she lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

I found some chips in one of the cabinets, and when I opened the refrigerator, I found some lemonade

“Have some of this at least. We haven’t eaten all day,” I said, handing her a glass.

Lila took a sip of it, and said, “What is this? It’s delicious?”

“Lemonade,” I said.

“It needs a little salt,” she said.

After Lila took some sips of lemonade, she said, “How are we ever going to get out of here?”

“We’ll find a way. I’m sure we’ll find out at dinner,” I said.

We both fell asleep on the bed for an hour or so, and then I heard someone knock on the door.

“Dinner,” I heard. “And the captain said to wear something nice.”

I turned to the closet, and I said, “Lila, what do you want to wear?”

She sat up in bed quickly to look at the dresses.

WHEN WE WERE BOTH DRESSED, we left the room to go to dinner. Lila looked beautiful in a deep blue gown, and I wore the most practical dress I could find: a light blue dress with black piping and flowers.

We opened the door and were face-to-face with two crew members. They walked us to the deck below where we

would be dining. The captain was already sitting at the long dining table, and we sat down across from him.

Everything about this boat was expensive-looking. The table was dark brown, and the chairs were adorned with gold cushions. There was a marble bar on one of the walls, and five floor-to-ceiling windows made up the other wall, dark waves splashing up against the glass.

He grabbed a bottle of wine from the bar and poured it into our glasses. Lila started to reach for hers, but I placed my hand on her arm and shook my head.

He looked at her, and I could tell that she had taken his breath away. I looked over at Lila, and she did look stunning in her beautiful dress—it made her eyes look even bluer than they were. He cleared his throat and made quick business of putting the wine back on the bar and taking his seat.

“So, where are you ladies from?” he asked as he took a sip.

He winked at Lila. She blushed and looked down at the silverware and plate in front of her. It was clear she wasn’t sure how to use the utensils.

“We’re mermaids. I don’t think it’s too difficult to know where we’re from,” I said.

The captain looked at me, his face blank. Then he shook his head, chuckled softly, and pulled something out from underneath the table.

“This was given to me by my father many years ago,” he said, placing a map next to his plate. “He says that there is some kind of hidden treasure down below in a ship that’s within a few miles of here. He believed that the treasure’s worth at least fifty million dollars. I need you to help me to find it,” he said.

He pulled out photos of the shipwreck and showed me where to look for the treasure.

"It's in shark-infested waters, so you will have to be quick."

He put the photos aside and showed us the map. "We don't know where the ship is, but it's somewhere around here," he said, pointing at a spot a little north of us. "Until you find the treasure, you're not going home."

"You're asking us to risk our lives."

"That's the price for stealing. Or attempting to. By the way, you have wonderful taste. Those diamonds are exquisite," he said with a chuckle.

I could die out there. But if this is what it took to get off this boat, I was willing to do it.

"There's a large reef near the treasure. You'll know you're getting close if you see a huge group of sharks nearby...."

His words faded as I thought about the people on land. Jared, Matt, Kristen, Jan—I needed at least one of them to know where I was.

If only I could find a cell phone, I thought. I wondered if they had one on the boat. I was scanning the room slowly to see if there was one around when the chef brought out dinner and set our plates in front of us. I looked down and immediately felt sick to my stomach.

"I thought you would enjoy this," he told us. "It's dolphin."

Lila's eyes snapped up. She stood up from her chair, stumbled around, and ran out to the balcony, leaving the door wide open. I could see her throwing up.

He put his napkin down and went after her.

"Come on! I was joking! It's not actual dolphin," he said.

She stood with her back to him, still shaken from the thought of eating fish as he talked to her. He seemed to be flirting with her. She turned around and laughed at something he'd said, and they both walked back to the table. I shot her a confused look when she sat back down, but she didn't

see it; she was too enthralled in her conversation with him, which had apparently moved on to the topic of food. He was talking to her about human foods like tiramisu and chocolate soufflé.

I threw my napkin down and walked out of the room. I was furious. She got us into this mess, and now she was flirting with the same guy that was asking us to risk our lives to find treasure that he wouldn't get himself.

I went to our room. I sat down on the bed and put my head in my hands. When I closed my eyes, I could already see the sharks. This was not the way that I had expected it to end.

I lay back on the bed and looked up at the ornate ceiling. There were small patterns that looked to be hand-painted, and everything was shiny and gold. If I wasn't about to swim through a shark nest tomorrow, I could have probably enjoyed it. But my stomach was pitting with fear.

Some time passed, and I wondered if Lila was still with the captain. I felt guilty for leaving her there, so I walked out and started making my way back to the dining area. But then I had a thought—I still needed to find the other part of the compass.

Instead of going downstairs to the dinner, I opened my locket with some water, and I followed the arrow, which I now realized could point upward as well. I went up the stairs toward the top deck. I saw a door immediately to my right and went inside. There was a grand-looking desk and a leather wingback chair in here, and pictures of old sailboats and a map hung on the wall. I realized this was the captain's quarters.

I had to be quick. I followed the arrow of the compass around the room, bumping into a dark, wooden cabinet. I looked behind my shoulder to see if anyone was coming, and

I could see that I had left the door slightly open. I opened the cabinet, and inside, a silver disc was lying in the back of the shelf. I took it, and the compass starting spinning as I moved the tracker toward it. I put it inside the locket and closed it.

I hurried to leave, but then I saw a moonbeam filtering through the porthole onto the desk. I snatched it up and checked for bars on the phone. When I saw I had a signal, I dialed Matt's number in on it immediately.

"Hey, Matt. It's me," I said.

"Where are you?! Whose phone is this? I was so worried about you. You know, Jan's worried sick about this. When I asked her about you, she told me you'd left for a trip."

"I'm in the middle of the ocean—south of Monterey. I'm not sure where exactly," I said.

"Does anyone else know besides Jan and me?"

"No, just you two."

"I'm the first person you called?" he asked, and I heard a slight smile in his voice on the other end.

"Yeah," I said.

"Are you...safe?" I heard Matt say.

"How are you?" I asked, changing the subject as I thought of the sharks.

"I've been better," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"Nah, don't worry about it," he said. "Promise me you'll be safe," he insisted.

"I'll try," I said. I heard footsteps approaching. "I have to go. Bye," I said.

I hung up the phone and tossed it onto the desk.

The captain walked in. He didn't say a word as he went over to his chair and sat down. He looked at me, down at the phone, and then back to me.

"Who did you say you were?" he asked, narrowing his

eyes at me. I gulped and stepped back from him, turning to leave.

"No, no, don't go. Just explain to me who you are." There was a threatening tone to his voice. "You're not like the other mermaids I've met."

"How many have you met?" I asked, my voice small.

He walked over to a minibar and poured himself a soda.

"I've been around long enough to know you're not like the others."

"But you look young," I said. He didn't respond to that.

"I make it my business to know all that happens around here. I know every sailboat that passes, every shipwreck from here to Hawaii. And as for mermaids," he said, leaning toward me. "I've met, I'd say, at least a dozen in my lifetime, but none of them were like you. You talk on cell phones, negotiate, use silverware. So, who are you?"

I hesitated and looked away. "Not every mermaid has the same background. Maybe if I make it out tomorrow, I'll tell you about it."

"I'd like to hear it now," he said, looking at me earnestly. "I'll give you back the cell phone."

I sighed and sat down in a chair opposite him.

"Where are you really from?" he asked, sipping his drink.

"Chicago," I told him. He laughed so hard that his eyes began to water.

"You're kidding me," he said. I shook my head. "Chicago?!" he said, laughing again. "Why would you be in Chicago?"

I didn't trust him, so I knew not to say much. "My aunt and I moved there before I knew I was a mermaid. I lived there until just a few months ago."

"I've been to Chicago. Good pizza," he said. He looked at

me quizzically. "You are the strangest person I've ever met. You *are* different."

"Yeah, I know. Can you tell me why the crew was looking at us so afraid?"

"You don't know?" he asked. I shook my head.

"You're not the average mermaid, Miss Chicago. Many of them enjoy sinking ships or leading our boats into storms.... Mermaids have a keen sense of the weather. When the crew saw you, they were afraid you two would do the same," he said.

"You said you knew of any shipwreck in this area, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Any shipwreck?"

"Are you mocking me?" he asked.

"What do you know about the large storm that happened twelve years ago off Santa Cruz?"

"Lots. If you find me my treasure, we can have a conversation." He looked at me carefully. "You remind me of someone, but I'm not sure why..." he said, thinking for a moment. I looked at him curiously.

"It's your smile. About twenty years ago, I met a mermaid named Cassie," he said. I inhaled sharply. He'd said my mother's name. "She was the most beautiful mermaid I had ever seen. Well, until Lila," he said, rubbing his head bashfully. He cleared his throat and continued. "She was murdered."

"By who?" I asked.

"I don't know, exactly. Her disappearance is one of the biggest mysteries in the sea right now. No one really knows what happened to her, but she was killed during that storm you asked about."

"You're sure she was murdered? You just said she died in the storm."

"That I am sure about. I don't know by who or with what," he said, shrugging.

I nodded. "What's your name?" I asked him. "And if you don't mind me saying, I'm kind of having a hard time believing you. You look really young for a pirate who met a mermaid twenty years ago."

"Captain Seaver," he said, shaking my hand. "And I'm not a pirate. I'm a treasure hunter. I find my treasure without stealing. And as for the youthfulness, I'm a shapeshifter. I can change into any animal, and I can make my face look younger, or older, but it seems to stay naturally young."

"A shapeshifter?"

"Yes."

"Huh," I said. "Well, I'm Katrina."

He chuckled. "I'll see you in the morning, Miss Chicago. And take the phone," he said, tossing it to me.

I walked out of the room and back to mine. Lila was asleep in the bed, so I called Matt and then Jan to let them know what was going on.

"Winter break is almost over. You're going to have to come home soon," Jan said.

"I know."

"Jared's called twice to see if I'd heard from you," she said. I sighed. "I guess I'd better call him."

"Yes, I think you should," she said. "Bye, Kate."

"Bye."

I dialed Jared's number. He picked up after one ring.

"It's Katrina, hey," I said, trying to keep my tone light.

"When will you be home?" he asked. He seemed distressed.

"I'll be home in two days—"

"I didn't know you were gone," he said.

"I went on a trip for a few days. How's golfing?"

"It's fine," he said. "It's been nice to get out of town for a little while."

As I talked to him, I worried about the next day. What if I didn't make it?

"Jared, I want you to know that I love you. So much."

"I love you, too," he said. "I just don't like not being with you. I can't keep you safe if I'm not around."

"We'll be together soon. Ice cream when I get back?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"I love you," I said again. "Bye."

"Bye," he said and hung up the phone.

Lila was still wearing her dress, which surprised me because mine was incredibly uncomfortable. I went into the closet and found a cotton nightgown. I put it on and climbed into the bed.

Lila was sleeping soundly, but my racing thoughts were making it difficult for me to fall asleep.

But even more so than the sharks, I thought about how Captain Seaver knew my mother and what he said about her—that she was murdered.

But how?

And why?

And I thought about my mother's smile. I hadn't considered our smiles before. But I finally had something of hers.

SHIPWRECK



I woke up the next morning, tired and exhausted. I hadn't slept much all night. I was anxious for today.

I opened my backpack and took out my mother's journal. I flipped through the pages, hoping to find something in here about sharks. There wasn't much.

Entry #19: You may be able to camouflage against sharks, and it should buy you some time. But sharks have a good sense of smell.... They don't need to see you to know you're there.

But I'm not sure that sharks are really monsters. Maybe, there's a way to get along with them.

I sighed and put the journal back in my backpack. Lila and I gathered our things and went to the top deck.

"Come inside, ladies," the captain said as we walked into the dining room. He gave us a large breakfast, which I ate quickly, not knowing when I would get a chance to eat again.

"Here is the map," he said, handing it to me. "We're on our way to the area now, and we should be there in about an hour."

"Wait, where are we?" I asked, looking at the map.

"It's not important."

"We have to get home soon," I said.

"You'll go home when this is finished."

He explained again where we would find the ship and reminded us about the sharks, which didn't help to put my mind at ease. When he was done showing us where we would be going, he took us to the deck. He put a bracelet around my wrist.

"To track you," he said. "All right," he said as we approached where we would be getting out.

"How do you know we're not going to just swim away?"

"Because you're going alone," he said, picking me up and throwing me over the railing and into the water.

"No!" I screamed as I hit the water. I swam up to the surface, my head bobbing above the waves. Lila was gripping the railing and looking down.

"Be careful, Katrina!" she shouted.

"We'll be waiting for you. You have until sunset, or we're sailing away with your friend."

I dove under. Maybe it was going to be better this way: I didn't want Lila to get hurt. But taking this on alone was more daunting than anything I had ever done.

I was shaking. I closed my eyes, and I tried to take some deep breaths. I could do this.

I swam forward and unrolled the map. It was laminated, so it was waterproof, which was helpful. The shipwreck was within five miles of my location.

"I'm so sorry," I heard Lila say.

"Just go back to talking to your new friend."

"He's not as bad as he seems."

"He is making me find his treasure and keeping you captive on his ship."

"I think he's lonely. I really am sorry."

"I'll find it."

"If you can't find it, just leave me behind. I'll be okay."

"I won't leave you."

"You might have to."

"I'm going to find it."

"Be careful."

And I said nothing more. I swam down, the water temperature changing. I wasn't cold, but I knew the temperature was dropping nevertheless.

I swam through a cave, pausing to look at the map to see where to go next. Green-blue light hit the cave's walls. Light beams filtered through like spotlights, and the walls were rocky and scaley.

I swam through the cave, looking at the algae growing along the wall or the gray fish darting below. I swam down toward the small opening at the bottom of the cave, going several yards down, and then I pulled myself through it.

After I pulled through, I came up to a large stone. I looked down at the map, and I realized I'd found the first mark.

"Tell him I found the first mark."

"I told him. He said good job and that you're getting closer."

I pressed on. Hours were passing by, I knew that, and I guessed it to be about three o'clock in the afternoon. I was looking for a reef, but there were just miles and miles of sand and rocks and ocean.

"I think I'm lost."

But then in the distance, I saw the big reef. It was beautiful from far away, but as I got closer, I noticed the sharks. There were about half a dozen of them.

I closed my eyes and camouflaged myself, hoping to hide from the sharks, but I remembered my mother's words. I was going to have to be fast.

"I found the reef. There are so many sharks, Lila."

"Please be careful."

I swam toward them slowly, trying to hide behind large pieces of seaweed along the way. And as I got closer to the reef, the seaweed got thicker until it was a forest.

My heart was racing. Suddenly, I felt the whoosh of water as a shark swam by. I let out a gasp. Three sharks heard me, or smelled me, and they came swimming and charging at me. I darted further into more seaweed and swam for my life. I weaved in and out of the seaweed, the sharks closing in on me. My camouflage stopped from all of this.

Soon, there were seven of them swimming after me, hungry looks in their eyes. I flicked my tail faster and swam in a circle. Some of them crashed into each other, and I disappeared into the dense seaweed. It slithered against my arms, and I shook with fear. I then saw one of the sharks heading toward me. I spotted an octopus, and I looked at him.

"Could use your help."

There was a shark behind me, and the octopus squirted the shark. It paused, and it was enough time for me to get away.

"Thanks."

"Swim!"

I continued swimming, zigzagging through more kelp and pressed further up toward the reef. There were dozens of sharks nesting around the coral, and I slowed down and crept underneath them, trying to stay unnoticed, camouflaging myself again.

As soon as I was in the clear, I swam as fast as I could. After about half a mile, when I realized they weren't chasing me anymore, I slowed down.

But then, from out of nowhere, a shark the size of a

submarine barreled toward me. I tried to duck out of the way, but it bit at my tail. I screamed as I fell to the ocean floor. Desperate, I put my hand up over my eyes and communicated.

"Leave me alone."

"Fine," said the shark. *"We'll leave you alone."*

I looked up, and the shark swam off. That worked?!

I didn't have time to process what had just happened. I had to get the treasure fast, and I swam quickly toward the shipwreck.

"I've found it," I told Lila.

"We're on our way."

The ship was at least three hundred years old. I was afraid to go near it because of the wooden planks jutting out of the sides, but I knew I didn't really have a choice. I pulled myself through a porthole on the side and found myself in a large room.

"What room did he say it would be in?"

"He says go to the living room."

I searched through the rooms and ended up in some kind of bedroom. It was beautiful and somewhat preserved. There was a large bed, and dresses were still hanging in the closet. Jewelry and other precious items lay next to a jewelry box on top of a dresser.

I left the bedroom and found the living room. A large chest sat on the floor in the corner. I went to open it, but the lid wouldn't budge.

"It's locked."

"He said there's a key in the jewelry box."

I went back into the bedroom and opened the jewelry box. Inside was an ornate key with a top made of ruby and little pearls lining it. It looked like it was worth a fortune.

I took the key back to the living room and stuck it in the lock on the chest. It opened with a loud click.

Inside, there were beautiful gold coins, expensive velvet, silver, and several large gems. Necklaces, bracelets, and a fancy egg-shaped item lay strewn across the coins. At the bottom of the chest, I found some kind of locket with a note attached to it.

DON'T LET ANYONE READ THIS, KATRINA. TAKE THE LOCKET.

What? I shoved it in my backpack, unsure of what to make of that, but then I brought my attention back to the chest.

"We found you...or I found you. We're throwing down a rope. Tie it to the chest, and we'll pull it up."

I did what she said, but I was becoming weak. I felt dizzy, and my tail was still bleeding from the shark bite.

"Try lifting it."

It was lifting slowly, but then I noticed the rope was starting to break. I swam, grabbing the treasure, flicking my fins quickly as I began swimming upward with it through the blue ocean water. I was becoming dizzy with each stroke, and I tried to keep my eyes open.

Just as I felt like I wouldn't make it, I emerged from the water. The sun was about to set.

The crew cheered as they hoisted me and the chest up into the boat. I lay on the deck, completely exhausted as my legs came back. Some of the crew had gathered around me, I saw Lila, and the next thing I knew, everything went black.

When I woke up, I was laying on a bed. My legs were propped up and the right leg was covered in bandages. Lila sat next to me, holding my hand and looking concerned.

"You're awake!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around my neck. "Are you okay?"

"Never better," I said, smiling weakly.

"You risked your life for me. I'll never forget that," she said.

"Did we get the treasure?" I asked.

"Yes, and you won't believe what you found. There was an egg that belonged to a queen from the seventeenth century, and her initials were on the chest. It was hers."

"That's great," I said. "They have their treasure. Can we go now?"

"Yes, they're taking us back to Santa Cruz," she said happily. She was wearing some kind of diamond around her neck, and I frowned. It wasn't the diamond that we needed.

"What is that?" I asked, nodding at the diamond.

"Oh, Mav gave it to me," she said shyly.

"Is that the captain's name?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's Maverick," she said. "Can you give me a hand?" I asked. She pulled me up, but when I put my feet on the floor and tried to stand, my legs were still too weak, and I lay back down.

We heard a knock on the door. As I watched Lila walk over to the door, I noticed she was in another evening dress.

She opened the door. The captain was there to escort her upstairs. And without another word to me, she took his arm, and they left.

I looked around the room, feeling annoyed, tired, and hungry.

A few moments later, I tried to stand up again and although I was weak, I could take a few steps without stumbling. I slowly made my way to the top deck, but Lila and Mav were nowhere to be seen. The crew members gave me a round of applause, and I smiled a little. I knocked on the door of the captain's quarters, and I heard them laughing.

"Come in!" he called.

I opened the door and shuffled into the room.

"Thank you, Katrina, for recovering the treasure for me. Are you feeling better?"

"I'm okay."

"We'll be near the coast in a few minutes."

"Put me up near the sand," I said. He nodded.

I went outside and smiled when I saw the coast. When we reached the beach, I waved to the crew and walked off the boat and onto the sand.

I turned around, Lila and Mav were giving each other a long kiss. She then dove off the side of the boat and splashed into the water.

"I'll find you soon," he said, smiling at her.

"I'm not sure you will," she said coyly. "But I'll always know where you are."

He laughed and gripped the railing as he looked at her. Lila disappeared in the water soon after, and Mav's boat soon faded out of my eyesight. As I walked on the sand, I reached into my backpack and pulled out a note.

THANK YOU. —MAVERICK

Inside, I removed the note and looked down at the large diamond in my hand. I grinned and lay on the sand.

HOSPITAL



Someone was shaking my shoulder. I peeked my eyes open.

It was Matt.

“Wake up, Katrina,” he said.

“I’m awake,” I mumbled sleepily.

“How long have you been here?”

I sat up and looked around. I must have fallen asleep on the beach; the sun had already set.

“What did you do to your leg?” he said, looking down.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Kate, it’s not nothing. You’re still bleeding,” he said. I looked down and could see that blood was seeping through the bandages. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

He picked me up and began carrying me up the beach. We were halfway through the parking lot when I saw Jared come over in his truck.

He shut the driver’s side door and immediately came up to us. “What did you do to her?!” he yelled at Matt.

"I was the one who found her. At least I try to take care of her," Matt yelled.

Matt gently placed me on the black asphalt, and the two of them glared at each other.

"Will you both just stop?!" I cried. "It's not Matt's fault."

"I found her passed out by the water," Matt said as Jared came toward me.

"Kate, what happened to you?" Jared asked, wrapping his arm around me. "Why didn't you tell me you were back?"

"I just got back. I don't have my phone or else I would have called to let you know," I said.

Jared scooped me up off the ground. "I'll take her to my dad. She needs to see a doctor."

"Your dad's a vet," Matt said. "Suit yourself." He shrugged, turned to me, and said, "You're going to be okay."

I nodded and let Jared place me in his truck. He began driving and didn't say anything. He gripped the steering wheel tightly as he sped down the street.

"Kate, how did this happen?" he asked finally. His voice was low, and he was clearly upset.

"I was swimming," I admitted.

"You were swimming, and what happened?"

"Um..."

Thankfully, we made it to his house before I had time to give him the full explanation. Jared carried me out of his truck and into the house, letting the screen door slam shut behind him.

He carefully brought me into the living room and placed me on the couch. "Dad?" he called.

"Back here!" Mr. O'Connor called from a room near the back of the house. Jared picked me up and carried me into what looked like a medical room.

Mr. O'Connor peeled back the bandages and examined

the wound. "Were you bit by a shark, Kate?" he asked. "You'd be the second shark bite I've seen this week."

"I think so."

"Matt found her passed out near the water," he said.

"You've lost a lot of blood. I'm not even going to try to stitch you up myself. We need to bring you to the emergency room..."

His voice started to fade out, and the room began to spin. I felt dizzy and knew I was going to pass out. But before it did, I prayed that I would be okay.

I DIDN'T OPEN my eyes. All I could hear was talking.

"She should be awake soon," I heard someone say.

I wanted to open my eyes, but I felt weak, and it felt like my body was weighed down by cement.

"Brandon? Where's Brandon?" I whispered, my mouth dry.

And I fell asleep again.

Some time had passed, and I could feel someone holding my hand.

My eyes fluttered open. I was connected to an IV, and my leg was wrapped in fresh bandages.

"Hey," I heard a woman say. I turned my head and saw Jan. "You're okay," she said, smiling weakly and brushing my hair away from my face.

All my friends were here. Kristen, Sam, Grey, Matt, and Jared were standing near the door, holding balloons and "Get Well Soon" signs. And, strangely, Lila was with them. Lila was here?

"Hi, guys," I said, smiling.

"Hey," they said.

A nurse came in to check my chart. "You have quite the

crew here," she said, turning to them. "Why don't you give her some space?"

"Jared can stay. He's her boyfriend," Jan said.

Jared stayed behind, and I could tell Matt wanted to stay as well. He had a very concerned look on his face, but he begrudgingly left with the others.

Jared came and sat next to me, his eyes sad.

"I'm going to go so you can talk alone," Jan said as she patted my hand. I nodded and watched her walk out the hospital door, gently closing it behind her.

Jared took my hand and said, "I thought I was going to lose you. The doctor said you lost a lot of blood."

"What happened?" I said, trying to remember.

"You were bitten by a shark. They gave you nine stitches."

I looked at my leg and felt a dull throbbing pain where I was bitten.

"Nine stitches?" He nodded.

It all came back to me: the shark, the boat, and the diamond.

Wait. Where was the diamond?

"I'm just glad you're okay," Jared said, looking down. "It's not safe...around here anymore."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We've noticed an increased number of sharks around the Santa Cruz and Monterey area. Please stay out of the water," he said, the lines on his forehead creased with worry. "But, I have to ask—when did you learn how to swim?"

I opened my mouth to answer when I heard a knock on the door. Lila walked in.

"Okay, I'll go," he said, kissing the top of my forehead. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

He smiled at me, his blue eyes creasing at the sides, and

then he walked away. I watched him give Lila a wary look for a moment, and then he left the room.

"I think I lost the diamond," I said.

"Not to worry. I grabbed it," she said as she showed it to me.

I sighed in relief, adjusting myself in the hospital bed.

"How did you know where I was? How did you know—"

"I went home for a few hours, but then I swam back, and I saw you still on the beach with that boy Matt shaking you awake. I camouflaged myself and followed you and Jared to the truck so that nobody could see me, and then I reached into your pocket to grab the diamond. I stayed in the car all the way until they took you to the hospital."

"Wow, that was pretty sneaky."

She laughed. "You make me feel young."

"You *are* young."

"No, I'm not that young. I'm forty-two years old."

"What? You look like you're, like, twenty-five."

"Mermaids age a little differently," she said.

"Can all mermaids camouflage?" I asked. "I can, too."

"Kind of," she said. "Mermaids in the Pacific Ocean can make themselves almost invisible. But most mermaids are able to at least blend into their surroundings."

I sighed. "It looks like I won't be able to come in the water for a couple of weeks because of the stitches."

"We'll figure it out. I'm happy you're all right," she said.

Grey then peeked her head in.

"Looks like you have another visitor. I'll see you soon," she said.

Lila left and nodded to Grey, closing the door softly behind her.

"Hey, are you feeling okay?" Grey asked as she handed me some chocolate.

"Not really, but thanks."

She came and sat on the edge of the bed. "You're pretty brave to have survived a shark attack."

"Grey, I'm scared that Jared is going to find out. I'm worried that it's becoming somewhat...obvious," I said.

"People believe what they want to believe," she said, shaking her head. "How did you get hurt? What were you doing?"

"A queen named Miranda made me go on missions," I said. "And I ended up getting bitten by a great white shark."

"Missions?" she asked.

"I have to go on these missions to be accepted by the pod. I had to go up the coast to collect a rare pearl, and for the other one I had to collect a diamond. We saw some sharks along the way, and we were attacked twice. The first time, I got out okay, but the second, I was bitten."

"That sounds dangerous," she said.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry this happened," she said. "You had us worried."

"I know. I hope it gets easier."

"Life is full of unexpected moments," she said.

"Thank you, Grey," I said.

"I'll see you later," she said, blowing me a kiss as she left the room.

I had some food, and then I slept right through until morning. When I woke up, Jan was sitting next to me, and the doctor handed me my discharge papers. I was supposed to be on crutches for the next couple of weeks.

When I got home, the first thing I did was collapse on my bed. I grabbed my stuffed animal Charlie and closed my eyes.

I heard a knock on the door a few moments later.

"Come in," I mumbled into my pillow.

Jan walked in with a tub of caramel sea salt ice cream. She

handed me a spoon and took a seat next to me on the bed, a concerned look on her face.

I took a few bites, savoring the sweet taste on my taste-buds as she stared at me.

"What?" I asked, taking another mouthful.

"Kate, all this mermaid stuff..." she sighed, "It's dangerous. It was dangerous with your mom, and it's obviously dangerous for you," she said, pausing a moment. "We can move again. I'm willing to let go of the aquarium if it means you'll be safe."

No, I wasn't moving again. I had accomplished so much, and I was closer than ever to finding out more about what happened to my mother.

"I don't want to move. Not again," I said.

"But how can we keep you safe? How can we prevent this from happening again?"

"Jan, I am trying to do the right thing, whatever that is. And I'll be more careful next time."

"I just can't lose you. You're my little girl," Jan said, pulling me into a hug. "Anyway, I picked this up for you," she said, pulling something out of her pocket. "It's a smartwatch. It's completely waterproof, and there's a GPS tracker on it. I thought you could text or call me with it," she said.

"Thank you," I said, fastening the strap around my wrist. This would come in handy. It was better than trying to borrow a stranger's cell phone in the middle of the ocean.

Jan squeezed my hand as she got off the bed. She walked over to the door and looked back over her shoulder at me. I smiled at her, and she closed the door behind her.

Finally. I could be alone with my thoughts and try to process all of this, and I tried to recall what had happened over the last few days.

Maverick thought my mother had been murdered. Was that true? I needed confirmation, and I now knew it was time to go see Dr. Keys. Not immediately, but sometime within the coming week. I remembered the file that Dr. Keys had written about, and I wanted to ask him what he knew and what had he found out in those years of research about the storm.

But as I lay there with my ice cream, it felt weird being back. I had grown somewhat used to having fins during the missions with Lila. And to be honest, I kind of missed being in the sea. As glad as I was to be done with the missions, part of me longed to be back in the water, swimming through the waves.

THE NEXT TWO DAYS, I lay in bed. Jared and I alternated between talking on the phone and video-chatting.

“So, I want to do a group camping trip when you feel better. What do you say? I was thinking we could invite some friends. Maybe Sam and Kristen?” he asked.

“Yeah, that sounds like a lot of fun,” I said. “Once I get off these crutches.”

He laughed. “Okay. That’s a plan.”

I felt really fatigued after my back-to-back journeys. It was nice to catch up on some reading and get ready to head back to school in a couple of days.

On Saturday morning, I wanted to visit Dr. Keys at the lighthouse, but I knew I’d need a ride. So, I called Matt.

When he pulled up in his car ten minutes later, he rolled down the window and flashed me a grin.

“Get in, blondie,” he said.

I hobbled over to the car and put the crutches in the back seat. I turned to Matt and said, “You know, I never really

thanked you for what you did.” He looked nervous for a second, but then I said, “For finding me at the beach.”

He visibly relaxed. “No problem. You looked like you needed the help. I’m just glad you’re okay.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “You know, you scared me practically to death.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t need to be sorry. Just try to be careful,” he said.

As I looked at him, I thought back to his kiss with Kristen.

“Okay. So, I know this is none of my business, but I have to ask. Is there anything going on between you and Kristen?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “What gave you that idea?” When I didn’t say anything, he said, “Were you spying at us on the beach?”

I looked away. “Maybe.”

He sighed and didn’t answer me. We pulled up to the lighthouse, and I had my hand on the door handle when he said, “There’s only been one girl in my life that I’ve loved, and it’s not Kristen. Does that answer your question?”

When I looked over at him, he had an intense look in his eyes, and my heart started to race. I gave him a curt nod, grabbed my crutches, and climbed out of the car.

I replayed his words in my head as I hobbled up to the lighthouse. He couldn’t possibly be talking about me. Could he? Or maybe there was some girl in Michigan that he left behind....

As I approached the lighthouse, it looked like it was going to storm.

“Of course,” I said under my breath.

I opened the door to the lighthouse. Dr. Keys was sitting at his desk.

“We need to talk about my mother.”

KEYS



“So, you’ve figured it out, then. You know,” he said, leaning back in his chair.

“I know,” I said.

“Then there’s something you should have.”

He walked out of his office and came back with a golden key.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s just ironic. My mom sent me a map,” I said, pulling it out of my bag to show him. “And she said that ‘keys’ was a clue. I thought you were the clue, but I guess this was too.”

He looked down at the map with a clueless expression on his face.

“The map’s blank,” he said.

I looked down at it. “What?”

He straightened up and slid the key across the table.

“This key unlocks something in Chicago,” he said.

That figures. Brandon and I spent so much time trying to

figure out what the circle on the map around Chicago meant, but we needed this key to help us find the clue. But then I realized something—Keys couldn't see the map, but Brandon *could*. Why?

"You should know that I didn't find out who she was until about a year after she passed away. The only people who knew she was a mermaid was your dad, Jan, and Mr. Johnson, your friend's father. Even Jan kept it a secret from me. When Jan and I were dating, Cassandra gave me this key and told me to give it to you when you turned eighteen. I didn't know what it was for, only that it opened something in Chicago."

I picked it up and slid it into my bag, thanking him. "I do have to ask you something, though," I said. "I was wondering what you found out about the storm...the hurricane. I read your file in the aquarium."

He nodded, and he pulled something out of a drawer in his desk. "After researching what happened with the storm, I came to the conclusion that it wasn't something that could have occurred naturally. And on the day of the storm, I found this," he said, showing me a small white scale. Even though it was dried out, it still glimmered slightly.

"That's a mermaid scale," I said.

"Yes. I figured out that it wasn't just strange weather, and that the storm was caused by a mermaid, or many mermaids," he said. "Here. You can have it."

I turned the scale over and watched as it glistened slightly. It was smooth to the touch and durable.

"What happened to her? Someone has to know."

He frowned and said, "You already know she died the day of the storm. But if you want my honest opinion, I think she was murdered." There it was again. "You should know that she loved you so much," he said. He was silent for a few

moments, reminiscing as he looked out the window. "You should probably go now. I think the storm is coming in soon. Do you need a ride?"

"I have one," I said. "Thank you for the information. And the key."

I walked out the door, and when I went outside, I saw that Matt's car was gone. The storm was rolling in, and I could feel the air becoming humid. The wind was blowing at me. I guess I'd need that ride after all.

* * *

DURING THE FIRST few days of school, I was glad to be back and ready for things to get back to normal.

I was surprised by how fast word had spread that I survived a shark attack. Lots of classmates wished me well, and I got some head nods from people who thought it was cool. I didn't share that opinion. And once I had my stitches out, I didn't have to use crutches anymore.

The stitches left a large scar on my leg. I hoped that it wouldn't transfer onto my tail.

I put my backpack down at the lunch table, and Kristen ran toward me, her honey-colored hair swinging a little.

"Did you hear the news? They've announced the prom theme!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Under the Sea!" she said, grinning.

Kristen, Helen, and Bri looked excited. Now that Bri and Sam were dating, she began sitting with us at lunch. I sighed and picked at my salad with my fork.

"Are you not excited?" Kristen asked, frowning at my reaction.

"I was just hoping for Paris, that's all."

It was so unlike me to care this much about something as simple as a prom theme. But the last thing I wanted was to be reminded of how different I was from everyone else.

As I thought about my scar, my thoughts drifted to Miranda. I was going to have to give her the diamond sometime; it might as well be today now that I could swim again.

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Lila said when I arrived at her cave. She hugged me, and we went inside the cave.

“I’m much better,” I said. “But look,” I said, frowning at the side of my tail. There was a scar there.

“Mermaids wouldn’t happen to have healing abilities like the dolphins, would they?” I asked.

“No, but don’t worry about it. It doesn’t look bad,” she said. “We could try wrapping it in some seaweed to help the healing.”

“Would that help?”

She shrugged.

“It’s okay,” I said. I then noticed the barrette in Lila’s hair.

“I love your barrette. You used the abalone pearl.”

“Yes, June designed it. Good luck. Miranda’s not happy. There have been multiple shark sightings, and they seem to be increasing.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Anyway, come back and see me later, okay? And here’s the diamond. You should go now before it gets dark.”

I opened the rock door and swam through the opening. On the way to Miranda, I saw George with another sea turtle next to him. Baby turtles were floating around them.

“Are these your babies?”

“Yes, and this is my wife Joan.”

"Nice to meet you, Joan."

"George has told me all about you."

*"I have to go see Miranda, but congratulations on the babies.
And thanks again for the help."*

"My pleasure."

"Goodbye."

I swam away and went straight to the castle.

"YOU FOUND THE DIAMOND. I'm impressed," Miranda said, looking at it in awe. "I heard you were bitten by a shark. Your wound has healed," she said, nodding at the indentation on the side of my tail. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, much."

"Katrina, I have some questions for you," she said, guiding me toward a window that overlooked the sea kingdom. "You're a Northerner, and I hear your people are quite kind-hearted to the humans. What do you think of them?"

I knew what she wanted to hear, but I wasn't going to cave to her. "I think humans are better than what mermaids think."

"How so? I mean, they are polluting our ocean with plastic and chemicals, and they clearly have no regard for sea life. They're barbaric. Do you know how many wars humans get in with each other?"

"Wouldn't you call an attack on humans a war?" I asked, thinking about my dad. My parents disappeared in a storm, and Maverick and Keys both thought my parents were murdered. It had to have been mermaids.

She narrowed her eyes and smirked. "You're smarter than I thought," she said, taking a bite out of some seaweed. "Do your people share your opinions?"

"Northerners are gentle toward humans," I said, remembering my mother's words.

"I think you're wrong. I think humans are to be feared. Think. They are a danger to the existence of our kind. And each year, they are closer to discovering who we are. Each year, pollution continues to devastate our ocean."

"Maybe we should talk to them and try to reason with them."

She laughed and said, "I almost forgot how young and naive you are. We don't need to reason with them. I got rid of the last mermaid that tried to reason with the humans. She was way too friendly with them, in my opinion, and she got what she deserved. The White Queen would agree with me."

The White Queen. It seemed familiar, somehow...

"You got rid of her?"

"Yes. And I would do the same to any mermaid who dared cross me and make peaceful relations with humans."

Then it hit me.

It wasn't just mermaids who had murdered my parents.

It was Miranda.

And I suddenly felt afraid.

"I won't offer you a place in the pod. You are far too different than the rest of us. And, I must admit, far braver as well. I didn't expect you to be able to find an abalone pearl, better yet, a diamond of this size.

"But you are welcome to visit here as you wish. I know you have become quite close with our hermit crab Lila. It's good for her, too; she barely talks to anyone except for Junopia. And I owe you a bead," she said. "I thought it was fitting." She handed me the bead, which was an iridescent pearl, and it had the shark's fin engraving on the side.

"Goodbye, Katrina. I have a feeling I will be seeing you around."

And with that, she swam off to a different part of the castle.

On my way back to Lila's, I opened the map.

I *knew* the name sounded familiar. Next to Alaska, there was a note, which said: *The White Queen*.

I went inside Lila's place, and she gave me a necklace to put the bead on.

"What did she say?"

"She told me I was too different to have a place in the pod, and she asked me what I thought about humans."

"What did you say?"

"That I didn't think they were bad, basically."

"I'm glad you spoke the truth," she said. "Go on."

"She mentioned something about the White Queen. Who is that?"

"She is more feared than Miranda. A horrible queen, or so I've heard. She's the only queen or mermaid I've heard of with white scales."

I nodded. "Thanks again for all of your help these past couple of weeks," I said.

"You're welcome."

"Lila, I have a question for you. Does anything happen to a mermaid if she travels too far away from the sea?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I leave for a trip to Chicago on March 20th. I'm going with a friend."

"What for?"

I debated whether or not this was a good idea, but I decided to pull out my mother's map to show her.

"My mother left me all these clues, and I was hoping to find the one in Chicago," I said.

“Interesting,” she said, but then she looked up at me. “The Great Lakes are one of the only lakes suitable for saltwater mermaids,” she said. “Not permanently, but it’s livable.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I said. “I have to go now. Bye, Lila.”

DRY ICE



“*Y*ou ready for the camping trip?” I heard Jared say on the phone. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Today was the group camping trip with Jared, Kristen, and Sam. I checked my watch and looked out the window. It wasn’t even six in the morning yet; it was only just starting to get light outside. My eyes felt heavy, and I stretched my arms before getting dressed.

I grabbed my backpack, sleeping bag, and water bottle as Jared’s truck pulled up out front. I waved at him from my window, and then I tiptoed down the stairs and went quickly out the door.

“You look ready,” he said as he opened the passenger door for me. He wore a red windbreaker, and his bronze hair was slightly tousled.

I slid in the passenger seat, and we took off for the trails. As we got closer, I noticed the ground looked a little muddy.

“It rained last night, unfortunately,” he said.

“A little mud won’t do us any harm,” I said, smiling at him. I was glad I had worn boots.

"We're going a little uphill, so hopefully we can find a dryer spot to camp in."

We waited a few minutes for Sam and Kristen to arrive. Although I didn't get cold, I noticed the air was slightly cooler than usual, and it was a bit foggy. The trails themselves looked a little eerie, but I hoped as the morning continued, it wouldn't be as bad.

Kristen and Sam pulled up a little bit later in Sam's car. "Oooh, it's freezing," Kristen said as she got out of the car. "Good thing I brought an extra jacket in my bag."

Sam got out, and he and Jared exchanged a friendly handshake.

"Are you guys ready?" Jared asked.

"Let's do it!" Sam said.

We began the hike up the trail, our boots slogging through the mud. The fog was rolling in through the huge redwood trees, the sun peeking through the leaves. The sound of birds chirping filled my ears, and I could hear a stream nearby.

After walking for about twenty minutes, we stopped to catch our breath and sip some water. I sat on a mossy tree branch that had fallen.

Kristen sat next to me, hugged me, and said, "Ooh, you're so warm."

"Why don't you put on your coat? I brought a hat as well; you can have it," I said.

Once Kristen had her hat, gloves, and coat on, I could tell she felt much better, and I could see the color returning to her cheeks.

"Look, Kate," Jared said as he pointed into the woods. "Do you see the doe?"

It was staring straight at us. I decided to try something.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi."

"I'm Kate, and these are my friends."

"I need help. Would you be able to come and help?"

"Sure."

"Come on, guys," I said. I gently approached the doe and began petting her.

"Amazing," Sam said.

"Let's follow it," I said.

We followed the deer. She approached a fawn that had large a splinter sticking out of its leg. The fawn was sitting near some green bushes.

"Jared, can you take this out?" I asked him.

"I can try," he said.

I looked at the doe.

"My friend Jared is going to take the stick out of your fawn's leg. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

Jared pulled a pair of tweezers from his pocket, and I heard a huge squeal as he removed the splinter.

The fawn ran and collapsed near his mother.

"Thank you," she said.

We turned around and began walking along the trail again.

"Thanks, Jared."

"It was nothing. You have a real connection to the animals. I think it's beautiful," he said quietly, his bronze hair shining in the sun.

We continued walking and finally, we arrived at a dry spot. The sun was now at its highest point in the sky, and the fog had thinned slightly.

"This seems like a good place to set up camp," Jared said.

Kristen and I spent some time setting up our tents and sleeping bags while Jared and Sam started a fire. Kristen was

happy to warm up next to the fire, and when her cheeks started getting red, she took off her jacket.

Jared had brought some hot dogs which he roasted over the fire, and I pulled out my peanut butter and jelly. Jared brought out potato chips, buns, and juice boxes as well.

"What are we, four?" Sam joked as he drank some juice.

Jared just laughed. After we were done eating our lunch, we were a little tired from the hike and the food.

"I'm going to hit the hay for a couple of hours," Sam said, climbing into his green tent.

"Should we pull out the s'mores?" I asked.

"S'mores?" Sam said, poking his head out of the tent.

We were laughing when Kristen said, "You can take your nap in a little bit."

"Let's just make half of them so we can have some later, too," I said.

As we ate marshmallows, Jared said, "This reminds me of the day we met."

"You need two for a good s'more," I said. He laughed hard at that, and I smiled.

He laughed. "That was the best line of all time," he said.

"Yes, I was there," Kristen said, laughing a little too.

As we loaded up our graham crackers with marshmallows and chocolate, we talked around the fire. Sam and Jared reminisced about some of the highlights of their past lacrosse season.

"How about that last game? Pretty incredible that we won State. The rings come in soon," Sam said.

"Yeah," Jared said. "Are you going to play in college?"

"Yes. I've been recruited, actually," Sam said.

"You didn't tell me that," Kristen said, looking at Sam.

"I just found out that I've been accepted to play lacrosse at Stanford," he said sheepishly.

“Congratulations!” I said to Sam.

“That’s great!” Jared said, slapping Sam’s back.

“Stanford...” Kristen said. “That’s your dream school, Sam.”

“I know. I’m really excited.”

All the talk of college...was I supposed to go to college now, too? Maybe I’d just take a gap year...it was a lot to consider, and I pushed those thoughts away. I hadn’t checked the results of my applications.

“How’s surfing going?” I asked Kristen as I bit into my second s’more.

“Good! I have another large competition coming up in the spring. I’m going to Fiji.”

“Can I come?” I joked.

She laughed. “Hawaii was fun with you,” she said. “And I’ve been trying out some new tricks while surfing. Just getting back into it after what happened.”

“Wait, what happened?” Jared asked.

“I’m surprised Kate didn’t tell you,” she said, looking confused. “I was surfing, and I got swept under after a huge wave took me. I bumped my head and scraped my leg on some coral and passed out. All I remember is being picked up and put back on my surfboard,” she said, nudging some sticks on the ground with her foot. “It was strange because they said nobody was there. But I *really* feel like someone saved me.”

Oh no. She was going to blow it.

Jared looked intently at her and said, “You think someone saved you? Are you sure it wasn’t the guy on the jet ski?”

She looked up at him and said, “No. I remember being lifted by arms while still in the water and placed onto the surfboard. At least, I think so. I mean, I bumped my head, so I could just be imagining it. But it felt so *real*.”

Jared's eyebrows furrowed, and panic started to set in. I felt my stomach tighten.

"You went on the trip with Matt, right?" Jared said.

"Yeah, he came with us."

Jared looked down into the fire, the light of the flames hitting his face in a flickering glow. He seemed to be lost in thought.

Meanwhile, I was freaking out. Why did Kristen have to say that? I didn't want Jared to find out or anyone to connect the dots and figure out that I was the one who had saved her.

The phone rang. Sam answered it.

"Yes, I'm with Kristen," I heard Sam say on the phone. "Bri, it's okay. We're just friends." Sam crawled into his tent and zipped it.

I turned to Kristen, and I saw her look at the tent, and she bit her lips, pulling her hair behind her ear.

When Sam was done on the phone, he took a nap. Jared, Kristen, and I spent the next hour playing Scattergories, one of my favorite games. I was trying to think of a school subject that started with the letter L when Jared's cell phone started ringing.

He didn't answer the first time it rang. Or the second. Or the third.

"What, Steve?" Jared said with clear frustration in his voice when he answered the fourth time.

He stepped away a little bit, but I could still hear him.

"Can you hear what he's saying?" Kristen said.

I nodded, and I wondered if mermaids had better hearing.

"Steve, not today," Jared said. "You'll be fine by yourself. I'm camping." He paused to listen. "No, you know what? I'm sick and tired of always getting pulled away from things. It's

constant." Then his face turned white, and he was silent for a few moments. "Okay. I'm coming," he said.

"What is it?" I asked when he came back to us.

"Someone drowned. The Coast Guard needs me. I have to go. Kate, I am so sorry."

Someone drowned?!

He pulled me in and kissed me. "Please be careful," I said.

He shook his head. "It's not me that needs to be careful. You need to stay safe. I'll be fine," he said.

He disappeared into the forest, and Kristen said, "Does he know where he's going?"

I checked to see if Sam was still sleeping, and I heard light snoring coming from his tent.

"Kristen, I'm going to follow Jared. You have to trust me."

"What? Kate, you can't do that. It's dangerous."

"A storm is coming, so you might want to seek out some better shelter or something. It's going to start pouring soon."

"How do you know?"

"Kristen, I can't tell you, but you have to trust me. Okay?"

"Okay," she said.

I wanted to try something. If I could move the water, could I do other things as well? I tried to freeze the ground under us so that it would not get too muddy and ruin all of the stuff. It worked.

"What?!" Kristen said, looking down.

I pulled out my compass and put some water on it to open it. I had slipped the tracker into his jacket pocket when we were saying goodbye so that I'd be able to follow him.

"I have to go."

"But, Kate," Kristen said, looking at the ground.

"I'll explain later," I said.

I began running through the forest to try to find Jared, and I realized I was running really fast. Ever since I had

become a mermaid, I was a lot faster on land, too. My endurance was still bad, but I was fast.

I ran down the hill and followed the needle to try to find Jared. The mud was getting thicker as I was coming down it, and I ducked under tree branches and tried not to trip on rogue logs. The trees were becoming sparser as I ran, and I could start to smell the sea, which meant I was getting closer.

As I reached the sand, I could see Jared. He hopped onto a boat, and they took off.

I went down toward the edge of the ocean and slipped off my shoes. A storm was forming, just as I had predicted. And it was coming fast. Anytime Jared had to leave with the Coast Guard, a storm appeared.

The waves were getting larger, and I felt the first drop of rain, which turned into a few more. Soon, it was a deluge, and I could see Jared's boat hit a large wave.

I backed up a few steps, and then I turned and ran straight into the waves. I was tossed by a huge wave suddenly, and I tried to flick my tail to get out of it, but I was sent swirling into the sea. I blinked my eyes and saw that I was momentarily surrounded by white mist from the wave. I could feel another wave coming. I put my hands out in front of me, pumped my fins faster, and swam through the wave.

I could hear a boom of thunder even though I was underwater. It was slightly muted, but I knew that lightning was going to flash next. I knew because of the lightning, it would be dangerous to go to the surface now, but I needed to find that boat.

I took a deep breath and swam toward the surface to see if I could spot them. I went up, and a huge wave tackled me, sending me spinning backward again. I rushed toward the top of the water again, and I saw the boat.

I ducked under quickly and moments later, I heard more thunder. I was swimming fast, and I could finally see it again.

I swam toward the boat, careful to stay away from the propellers, and I made my escape. I camouflaged myself (I was getting better at this—I was close to invisible), and then I went up to the surface, swimming alongside it. I grabbed onto the side of the boat, and with all my strength, I pulled myself up, letting my legs come back. I looked up, and I gasped, but there was no way anyone heard me with how hard it was raining.

A huge wave was sent toward the boat, maybe larger than any I'd ever seen.

"HOLD ON!" I heard Mr. O'Connor yell. The boys were all wearing yellow life vests, but I noticed a figure in the corner not wearing one—it was Grey. Steve was holding onto her, and I could see her duck her head into his shoulder.

I gripped the railing and closed my eyes as I waited for the wave to crash as I heard more thunder rolling.

I tried not to scream as the wave crashed against the boat.

When it let up, I realized Logan was on the boat as well. Logan had a smile on his face, but Jared's face looked grim. They were all trying to spot something.

I was trying to see what they were looking at, but my attention was caught by another boat coming into view. The boat was sinking.

"Get the people!" I heard Mr. O'Connor yell as he continued to steer the boat. Another wave hit the boat, splashing a woman and causing her to lose her footing. She screamed and was headed for the water, but Jared caught her arm and pulled her onto the boat.

I then noticed all of them looking down at something.

I stood up, my hands aching from gripping the railing so

tightly. My legs felt like Jello-O as I headed next to them, keeping as quiet as I could. I stood next to Jared. I looked at him for a moment, and then I looked down to see what they were looking at.

I noticed an indistinguishable tail flicking upward and away. Then another one.

"There they are," Steve said, grimacing as he looked down.

I started to put the pieces together in my head, and I became very dizzy. I wanted to scream and cry all at the same time, but I could do neither—I was standing right next to Jared. I held onto the rails in front of me, trying not to hyperventilate.

"Get the people in the boat!" Mr. O'Connor yelled.

Logan and Jared ran toward their boat, and I saw another wave forming. Grey put her hand up, and I could see the wave was struggling to grow in size.

"Hurry!" Grey said, keeping the wave down.

Logan and Jared were helping people onto the boat. When they were all safely boarded, Grey put her hand down.

"Get them into the cabin, Grey," Mr. O'Connor said gruffly. Suddenly, the boat was being turned. I could see Mr. O'Connor was turning back toward land.

As we were turning, the boat came fully into view. In mere seconds, the boat was fully submerged—they had gotten the people out just in time.

"They're monsters," Jared said.

"Let's get out of here," Steve growled.

I felt the urge to sob. I didn't want this. I didn't want to be a mermaid. They were horrible. I closed my eyes, and I let tears stream down my face as I continued to hold onto the railing. I looked through wells of tears at Jared. He was looking straight at me, but he couldn't see me. I wished I

could reach out and that he could see me, but I'd never felt more apart. I reached my hand out slowly, just inches away from his.

I dropped it suddenly, and I let tears slide down my cheeks as I sunk to the ground.

My conversation with Maverick came to mind.

"Many of them enjoy sinking ships or leading our boats into storms.... Mermaids have a keen sense of the weather..."

So that's what Jared has been doing this entire time. He was saving people from being drowned by mermaids.

I felt water hit me, and I was sent straight into the side of the rails.

Ouch.

"There are more waves coming. They're attacking our boat!" I heard Steve say.

I stood up, and I saw a mermaid grab Jared's jacket. She was trying to drag him under. Mr. O'Connor jerked the steering wheel, which made her let go of Jared as the boat surged to the right.

Jared looked scared, and he grabbed the sides of his jacket as he took a deep breath. But the shock on his face only lasted a moment because his eyebrows pressed together as he looked out at the waves. They were growing in size.

"Go faster!" Steve yelled at Mr. O'Connor.

Grey was trying to stop the waves around us, but there were so many of them. They were trapped. Before I realized what I was doing, I pushed one of the waves back down into the water.

"Who's doing that?" I heard Jared say.

"It's not me," Grey said, shaking her head.

I continued to hold my hand up to prevent another large wave from crashing the boat, but I could only do so much.

Waves still crashed onto the boat, but with Mr. O'Connor's boat maneuvering, we arrived onshore.

They let people off the boat pretty quickly, and Mr. O'Connor jumped off to tie the boat.

My entire body was shaking. I didn't know how to process everything that had just happened.

"Those monsters," Steve said, looking back out at the water.

Those words set an entirely new batch of tears down my cheeks. He was right—they were monsters. And I didn't want to be a part of it.

"I have to go," I heard Grey say, and I watched her hop off the boat. She looked over her shoulder, and then she ran toward the woods.

I wiped my tears and followed her. My feet clamored on the dock, and I hoped nobody heard them.

Grey was running fast, but it was not hard for me to catch up to her. She seemed to know exactly where she was going. But it was strange...she wasn't following the trail. I watched as she hopped over tree trunks and ducked underneath branches on the way toward where she wanted to go. I followed her, my hair skimming some leaves from a branch as we continued running. We ran by redwood trees, and I even noticed a fox peeking out at us through some bushes.

I followed her all the way toward a river. She didn't even hesitate as she jumped in, and then she disappeared.

I stopped at the river, and I looked in. Why did Grey jump into a river?

But I was beyond all that now. I jumped in after her, and I began swimming. It felt different than swimming in saltwater. It was murkier in here, but it was very calm and without so many currents.

I caught a glimpse of her silver-gray tail. I stopped for a moment.

Grey was a mermaid. That explained how she could control the water. But what was she doing in a river?

I followed her until the river emptied into a lake. Grey continued to swim, but then I stopped and watched her disappear. I wanted to follow her and talk to her, but I realized that Jared was probably headed back toward the campsite. I needed to leave NOW.

I jumped out of the water, and I used my compass to track Jared. I was sprinting, and it didn't take me long to catch up to him. He was walking in long, slow strides. He looked tired and defeated, and he was looking at a piece of paper.

I ran past him and back to camp, beating him there. I sprinted for my tent. I zipped it shut, and then I looked at my hair and clothes. I was soaking wet. I put my hand up next to my hair, and I closed my eyes. I was trying to dry the water.

"Ow!" I said, pushing my hand back. My hair was suddenly really hot. But then it was dry. I did the same for my clothes.

"Hey, are you okay?" I heard. It was Kristen.

I opened the tent. "Can we talk later? I just really need to be alone right now," I said.

"Okay. If you need anything, let me know."

"Kristen, thank you," I said.

She nodded, but she frowned as she left. I could tell she wanted to know more.

I put my head in my hands as I thought over what had just happened. Once Jared learned who I was, he wouldn't want to be with me. He had said it himself. He thought mermaids were monsters.

As I thought of the boat sinking, I couldn't help but agree

with him. I was completely done with being a mermaid, I decided. I'd disappear out of the ocean, and I would only go in when it was absolutely necessary.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I felt my world collapse in. But I was sure of my decision. After what had happened, I couldn't associate with them. I mean...how could I?

I would miss the sea that was for sure. These past few months had been challenging, but they were some of the best times of my life. I remembered what it was like riding Blue, the gray fin whale. I thought about meeting Henry, George, and B, the Pacific white-sided dolphin. I thought about the beautiful pink sea anemones, the tall and swaying kelp forests, and the abalone pearls. And then I thought about Lila and June.

They wouldn't be part of this...would they? I knew that Lila and June loved humans. They couldn't possibly be part of this. But it still didn't change the way I felt or what I'd seen.

I didn't want to be a mermaid anymore.

I heard Jared return, and I zipped open my tent to see him. He looked as sad as he'd looked before, and he went straight for his tent. He didn't come out again after that.

I pulled off my bead necklace suddenly as I sat in my tent, my decision made. I looked at it once more before placing it in my bag. I saw that the pearl had the etched shark fin, and I traced my fingers along the edge of it. But when I turned it over, I noticed something I hadn't seen before. On the back of the pearl was a simple name: Cassandra.

She knew.

ELLE



“*I* have to tell you something,” Jared said.

It had been a day since the camping trip, but it could have been months. Jared asked me to meet him in the abandoned lighthouse. I had said yes...tentatively. But everything was different now.... I just didn't know how to move forward.

I looked up at Jared, unsure of what he wanted to tell me. Did it matter? He'd already said so much....

His eyes looked clouded and misty, like they were pulling up a memory from the past. His eyes weren't in the present, and I searched those eyes to try to find what was in them.

“What is it?” I whispered, bracing myself for whatever he was about to tell me.

“I need to tell you about Elle,” he finally said. “Elle was my sister,” he said. I looked at him, and he looked sullen. “Years ago, there was a large storm that hit Santa Cruz. It was twelve years ago to be exact,” he paused and looked at me. “It was the storm you lost your parents in.”

We sat in silence for a few seconds, and then he contin-

ued. "Elle was younger than me. She was three years old, and I was six. We were playing together at the beach when a woman with white hair came and scooped her up and took her into the ocean. I ran and tried to stop her, but it was no use. Elle was kidnapped by this woman. By a mermaid," he said, looking at me.

I didn't say anything for a few moments.

"Mermaids are real," he said. "It's what I do with the Coast Guard. We prevent them from sinking ships or at least we try to. I'm telling you the truth.... Yesterday, someone drowned. It's that serious."

"Is Elle still alive?" I asked.

"Yes."

He took out his wallet and showed me a picture of her. It was old and tattered, but I felt like I'd seen it before. Then it clicked—I had seen this picture in the file at the library.

"How do you know?"

"We've been in contact with the woman who has her. But we don't know where she is. We don't even know her name."

"Why would she be in contact with you?"

"She wants to negotiate."

"For what?"

"I can't say," he said.

I sighed. "Jared, who are you?"

"I'm what's known as a protector. We're stronger, faster, and have heightened senses than the average human. We try to protect people like you from some of the evil that is out there."

"Like mermaids?"

"Yes. They're evil, Kate. They sink boats and lead people into storms. People have died because of them," he said.

I couldn't imagine how much pain mermaids had caused him in his life. He was constantly rescuing humans from

them, and now I learned that his own sister had been kidnapped by them.

I looked out at the horizon, and a tear went down my cheek. I brushed it aside quickly, but he had seen.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Jared, I'm sorry about Elle. I'm sorry about what happened to your family."

"I'm not the only one who lost someone that day," he said quietly. He took my hand in his.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked.

"It's not something I like to talk about with most people, but I thought you should know. Now you know why I'm always running off."

I nodded. "How can you get her back?"

"We're trying. My dad has just left town to try to find her again. He thinks the mermaid might be in Alaska based on the cell phone numbers."

"Alaska?"

I thought about my mother's map. According to her, the White Queen lived in Alaska. I thought about my meeting with Keys.

Could *she* be the one who left the scale behind the day of the storm? Jared said the woman had white hair. And then I remembered what Lila said—the queen was the only mermaid with white scales.

It *had* to be her.

"But why did she take her?" I asked.

"She mistook her for a different mermaid."

"How so?"

"She has light blonde hair and blue eyes, similar to how Elle looked. She's supposed to be some kind of princess. She was the daughter of a mermaid queen named Cassandra."

I felt like I couldn't breathe. It was me. This was my fault.

"And what do you have to do to get her back?" I whispered.

"We have to find her. And you want to know how?"

I nodded.

He laughed bitterly. "Look out at that ocean. Now tell me. How do you find the same fish you caught twice?"

"You don't," I said.

"That's right," he said, and he frowned.

"Is there anything else you can do to get Elle back?"

He shook his head. "We've tried everything. At this point, we just need to find her."

"Jared, I'm sorry," I said. He cupped the side of my face and looked at me. *I was* sorry. What kind of pain had I put his family through? This was all my fault.

"Are your cousins all protectors?" I asked.

"Yes.

"What about Grey?" I asked him.

He looked away.

"She's a freshwater mermaid. A river mermaid," he said. So, he knew, and he accepted her.

"I thought you didn't like mermaids," I said.

"Freshwater mermaids are different. They live in the land. Ocean mermaids, they're the bad ones. River mermaids don't try to sink human boats. They don't hurt people. And she's the reason that we're here today."

"What do you mean?"

"We couldn't accomplish half of our rescues without her help," he said. "She can feel it in the air when a storm is approaching faster than any of the rest of us."

I gave him a short nod and bit my lip.

He sighed and said, "I'm sorry. I know it's a lot to take in."

I nodded, and we both sat there in silence. When there was nothing more to be said, Jared pulled out a book, and he

began reading it to me. I sat there, looking at the gray clouds out the window, and after several minutes, Jared had fallen asleep. The book was half-open on his stomach, and he had sunk onto a blanket on the floor.

As he slept, I began singing to him. I don't know why, but the words just flowed out. As I sang, tears slipped down my cheeks, and I put my head in my hands. The song that poured out of me was sad too, reflecting what was in my heart.

As I watched him sleep, I felt I couldn't stay any longer. I gently removed my hand from his and ran down the stairs, out the white, peeling lighthouse door, and toward my house.

I was a princess.... Elle had been kidnapped because of me. And now I knew what Jared thought of me.

Why did everything in my life have to be so complicated?!

Why couldn't just one thing work out?

PART 2



BRANDON



*I*wish I could tell her how I really felt. For her, it's like looking through frosted glass. I can see her just fine, but she can't see me.

BLUR



*I*t had been two months since the last time I'd been in the sea.

I was walking down a pier in Santa Cruz, watching the sunset. It was mostly purple with streaks of color racing against the sky. As the sun sank, it looked like ice cream as it melted all across the sea. I watched as waves brushed against the shore, slowly, and I longed to reach out for them.

The surface of the water created such a facade for what lied underneath. I knew that there was an entire world under there, but from here, there was almost no way to tell.

Instead of going to the ocean, I went to the aquarium at night every couple of weeks or so. I was camouflaged, of course, but I enjoyed drifting toward the bottom of the tank and watching the fish floating above me. It was the closest I could come to swimming in the sea.

I leaned forward on the edge of the pier and sighed. I was caught somewhere between two worlds, not quite fitting into either. I thought my decision would bring me a lot of clarity, but I felt more confused than ever.

Someone approached from behind me.

"Hey, Kate," I heard. I tucked a blonde strand of hair behind my ear as I turned.

"Matt," I said with a smile. "Hey."

We both stood there in silence for a while, and I watched as a dolphin jumped out of the water in the distance.

"Still not going in the sea?" Matt asked, folding his hands as he looked out at the water.

"Yeah," I said, frowning as we looked at the purple and orange sunset. Matt's brown hair seemed to take on some of the orange, and it glowed slightly as we talked.

"How's the map?" he asked, turning around and leaning his back on the wooden railing. "Are you still working on that at least?"

"I leave for Chicago in a few days," I said. "I wasn't planning on it, but I'm going to look for the clue."

As I looked at the beach, a few tears came out of the corner of my eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"It's her," I said. "It's Elle. Jared's little sister. There's a mermaid out there called the White Queen. She took her, Matt. She took her, and she meant to take me, and now it's all my fault."

"Kate, it's not your fault that it happened."

"It doesn't matter. Either way, she's out there somewhere, imprisoned because of me."

"Kate...you can't blame yourself for this. You didn't do this."

"I know, but somehow I have to make it right," I said.

"You said the White Queen? It wouldn't happen to be related to the scale you gave me a couple of weeks ago?"

I nodded. "Actually, yes."

"I found something you might want to take a look at,"

Matt said. "I'm not sure it's helpful for your situation, but it's pretty interesting. Come to the aquarium with me. I'll show you in the lab."

"Okay," I said.

When we arrived at the aquarium, Jan was still there, so we talked to her for a few minutes. After, Matt led me to the lab, and we walked up to a microscope. He found the white scale, and he placed it underneath the microscope.

"Look," he said.

When I did, I saw many small, different colored dots.

"What are those?"

"Chromatophores," he said. "An octopus has them too. They're why you can camouflage."

"Cool," I said.

"Watch what happens when I turn the lights off," he said.

As I looked at the chromatophores, I watched the colors change.

"They're different!"

"Yeah," he said, smiling as he turned the light back on.

"Do you still need the scale?" I asked him.

"No, do you want it back?"

I nodded. "Matt, there's something I need to do."

I KNOCKED on Jared's door. I stood there, nervous, holding my backpack. I waited for a few seconds, and when no one answered, I knocked again.

This time, someone opened the door. It was Jared.

"Kate," he said, grinning. "Come in. Grey and Steve are here."

I walked in and saw them sitting in the corner table in the kitchen.

"We ordered pizza. You're welcome to have some," Jared said.

"No, thanks," I said, joining them at the kitchen table. "There's something I need to show you...all of you," I said.

Grey and Steve exchanged a confused glance as I unzipped my backpack. I took the white scale out, and I placed it on the table. At first, we all just looked at it.

"Jared told me the story about Elle," I said. "Dr. Keys found this scale the day of the storm—the day Elle disappeared. I thought this could help you find who you are looking for."

"Of course," Steve said, picking up the scale to inspect it. "This changes a lot. I didn't think about it before."

Grey and Steve exchanged a nod.

"It's the White Queen. It has to be. She's the only known mermaid that has white scales. We know she lives in Alaska, but we just don't know where," Steve said.

Steve got on the phone and started talking to his dad about the scale.

"Thank you, Kate," Jared said. "This helps more than I could ever tell you."

I gave him a small smile, but I felt nervous and scared. I hoped they wouldn't ask any more questions—like why did Keys give it to me in the first place? But they didn't.

"Thank you, Kate," Grey said.

"That's all I came here for," I said, and I picked my backpack up to leave.

"You don't have to go," Jared said.

"I do have to go. Can you walk me to my car?"

He held my hands and said, "Let's go get ice cream before you leave for your trip. When do you leave?"

"Tonight," I said.

"I guess that means we should go now then," he said with a smile.

Jared opened the door to the passenger side and slid in. When we arrived at the ice cream shop, we sat in a red booth. Jared went and ordered the ice cream, and I sat there feeling a little nervous. I just really hoped Jared wouldn't ask me any questions about Dr. Keys or why he'd given me the scale.

Jared came back to the table with a smile on his face.

"I got you your favorite: caramel sea salt."

"Thank you," I said, letting the caramel sauce melt onto my tongue.

"I can't believe you're leaving again," he said as he sat down. "Why are there so many trips?"

"I won't be gone too long."

His eyebrows furrowed, and he frowned a moment. "Will Brandon be there?" Jared asked, his eyebrows pulling together.

"I haven't talked to Brandon in seven months. I don't even have contact with him anymore."

Jared nodded and said, "You know I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too. A lot."

I smiled a little, but then he looked lost in thought again. I felt my stomach flip as I waited for his response.

"There's something I want to show you," Jared said, pulling something out.

"What is it?"

"It's a short book that I wrote. It documents all my times at the Rescue. I decided to write it all down."

I opened up the book and began reading some of it. There were pictures of the animals in here too.

"Jared, this is amazing," I said.

He smiled. "I'm sending it off to get published. You can keep it," he said.

"What?"

"Sure. I have another copy at home. I want you to have it...really. The way you interact and work with animals is special.... You inspired me to write this, Kate."

I grinned as I turned the pages.

"It's the fox!" I said.

He laughed. "Yeah."

"Jared, this is a huge accomplishment. I'm really happy for you."

We spent the rest of the time at the ice cream shop looking at the pictures and reading some of what he had written. I loved every page, and the craft and detail that went into this showed me how much he really cared for the animals.

I turned the page, and I saw my name written on the top along with some pictures he'd taken while I was volunteering.

"There's a section on me?!" I said.

He laughed. "You can read that when you get home. You ready to go?"

I dropped Jared off, and as I drove home, I wondered what he had written about me. But as I approached my driveway, my jaw dropped. Lila stood at my front door.

CHICAGO



Lila had on a pale, yellow maxi dress that was tattered at the bottom. When she saw me approach, she smiled slightly, but she looked a little worried.

“How did you find me here?!” I asked as I went up and hugged her. I had missed my friend.

She raised an eyebrow. Oh, right. The talent.

“I’m coming with you to Chicago,” she said. “I booked a flight and everything. Why haven’t you been in the sea? I haven’t seen you anywhere.”

I looked away and said, “I’m done with the sea. I’m done with that life.”

“What?!”

I nodded. “Lila, I can’t go back in the water. You know what happened—a human was drowned,” I said.

Lila hesitated and said, “We should probably discuss this inside.”

Suddenly, Kristen pulled up with her dad. “Are you ready?” she asked. She looked at Lila, a little confused. “Will she be coming with us?”

"Yes," I said.

"Okay...well, get your suitcase because we're going to be late!"

"Come inside. We need to get you some new clothes." I let Lila in, and I went up to my room and found a blue dress, some extra clothes, and some sneakers for her.

We got in the car, and Lila hesitated a moment as she climbed in.

"It's a car," I whispered.

I showed her how to buckle in, and then Kristen turned to face us.

"So, are you related? I can totally see the resemblance," she said.

Did mermaids have a certain look to them? I glanced at Lila and didn't think we looked alike.

"This is my friend Lila. She's visiting," I said.

"Nice to meet you," Lila said, and Kristen smiled politely.

We rode to the airport, and I realized Lila didn't have any form of ID. How was she going to get through security? But when we reached the security line, she pulled an ID from her backpack.

I looked at her, confused, and she said, "You didn't think I was completely ignorant of human ways, did you?"

Well...no but that was not something I would've expected.

Minutes later, we stepped onto the plane. Lila smiled as she looked around.

We took our seats, and she gasped as the earth began to shrink as we ascended. But as soon as we reached cruising altitude, she disappeared into the bathroom. When she came back, her face was paler than usual, and she looked a little green.

"Are you okay?"

"No," she said embarrassed, but then she lay back on the seat and closed her eyes, falling asleep.

Kristen turned to me and said, "Thanks for coming. I'm glad you could make it."

"Of course. I love our trips!"

Kristen's eyebrows furrowed. "Kate, there's something I've been meaning to ask you, and I was hoping you would've cleared it up these last couple of months. But...what happened on that camping trip?"

"Oh..." I had no clue what to say.

"Look, I don't need an answer right now, and if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine, but I want you to know that I'm here if you ever do want to talk."

"Thanks, Kristen."

She looked at me, hoping that would prompt me to talk, but I just wasn't ready to tell her. I wanted to soon. But not now.

When we landed at the airport, we drove straight to the city. My heart felt so many emotions as I saw the skyscrapers coming into view. So much had happened in the last seven months.

The city felt the same, but I was so different than the broken-hearted girl who left all those months ago. It felt like an entire lifetime had passed since my time in Chicago, and I felt like an outsider looking into this new world. Even though I'd lived here most of my life, I felt like a tourist.

When we arrived at the hotel, Mr. Johnson said, "All right, kids, feel free to go explore wherever you want. I have business to attend to, and I'll be back around four. Lila's in charge while I'm gone," he said.

"Dad!"

He chuckled. "See you later." He left the room with a

briefcase and a wave goodbye, and the three of us sat on the couch in the hotel suite.

“So, what do you guys want to do?” Kristen asked, opening up one of the jars of chocolate. “This is your city after all. Any ideas for us?”

I thought about all the places I could take them to, but I had something on my mind. I needed to see him. I needed to see Brandon.

“Actually, there’s somebody I need to see.”

“Who?”

Lila’s eyes widened at the sight of chocolate, and Kristen handed her a piece.

“An old...friend,” I said, looking down.

“Okay, but then can we go sightseeing?” Kristen asked.

“Sure.” I looked back up, and Lila was reaching for more of the chocolate.

We made eye contact, and we both started laughing.

“Are you guys ready to go?” I asked them.

They nodded, and we ordered a car. About half an hour later, we pulled up to an apartment.

“Is this it?” Kristen asked. “Who are you trying to see?”

We filed out of the car, and I looked at the old brownstone. My heart began to beat a little faster as I gazed up at it. I wanted to turn around and go back into the car, but I couldn’t. I just had to see Brandon face to face. But after all this time, what if I was still given rejection? Could I handle it?

I walked up the cement steps and raised my hand to the door, and I knocked a few times. There was no answer at first. I knocked it a few more times and waited. I was about to turn around when the door opened.

“Katrina, darling! What are you doing here? I thought you

moved to California!" said Mrs. O'Rourke, Brandon's foster mom.

"I'm here to see Brandon," I said.

"You'd better come in," she said.

The three of us went into her home. A couple of kids were running around, and I caught the smell of soup.

"Are you girls hungry?" she asked.

"I am," I said.

We sat down at the table, and she gave us some soup as she spoke to us.

Mrs. O'Rourke looked sad. "Soon after you left with your aunt, I received this note," she said, holding the paper in her hand. "Brandon was so devastated when you left that he ran away. All he left me was this. He's eighteen now, so there's nothing I can do."

I was completely shocked.

"Did he say where he went?"

She shook her head and said, "He calls once in a while to check in to let me know he's all right. I assumed he was with you and that he went after you. You haven't seen him?"

"No, I haven't," I said.

Her shoulders shrugged, and a frown formed on her lips. "Well, I just hope he's all right. I don't blame you for moving. But it hurt him. It hurt him more than I can express to you."

"I understand," I said, feeling guilty.

"Here," she said, giving me the note. "You can have this."

I put it in my pocket.

"Thanks for the soup," I said. "And thank you for talking to me about this."

She led us to the door and said, "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help. I hope you two can reconnect someday. He really cared about you. I hope you know that."

We walked outside the door, and then she shut the door behind us.

"Brandon's that friend of yours from your social media, right?" Kristen asked.

"Yeah," I said. "But I'm not sure we're friends anymore."

"That's such a sad story," Kristen said, looking down.

I didn't really know how to process what she had told me. Here I thought Brandon was going on about his life without me. But he had run away and was gone, and it was because of me.

"Can we sightsee now?" Lila asked as the taxi pulled up.

"Of course," I said.

When we went into the taxi, Kristen said, "I don't think I'll be able to come sightseeing. My dad wants to meet me for dinner tonight to go over some stuff for surfing. Mind if I catch up with you guys later?"

"Sure," I said.

We dropped her off at the hotel, and when the driver asked where to go to next, Lila said the beach.

"What are you doing?" I asked her quietly so the driver wouldn't hear.

"I can't stay out of the water this long."

"The water's going to be freezing for you. It's March," I said.

"I'll be fine," she said.

"Lila, the water temperature in Monterey is in the fifties. In March in Lake Michigan, it could be in the thirties," I said.

I looked over at her, and I could tell she was a little anxious. She had been doing well with all this traveling and the new city until now. But I couldn't blame her. Lila had lived in the ocean her entire life. This was the farthest from home she'd ever been, and I'm sure all of this was very

strange to her. As much as she loved human things, she was still a mermaid.

While riding in the taxi, I couldn't help but look down and read the note.

GOING TO LEAVE FOR GOOD. MISSING HER. THANKS FOR ALL YOU'VE DONE FOR ME.

LOVE,

BRANDON

A tear slipped down my cheek. I'd been so worried that moving away hadn't hurt him because of his silence, but this verified that he had, in fact, missed me.

But why didn't he call me? Why didn't he contact me?

I wiped the tear as we pulled off of Lake Shore Drive and up to the beach. It was mostly empty.

"Thanks," I said to the driver.

Lila didn't waste any time as she ran into the water. I turned around to see if anyone was looking, and I followed her in.

The feel of the freshwater was clearer than the ocean, and a stark contrast to swimming through the river. It felt nice for me, but I wondered if Lila was okay in this cold water.

"Lila, aren't you cold?"

"So, what kind of sightseeing can you do in the water?" she said, ignoring my question.

I smiled. "I have an idea."

I began swimming quickly, and she followed me.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," I said.

We swam for about half a mile, and then I said, "We have to go up to see it," I said.

She smiled. "Okay."

We swam up and broke through the surface of the water.

"Welcome to Navy Pier," I said.

"What's that?!" she asked.

"It's called a Ferris wheel," I said. "You can ride it up, and see the city that way."

"Let's go!" she said. I looked behind us and saw the sun halfway set on the horizon.

"Lila, it's just past sunset," I said. "Look."

She turned around, and her face fell.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What are we going to do about Kristen? She'll be waiting for us."

"It's my fault," she said, dipping into the water.

"Lila?" I asked, looking around for her.

"Hey," she said, swimming up from behind me.

"I'll just text Kristen using my smartwatch," I said. I messaged her, but she didn't respond right away.

Lila sunk to the floor of the lake, and I followed her, pushing my tail into the sand. We manipulated the water so that we would stay on the bottom.

Lila silently played with some seaweed a little. A moment later, her blue eyes looked up at me.

"Katrina, tell me: why haven't you been going into the ocean?"

I sighed. "Lila...I don't want to be a mermaid anymore. I don't want to be part of something where drowning people is okay."

"Katrina, I don't agree with what Miranda is doing. It's Miranda. Do you know why I live in my cave outside of the kingdom?"

I shook my head.

"She banished me for disagreeing with her views. I can go into the kingdom, but I can't live there anymore. It happened about twelve years ago," she said. "Don't you remember what I said before we met Maverick? I told you that we had different beliefs. You've seen the way she treats me."

"But why didn't you try to stop her?! Someone *drowned!*" I said.

Lila looked down and said, "Because I don't want to be thrown in jail...or worse."

"What about the other mermaids? They agree with her?"

"Most don't. But most are also afraid of Miranda," she said. "She makes them go with her."

"But why didn't you leave?"

"I've been waiting for someone..." She sighed. "There's something I have to tell you."

"What is it?" I asked.

She hesitated and said, "June's in jail."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?!"

"I actually partly came to your house because I thought Miranda was going to come for me, too. I can't tell you how hard it was getting away from the guards. Miranda's been keeping a close eye on me ever since June was put in jail."

"Why is she in jail?"

"A few days ago, she tried to stop Miranda from sinking a ship. Miranda's been upset ever since a couple of months ago when another mermaid tried to stop her from sinking a boat. She's blaming June for both of these events now."

I looked down. "It was me—I was the other mermaid."

"You were?"

"I followed my boyfriend, Jared. He's a protector.... I followed his boat, and I saw what was happening. That's when I stopped them from sinking it."

"You're dating a protector? What if he finds out you're a mermaid?"

"I know," I said.

I noticed that Lila was beginning to turn slightly blue. She was shaking a little.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Can mermaids get hypothermia?"

"Yes," she said. "It takes a long time, but yes. Unless you're a Northerner mermaid, we can't be under forty-five degree water temperatures for more than a few hours. Anything fifty degrees or above feels warm for us—it's comfortable. The top that June gave you is something that mermaids can wear if they're going north to keep them warm or in a situation like this," she said. "I should have brought one."

"Is there something I can do?"

"Since you're a northern mermaid, you can warm water. Other mermaids can't do it. Can you warm up the water around me? I'm cold."

"I can try," I said. I was able to warm up the water around us, similar to how I dried the clothes on the camping trip. She stopped shaking, and she returned to her normal color.

"Thank you," she said.

As I lay in the sand, I thought about my decision to not be a mermaid. But for now, I was going to have to find a way to stop Miranda, even if it meant going back in the water. I just had to do something. And it started with following the map and going to the Shedd.

CARIBBEAN REEF



“Where have you been?” Kristen said, hugging me when we got back in the morning.

Lila and I looked at each other.

“I promise to explain later. We have to go to the Shedd,” I said. “And the line gets pretty long, so we’d better hurry.”

“Okay,” she said.

I grabbed my backpack and packed the map, the jacket June had given me, some snacks, and my wallet.

We headed to the aquarium shortly after, and when we went inside, Lila’s eyes turned wide as she gazed at the tanks. She headed toward the large cylindrical one in the middle.

“I’ve heard about aquariums before.” She pressed her nose up against the tank.

“It’s dirty,” I said, but she kept looking in.

“Do you think if humans knew who we were, we’d end up in one of these?” she asked quietly.

As she looked into the tank, I knew I wondered that myself. “Maybe,” I said.

“What is THAT?!” Lila said, taking off in a run.

“Lila, wait!”

A trail of red hair was running in front of me, and I quickly caught up with her, Kristen trailing behind.

She was grinning as she looked at the monkeys that were swinging from vine to vine.

“These aren’t fish. What are they doing here?”

Before I could answer, I saw someone.

I waded through the crowds of people. I raced over to try to catch up with him, and when I did, I hid around a corner to peek at him.

It couldn’t be...could it? But it was.

It was Brandon.

His golden-blond hair was shining, and he walked over to a table to eat the sandwich he had brought.

The girls came up behind me and said, “Why did you just disappear like that?”

“It’s Brandon,” I said, looking at him.

“He’s cute,” Kristen said.

“He’s just my friend. Or...well, I don’t know if we even are friends anymore.”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“Go talk to him. It’s important,” Kristen said, folding her arms over her chest.

I hesitated, but then I walked over and slid into a chair in front of him.

The lights were bright, and I could smell coffee being brewed. Every once in a while, I could hear the squeaks and whistles of the belugas.

He was looking down at his sandwich when he suddenly looked up at me.

“Hi,” I said.

My heart was beating fast, really fast.

He didn’t say anything for a few moments, and I suddenly

felt really awkward.

"Hey, blondie," he finally said, no hint of emotion in his tone.

I looked at him, and I didn't know what to say. I felt speechless. He looked, rather, apathetic at me being here. It hurt. It hurt bad.

"How are you?" I finally asked, breaking the unbearable silence he was putting me through.

"I've been better," he said.

I looked down and said, "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry about everything. About the move, about Jan. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Tears were running down my face, and he put down his sandwich.

He looked troubled for a moment, and his eyebrows pressed together. Then he picked his sandwich up and kept eating.

"Don't you have *anything* to say to me?"

"No, no I don't," he said.

My heart was breaking right in front of him. Again.

"You don't have anything to say to me?! What about your promise?! Your word is good for nothing, you know that?!"

He looked at me, and his green eyes looked sad.

"I didn't break my promise. But what about you? You go to California, and a week later you have a boyfriend?! Explain that to me," he said.

"Why should you care if I have a boyfriend? It's not like you texted me or called me or anything. You left me there."

"Before you jump to conclusions, look at yourself. You sure it's Jared you care about? Are you sure about that? Why in the world are you sobbing in front of me if you love Jared. Unless that is, you don't love him."

"Of course, I love him."

I could see the hurt in his eyes when I said this, and he said, "Then why are you sobbing? Why are you crying?"

"You're my best friend," I said.

"I think you and I both know it's more than that. It's always been more than that. You're lying to yourself if you think otherwise," he said.

"I don't know what to think," I said.

"Look, Katrina, I didn't break my promise. You have to trust that."

"How? How could I possibly trust that? You weren't there."

"Why are you here?"

I wiped the tears with the back of my hand, and I fished the map out of my backpack.

"You remember this?" I asked him.

He looked down at the map and nodded. "Yeah, I remember this."

I looked at him and said, "I'm trying to find out more about my mom."

"Did you find the other items?" he said.

"Yes. This necklace, and then I found this." I slid the key across the table so he could see it. "I think the key is important. Maybe it unlocks something here? I don't know."

Brandon looked down at it and thought to himself. I turned around and motioned for the other girls to come over.

They came over, and Brandon waved and introduced himself.

"You two related?" he asked me and Lila.

"No, why does everyone keep asking that?" I asked. We sat down and looked at the map. *X marks the spot*. "Brandon and I figured it out. It has to be treasure. Maybe it's some

kind of chest? This key must be what opens it. But we need to find out where it is.”

Maybe I could talk to some of the animals?

“Can you wait here?” I asked them.

“I’m coming with you,” Lila said.

Suddenly, everyone was up and out of their seats, and we headed toward the beluga tank.

“*Can you hear me?*” I asked one of the belugas. “*Where’s Shelly?*”

“*Yes. Shelly, you have to get over here. It’s Kate!*”

Shelly came over to the glass.

“*Kate! It’s you! I’ve missed you. You can hear us?*”

“*I’ve missed you, too. And yes. I was wondering if I could ask for some help?*”

“*Sure.*”

“*Do you know where I could find a place where ‘x’ marks the spot?*” I showed her the map.

“*I know where your treasure is. Look at your paper—it’s shaped like a sea star without the fifth leg. There was a sea star in that tank over there that lost one of their legs. It grew back, but it’s the only one I know that did. It was some years ago,*” she said. “*It’s my best guess.*”

“*Thank you,*” I said.

“*Anyone want to dive?*”

“Wait. What’s going on?” Kristen said. “I’m so confused. I just watched you stare at a tank for the last few minutes.”

I looked at Lila, and she shrugged. “I’m a mermaid.” It was time she and Brandon knew. “So is she,” I said, tilting my head at Lila.

“WHAT?” Kristen said.

“I was the one who saved you.”

“That explains it,” she said. “And why you get so weird

around the water. Is that why you disappeared while camping?"

I nodded.

"That's...amazing," she said, shaking her head.

I turned to Brandon.

"I knew," he said.

"What do you mean you knew?"

"Don't ask how. You want to find this treasure?"

I wanted to ask, but it wasn't time to press him.

"Let's do it." I looked into the tank they were talking about, and it was filled with sharks. Of course, it was.

"Who wants to dive in there?"

"It's going to have to be one of us," Lila said. "We're the only ones they won't be able to see."

"It's going to be me. It has to be me."

I knew my way around the aquarium—I had volunteered here for years. I disappeared into an office and found the entrance to the tank. I lifted the lid, and I jumped in, trying to camouflage myself so nobody could see me.

Some of the sharks looked my way—I knew they could sense me, but none of them attacked. Regardless, I felt nervous.

I directed my thoughts toward the sharks.

"Does anyone know where I might find a four-legged starfish?"

"There was one, but they grew their leg back. Here."

The shark pointed to a spot.

I went down to the sand, and I began digging with my hands. Sure enough, I felt a piece of metal.

It didn't look like a treasure chest, but it was a box with a keyhole. I brought it up to the surface and slipped out of the tank, letting my legs come back.

I dried off, and I went back down to find my friends.

We sat down at a table and looked at the box.

“Key?” I asked Brandon, who slipped it to me.

I wasn’t sure what we would find in there, but I knew it would be important, and I hoped it would give me a better idea about what happened to my mother.

I slid the key into the box and held my breath as I heard the latch open.

LAKE MICHIGAN



*D*earest Katrina,

If you have found this, it means you know you're a mermaid now—and brave enough to swim through a tank of sharks.

I know that if you're reading this, it also means I am likely not here with you anymore. There are a couple of things you need to know. First, I love you. I have always loved you. And second, your father isn't human. He was a northern prince from a pod off the coast of Alaska, but shortly after we married, he was murdered by a woman called the White Queen. She wants power, and she is willing to do anything to get it. I have reason to believe she's after you because you have a gift that is so extraordinary that you pose a threat to any of the other mermaids in the entire ocean. You have a rare gift that allows you to speak with animals.

I have placed you in the care of Jan, a wonderful woman whom I've known for many years. I know she has taken care of you well over these past years.

All I want for you is to follow your dreams—whatever they

might be. You do not have an obligation to be a mermaid or follow in my footsteps, or better yet—fins.

However, I fear that the White Queen is going to take control of the ocean, and she is especially unkind when it comes to humans. All I need you to do is make sure that she doesn't get her hands on this. It's my crown. And if she has it, she can take control of my kingdom. The next person who wears the crown becomes the queen of our kingdom—so don't let it get into the wrong hands.

Here is one of my favorite quotes.

"But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which spitefully use you." -Luke 6:27-28

Remember that no matter what someone has done to you or to me, forgive them and love them. Have courage, Katrina. Love others, and firmly, without a doubt, love God more than anyone or anything else.

You're my treasure.

With love,

Your mother Cassandra

Tears streamed down my face, and I held the crown up.

"What did the note say?" Brandon asked.

"I know what that is," Lila said, her blue eyes getting wide. "That's our crown for the kingdom. It must mean that Miranda's is a fake. She's been faking being queen this entire time. Kate, we have to hide this. It was Cassandra's crown?"

"You knew her, didn't you?" I said, trying to blink through the tears.

"Katrina, I've known who you were since the moment you told me you could speak to animals, and I suspected so when I first met you."

"But why didn't you say anything?"

She sighed. "I wanted to get to know you first. I wanted to know who you were as a mermaid and as a person."

I hugged her. "You were friends, weren't you?"

"Yes. We were best friends," she said. We smiled at each other a moment, but then Brandon caught my attention.

"Kate, you should probably see this," Brandon said.

I looked over my shoulder and saw two men looking over at us and looking at the crown.

"Could they know?" I whispered to Lila. Her mouth gaped. "Those are Miranda's guards. How did they know we were here?"

Brandon whispered, "I'll distract them. You and Lila need to go. Jump into the lake and swim as far as you can. And take the crown."

I did as he said and slipped the crown into my bag. There was an outdoor seating area outside. We could jump into the water from there.

"Brandon..."

"There's no time to talk. You have to go. NOW!" he said. I nodded, and Lila and I ran. We darted outside and jumped into the water, swimming as fast as we could. Lila took my hand so that we could swim even faster.

"What about Kristen?!" I asked Lila.

"I think she'll be okay. Brandon is with her," she said. "You know, I see your mother's courageousness in you..." she said. "And you should know one more thing. I'm your godmother."

"You are?" I asked her.

She smiled, and we hugged.

"The guards are getting close—we have to go fast," she said when we pulled apart.

We didn't talk after that. We kept swimming for what felt like miles, but I still didn't feel like we were at a safe distance.

My watch told us that we were now in Wisconsin. Several hours had passed, and as I looked at the sunset, I could tell that we had to get out of the water soon.

"Let's get out," I said. We jumped up onto the coast and began running.

I had no idea where we were, but not too long later, I realized we were near Lake Geneva. As we were running, I could tell that Lila was cold even after I dried her off. I was smarter this time around—I'd brought the coat June gave me.

I handed it to her, and within minutes, her cheeks were a light rose color instead of the ghastly pale they were before.

"You really don't get cold, do you?" she asked as she rubbed her hands together.

"No, not really," I said.

I had a credit card with me, thankfully, and soon we had waved down a taxi.

"Where to, girls?"

"Lake Geneva," I said.

Lake Geneva wasn't far from here. We drove and Lila stared out the window. It was the very end of March, and leaves were beginning to bloom. I stared out the window and saw some of the trees had these beautiful pink petals all over them.

"Where are we going to stay?" she asked as we stepped out of the taxi.

I knew we could stay in the lake, but I had a different idea.

"Brandon has a lake house around here. I'm going to call and ask him if we can stay. Hopefully, he'll respond to me for once." I opened my bag. My phone was completely soaked. And my smartwatch was dead.

"Well, I don't know what to do. He did tell me once I

could always stay here in a bind. He has a key under the doormat.”

“Let’s just go,” she said.

“Can you tell where the guards are now?” I asked her as we made the way toward his lake house. His dad hadn’t left much for Brandon, but this lake house was one of them. Brandon, Jan, and I often stayed here for camping trips.

“I think they’re on land, but they’re far from here,” she said.

“Good.”

We walked all the way to the lake house, and I found the key. We opened the door and walked in. The house had a bit of a musty smell it. The ground and walls were dark wood, and pictures of fish adorned the walls. It had been a long time since I’d been here.

“Gorgeous,” Lila said as she ran for one of the couches. We were both exhausted. I felt like the worst guest of all time as I began going through the pantry, but I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and I was starving. As I looked in the pantry and refrigerator, I was surprised to see items that were bought recently. Had Brandon been here?

It probably didn’t matter. But I’d have to find a way to pay him back for the food.

I found an outlet for my smartwatch, and I waited patiently for it to turn back on. My cellphone, unfortunately, was ruined even after I tried drying it. It had been underwater for too long.

As I waited for the watch to come back on, Lila and I ate ice cream and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Finally, the smartwatch charged, and I was able to call Kristen.

“Are you safe?” I asked her.

"Yes, yes I'm fine. Brandon is really strong—he definitely bought you some time."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He rode with me back to the hotel, and then he disappeared," she said.

He was gone again. I bit my lip as I put a piece of hair behind my ear.

"Okay. Well, I'm glad you're safe."

"I told my dad what happened. He threatened to call the police, but I told him everything. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," I said. "I think he already knew." I thought about the people who Dr. Keys had said knew my mother was a mermaid.

"He did know. He wanted to thank you for what you did for me in the surfing competition. And I also want to thank you. I can't tell you how grateful I am. You're a good friend."

"So are you," I said.

"My dad bought you and your friend plane tickets back to San Jose for tomorrow morning. Do you think you can get to Madison?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said. "Tell him thank you."

"I will. And be safe, Kate, okay?"

We hung up.

"We both need showers, like, desperately," I said.

We took showers, and got in dry clothes and lay in the twin beds. I actually had a drawer of some clothes from a couple of years ago.

While we were laying, I was looking at the wooden ceiling.

"Lila?" I asked. "What happened to my mother?" I had my answer from Keys, and somewhat from Maverick, but I wanted to hear it from Lila, her friend.

"She died during the storm."

“Can you tell me anything about that storm?”

Lila looked at me and said, “A lot of mermaids created that storm. I can tell you that much. It was one of the largest storms I’ve ever seen.”

“Why?”

“I told you I was banished because of my views about humans. Your mother was at the head of it—she was queen at the time, and we lived in peace with humans. The White Queen and mermaids like Miranda think that humans are bad, and they believe in attacking them for the pollution they caused.”

“That’s so wrong.”

“It’s terrible, and your mother agreed. She believed that we could work together with humans to help conserve the ocean and the pollution—she didn’t think they were that different from us. And that we all make mistakes. She believed in kindness, Katrina.”

“My mother used to volunteer at the local aquarium to do conservation work,” I said.

“Exactly. But I think you should know the story,” she said. “Miranda and your mom were from two pods of mermaids who had their own royal lines, and then they merged into the one we have now.

“Your mother became queen, and Miranda became very jealous. She thought she should be queen, not Cassie. Your mother’s voice was so beautiful, almost as beautiful as your singing. And then they differed on their views of the treatment of humans. Eventually, Miranda, and I believe the White Queen, worked together so that Miranda could take the place of your mother.”

“I remember something Miranda said to me. She told me she got rid of the last mermaid who believed we could have

good relations with humans,” I said. “It was my mother, wasn’t it?”

“It’s probable. You know, you have the rightful place to the throne,” she said. “One of the queen or king’s children is supposed to take the throne, or the queen can choose someone when passing on the crown. Since you’re alive and your mother’s daughter, it means that you have the actual right to the throne, not Miranda.

“But you should know that once the person has the crown on their head, it’s too late. You can’t remove it unless the person wearing it dies or chooses someone else to wear it. Since Miranda has a fake crown, it’s your choice on who gets to wear it—you or anyone of your choice. Unless Miranda gets it first. And we have to prevent that from happening.”

I didn’t want to be queen.

“I don’t want the crown,” I said.

Lila turned to me and said, “It’s so unfair of me to put this on you. I understand. But you can choose someone if you really don’t want it.”

“You know, you don’t really seem like my godmother. I feel like we’re more like friends.”

“We are friends,” she said, smiling at me.

“Lila, I’m scared,” I said.

“You’ve been so brave since I’ve known you,” she said.

I looked out the window and could see beautiful stars.

“Thank you, Lila. You’ve been there for me.”

“You’re family. I’d do anything for my family—for the people I love,” she said.

“Do you think it’s true?” I asked her.

“What’s true?”

“That the people you love is really your family?”

“Who told you that?”

“Jared’s grandmother,” I said.

“I think it’s completely true. Katrina, I am so sorry for what happened to your parents. But know that there are so many people who love you.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Let’s go to sleep. We have a plane to catch in the morning.”

I closed my eyes and felt so peaceful in the cabin. The bed was so soft, and I felt like I was sleeping on a thousand feathers. Drifting into sleep was the easiest thing I’d done in a long time.

FAVOR



Lila was shaking me awake.

"They found us!" Lila said.

"What?! How?!"

"I found this in my bag," Lila said, showing me a small disc. "It's a tracker."

"Well, break it!"

She broke the disc in half and threw away the pieces. "We have to go! NOW!"

"Where are they?" I asked her.

"Outside by the front," she said, whispering as she helped me throw our stuff into my bag. "What are we going to do?"

"We can slip into the lake. We can cross it and then find a ride. Maybe Kristen can help"

"Good idea."

I called Kristen on my smartwatch. "Kristen, it's an emergency. I need you to send a car to this address." I told her our location.

"It's so...early," she said groggily.

"You remember those guys from the aquarium?"

Kristen gasped.

"Exactly. They found us, and we need a ride ASAP. We have to get out of here!"

"I'm on it."

"Thank you!"

When I hung up, Lila said, "I don't feel good about this—I think they'll catch us."

I was looking out the window when I saw a bird sitting on a branch. I communicated with it.

"Could I ask a favor?"

"Absolutely."

"Can you round up some of your friends and see if you can distract the two men outside? Any animals would be helpful."

"I can do that. Give me two minutes."

"We have to wait a couple of minutes," I told Lila. "I asked a bird for help."

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. A voice from the other side of the door said, "We know you're in there, girls."

Lila looked at me wide-eyed. I put my finger to my lips, and we crept toward the back door. "If you don't open up, we're going to come in anyway."

"Now!" I told Lila.

We threw open the screen door, ran through the back lawn, and jumped into the lake. I came up to the surface and watched as a flock of birds swooped in and surrounded the two men. The men flailed their arms, trying to scare away the birds.

"Hurry!" I said to Lila.

We swam quickly through the dark lake. I had no clue how far the men were behind us, but I didn't dare look behind me again. We needed every second we could get.

We popped out of the water just as the sunrise hit the water. Both of us returned our legs, but then suddenly, a hand gripped Lila's ankle and tried to pull her back into the water.

She screamed, and I grabbed her arm, yanking her back.

One of the birds had followed us and began pecking at the guard's arm until he let go, and then we both ran fast. The car was waiting, and we jumped in.

"The airport. And step on it!" I yelled as I shut the door behind me.

The driver looked at us confused, but then quickly drove away. We looked behind us as the two men stood in the road, growing smaller as we sped forward. We sunk into the seats, relieved. But I knew we weren't in the clear yet.

When we got out of the car, we ran to the counter to grab our tickets. I felt impatient as we waited at the gate and kept looking over my shoulder to see if we were being followed.

Finally, we boarded, and when we ascended into the air, I felt like I could breathe again.

"Okay, we can relax now," I said, leaning my head against the headrest.

"I've never been so happy to be on a plane," Lila said.

I laughed. "Me too."

I stared out the window. Even though I couldn't see from Chicago from here, I braced myself to be without Brandon again.

I sat back in my seat and tried to get a little rest on the plane. I woke up when a flight attendant asked for my drink order.

"Orange juice?" I asked.

She smiled and poured some into a short, plastic cup.

"Try some," I told Lila.

She did, and she smiled. "This is delicious! I wish we had this in the ocean."

As we both had our juice and a snack from the plane, I thought about the crown.

"Where are we going to hide it?" I whispered.

"Your mother had a good idea of burying it in the aquarium. Is there an aquarium near you?"

"There is," I said.

* * *

WHEN WE FINALLY MADE IT back to Santa Cruz, I took Lila to the aquarium.

I slipped into the kelp forest tank, swam down, and buried the crown at the bottom in the sand. I hoped this was a good enough hiding spot.

When I got home, I introduced Lila to Jan.

"Nice to meet you. I have so many questions for you." Jan wasn't going to miss her opportunity as a marine biologist to speak with a mermaid.

Lila and Jan went to sit at the kitchen table, and I went upstairs to my room.

I paced back and forth on my rug. What was I going to do about the crown? It wasn't just about keeping it out of Miranda's hands; it was also deciding who should wear it and rule the kingdom.

Should it be me? I was a...princess. I was my mother's daughter. Technically, I was next in line.

But I had Jared, Jan, and my friends here. I wasn't ready or prepared to become some kind of mermaid queen. It just wasn't who I was—at least at this point in my life.

But if I wasn't going to wear the crown, then who would?

I sat on the edge of my bed and sighed, unweaving my braid.

Lila opened the door and said, "You have a visitor."

Jared stood in the doorway behind her.

"Hey!" I said as I rushed over to him.

He opened his arms and pulled me into a hug. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

When we pulled apart, I looked up at him. His eyebrows were knitted together, and he looked worried.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Grey is gone. She disappeared a couple of days ago, but not before sending Steve a text saying that she thought she was being followed. Steve is a complete wreck."

Lila and I looked at each other.

"I'm going out on the boat tonight and all day tomorrow. We're going to try to find her. I really hope she's okay," Jared said. He came closer to me and took my hands. "If you see her or hear from her, I want you to call me," he said earnestly.

"I can come with you," I said.

"No. It's too dangerous. Steve lost Grey. I can't risk losing you," he said.

I nodded. "I understand. But please be careful, Jared."

He tilted my head up and kissed my cheek. "I'll be back soon." He nodded at Lila and disappeared out of the room. Lila looked at me, confused.

"Grey is a freshwater mermaid," I told her.

Lila looked down for a moment, and then she said, "If she stays in the ocean too long, she could dehydrate. She can't be in saltwater very long. River mermaids aren't meant to live in the sea."

"We have to find her," I said, standing up. Grey had been so good to me. I had to help her.

"Just wait a moment," Lila said. "It's not like we can just go into the water. They're after us, and you know that. They know we have the crown. We have to come up with a plan."

I sat down on my bed as I thought of all of this. She was right.

"How long can a freshwater mermaid survive in the sea?"

"A week, maybe? But she's not going to be feeling well."

"Do you think Miranda threw her in jail?"

"Yes. I bet she's with June," Lila said. "We have to find both of them and get them out."

"How can we do that?"

Lila's eyebrows furrowed as she lay down on my bedspread.

She then sat back up. "Do you think we could get the fish to help us?"

"Maybe. But it's dangerous, Lila," I said. "I don't want to put any fish in harm's way."

She sighed and said, "I know. But what choice do we have? If they see us, we are going to be captured. There's too many of them and not enough of us."

"Do you think Maverick would help us?" I asked her.

"I bet he would. We would need a boat nearby for a fast getaway with the girls."

"Call him," I said. "Ask Jan if you can borrow her phone because mine's broken. Do you know his number?"

"Yeah," she said. "I think I remember it."

When she came back in, she said, "He'll be here tomorrow around three. That gives us time to plan. And time to rest, which we both need after the last few days." Then she smiled and said, "Until then, what do people do for fun around here? I need to relax."

That evening, we listened to records, and I showed Lila some books I had about the sea. Lila settled into the chair at my desk, curled up with one of the books, but I found it challenging to unwind. I had so much on my mind.

What if we couldn't save them? I closed my eyes and tried to breathe. I just had to trust that they would be okay.

DIVERSION



I woke up to Lila shaking me—the second day in a row.

“We have to go now,” she said.

I just wanted to go back to sleep. If we couldn’t pull this off, I might never see Jared again. Or any of my friends. I could be stuck in a prison in the middle of the ocean for the rest of my life.

But we had to find Grey. Her life depended on it. And we needed to bail out June.

We packed up some supplies and got ready to go.

“Are you ready?” Lila asked.

I nodded. We ran down the stairs and out the front door.

We went to the beach, and after making sure no one was looking, we dove into the water and saw Maverick’s boat a few minutes later.

Lila hopped out of the water, grabbed onto the railing, and pulled herself up and onto the deck.

Maverick pulled Lila into a hug and said, “So, what’s the plan here?”

"We need you to wait here while we go and rescue our friends," I said as I climbed into the boat.

"So what you're saying is, you need a getaway boat," he said, laughing.

"Can you do that?" Lila asked.

"Anything for you," he said as he took her hands.

I looked longingly at them. Loving each other was so easy for them. There were no secrets. No complications. They both accepted each other for who they were.

"So how are we going to do this, Lila?"

She grabbed onto the railing as she looked at the water.

"We have to create a distraction—some kind of diversion. Could you talk to the animals again and set up what you did back in Lake Geneva?"

"You were in Wisconsin?" Maverick asked.

She nodded.

"I'll need to find Henry. And I wonder what happened to B. Maybe he can help us out as well," I told her.

We took off in the boat, and some time later, we arrived in Monterey

"I need you to meet us over there." Lila was pointing near a cave a few yards away. "The jail cell is very close. When we come up, you'll have to drive away very quickly. Okay?"

"You got it," Maverick said.

I looked at Lila, her blue eyes filled with fear. She looked as nervous as I felt.

"Let's go," I said.

We jumped in and swam down into the ocean, and I wondered how I could find Henry.

The water was a clear blue, and the floor was bright from the sunshine. Henry liked to hang around by the kelp forest near Monterey, so we headed toward there.

"Henry?"

"Katrina, come help!" I could hear his voice from a distance.

I swam toward where I thought he could be, and not much later, I found him with George. George had a fishing net caught around his throat. He was suffocating and couldn't swim to the surface.

"Help!"

Lila and I swam toward him, and we grabbed George.

I didn't know what to cut the nets with, but Lila found a sharp rock, and she cut at the twine. George's eyes were closed, and Henry was swimming around him anxiously.

Finally, the net was free, and we brought George up to the surface to get some air.

"Thank you," Henry said.

"How did this happen?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I found him like this. Thank you so much for coming."

George's eyes were closed, but he was breathing again. He opened them slowly, and turned to face me.

"Thank you to you and your friend. Is there anything we can do in return?"

"There is, actually. I need you to round up some fish and create a diversion near Miranda's jail cell so that the guards can't see us."

"June is in there. We heard about that."

"Has anyone mentioned another mermaid in there, too?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I guess we'll find out. Are you sure you can do this?"

"Yes, anything to get Miranda off the throne. The sharks have been increasing ever since Miranda took over, and it's only getting worse. Meet me by the jail cell in ten minutes."

"We have to meet them there in ten minutes."

We camouflaged ourselves and took off. To get to the jail, we had to go through the kingdom, and there were guards

everywhere. We swam slowly, careful not to create a large current that would give us away. We swam through the large kelp, went past the castle, and found the jail cell a few yards behind it. The mouth of the cave was high up, only a few yards from the surface. A rusted cell door hung on the cave, and there was a lock hanging off the side of it.

"I hope your friend is in there," Lila whispered as she reappeared. She pulled a key out of her bag.

"Where did you get that?" I whispered.

"I have my ways."

There were some guards near the entrance of the cave. And then I saw the diversion happening. Several large fish were swimming straight into the castle. The guards quickly swam away.

When they were gone, I swam toward the lock. It was made of solid gold with a large keyhole. I looked behind me briefly and saw Lila put a sea star in her hair. *Oh, Lila.*

I turned the golden key and heard it click open. Lila and I dove inside and found June and Grey on the sea floor several yards below us.

"Kate! Lila! Hurry!" June was holding Grey in her arms.

I swam quickly toward Grey. Her eyes were closed, and her skin was extremely pale.

"She's been sleeping for hours," June said.

I tried to shake her awake. "Grey," I said, some bubbles floating upward. "Grey!" I said a little louder as I shook her.

She opened her eyes slightly. "Katrina? Is that you?" she asked weakly.

"Yes, it's me. We're here to get you out. But we have to swim now! Try to stay awake, Grey."

We swam with Grey back up and out of the cave, but the guards immediately surrounded us.

"Don't move!" one of them yelled.

We were trapped. I didn't have any other options, so I tried something.

"Any great white sharks out there? We could use your help."

"Yes."

Not before long, two great white sharks swam up to the men and flashed their teeth at them. The guards yelled and turned their spears toward the sharks. One of the sharks grabbed the spears and chomped on them, breaking them in half.

"Thank you so much! Please don't hurt them," I said as we swam away.

"Fine."

Finally free, we swam up to the surface of the water. The four of us looked around, searching for Maverick's boat. It was only yards away. We swam quickly toward it, he was waiting for us on the deck. We hoisted Grey up, and he pulled her into the boat. After Lila, June, and I climbed into the boat, he threw the boat into high speed, and we sped away.

THE RIVER



“Grey!” I screamed, shaking her. She was unconscious again as she lay on the deck of the boat. “Grey, you have to wake up!”

Lila and June sat around me, looking at her.

“What are we going to do?” Lila said, frowning.

“She needs water.” I ran inside the boat’s cabin and found a water bottle, and I gave it to her to drink. She opened her eyes slightly to drink a few sips, and then a few sips more. She blinked her eyes slowly.

“Where am I?” she said, her eyes barely opened.

“You’re on a boat. We’re taking you back to shore. To Steve,” I said. She looked down and let her legs come back to her. She had been wearing a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt before this, which were now soaked.

“I’m so tired,” she said, trying to sit up.

“Here. Try to drink some more water,” I told her.

She did, and she was able to sit down next to me. She looked at me, and her gray eyes looked like storm clouds.

"Thank you, Kate. I can't tell you how grateful I am. To all of you. You saved me."

But then I could tell she seemed dizzy again, and her eyes began to flutter close.

"We'll be back soon," I said. "Let's get you to the couch where you can sleep."

We stood her up and guided her to one of the leather couches on the side of the boat.

"Maverick, can you drop us off a couple of miles up the coast?" I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"If they're following us, I don't want them to know where I live."

"Good idea," he said.

"But how are we going to get her home? It's not like we can carry her," June said.

I looked at June and at Lila and said, "We're going to swim."

We pulled up against the rocky coast, and I looked at the forest. I could see the large redwood trees from here, and I knew we were going to have to climb those rocks, and then we would have to get to the river. I had a pretty good idea where it was, but I wasn't sure.

"Thank you," I said as we pulled up. We helped Grey off the boat, and I saw Lila give Maverick a wave of goodbye. Then, the four of us tried to make it up the rocks.

We had to hold onto Grey to keep her from falling, but we continued nevertheless. Fifteen minutes later, we made it into the forest. June kept looking around at the trees as we were walking, clearly curious. But we had to get Grey to safety, so I pressed on. Finally, we came up to the river. It was pretty shallow, but I hoped that it would lead us toward a deeper part of the river and to the lake.

"No, no, I'm not swimming in that," June said, looking at the murky water with a disgusted look on her face. I looked down at the river. There were mud and rocks, and it was a little opaque. I could see some clumps of algae forming on the surface.

"We don't have a choice. I wonder if she'll feel better if we can get her back into freshwater."

"That makes sense," Lila said.

We all slipped into the water and began swimming. It was dark and murky, and there were fish swimming around us and through the plants. I could see some sun rays beaming through the green-colored water as we swam through it. It was just very different than the blue ocean. Regardless, I still found it to be very beautiful.

It didn't take long for the river to become much deeper. And as we were swimming, Grey began to open her eyes. I could tell she was feeling better, and soon, she was keeping up with us quickly and leading the way.

We swam until we reached the lake, and then Lila, June, and I came out of the water.

Grey was under for a moment.

"Is she okay?" I said, feeling nervous.

But then she suddenly popped out of the water, putting her elbows on the grass and mud that were on the edge of the lake.

"Thank you for what you guys did for me. I really cannot thank you enough," she said, reaching for us to give us a hug.

"What are you going to tell Steve?"

"I'll tell him I escaped from Miranda. If he asks me for more details, I won't give it to him."

I nodded. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes, and this is where we part. You can get back to town this way. I'll take a different route."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"That was smart putting me in the river. That helped me a lot," she said, coming out of the water.

She took a few pieces of seaweed that were on her shoulder off and flicked it back into the water.

"Bye," I said as I watched her run into the forest.

June, Lila, and I looked at each other.

"Where are we going to stay?" June asked. "I'm totally disgusting," she said. She was covered in algae and seaweed. Lila and I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"It's not funny," she said. But then we were all laughing.

"You can come and stay with me. We have a lot to tell you," I said. Lila and I nodded, and then we left to continue through the forest.

When we got to my house, June looked excited. We opened the door, and I saw Jan sitting at the table with Dr. Keys.

"Girls," Jan said as we came inside. She was standing now, looking a little alarmed.

"You've met Lila. This is Junopia."

"June," she said, smiling. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise," said my aunt. "Why are all of you covered in algae?"

"It's a long story," I said with a laugh. "Can they stay with us for a little while? It's important."

"Sure," she said. "Of course. It's nice to meet all of you. I'd like to take you to the aquarium tomorrow, if that's all right. I have some questions for you two," she said to June and Lila.

"I'd love to!" June said, smiling brightly. She then turned and whispered, "What's that?"

"Thanks so much, Jan. They'll stay with me in my room," I said as we headed up the stairs.

"I have dinner coming in a few minutes. Come back down soon."

The three of us walked up the stairs, and then I said, "You two can share my bed. I'll sleep on a mattress on the ground from now on. But first, we all need to take showers. I'll shower in Jan's bathroom. Lila, you and June can shower in mine." I left out some of my pajamas for them to use, and then we left

When I got back to my room, Lila and June were in the pajamas and sitting on my bed.

"So...what did you want to tell me?" June said.

"Well, we should probably tell her about your past," Lila said.

"I'm a princess." I looked at Lila, and she nodded. June then said, "I traveled here from the Gulf Seas. I am the tenth daughter of a queen from there."

"Why did you leave?" I said. "That's a long trip."

"She met a boy," Lila said.

"Lila!" June said. "But, yes, it was a long journey."

I turned to Lila and said, "She could be the queen."

"What?" June said.

"You better explain first," Lila said.

"June, my mother was queen before Miranda, making me a princess as well. Miranda is not the true queen."

"How do you know?"

"My mom left me a map full of clues, and one of them led to a crown. The *real* crown."

"Miranda's illegitimate, then. She needs the crown to be the true queen. Who will be queen then?"

June could be queen. It didn't have to be me after all. She was already a princess, and she was fond of humans.

"I think it should be you, June," I said.

Lila looked at me and smiled. "I agree."

"No, it should not be me. It should be you, Katrina. You've been so brave. You saved me—it should be you."

I looked down and sighed, "First, I don't want it. Second, you would be a great queen. You love humans, and you could stop the shipwrecks from happening. You would be an excellent queen...that is, if you'd want it."

June looked down and said, "I would want to be queen. I want things to be better—things can be so much better."

"It's agreed then," I said. "We can go to the aquarium tomorrow and grab the crown. Then you can put it on, and you can take the throne."

It was silent for a few moments as we all thought about what we had discussed.

"How did you do that with the sharks, by the way?" June asked.

Lila was looking intently at me as well. "How *did* you do that?"

"I can talk to animals."

"Sure, we know that. But great white sharks don't like mermaids," June said.

"I don't know. I just kind of told them to help, and they did."

Our conversation stopped when we heard a chime from the text I had received from Jared. He wanted me to meet him at the abandoned lighthouse. We would meet there tonight.

After dinner, Lila and June fell asleep quickly after the long day. I, on the other hand, left for the lighthouse. I was anxious to get there and see him.

I parked my car, and Jared was standing outside. I ran for him, and he took me into his arms as we hugged each other. It felt so good to see him after everything that had happened.

Tomorrow, June would become queen, and the shipwrecks would stop happening. I felt like I could finally relax.

We climbed the stairs in the lighthouse, and when I got up there, he had brought up candles and a lantern, books, and a projector to watch a movie.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in so long," I said as I looked into his eyes. Today, I could see hope in them. Like a new chapter was being written.

"I don't like when you're not here," Jared said, looking back into my eyes. He kissed me on the cheek. Then, he straightened up a moment and said, "Grey is okay."

I smiled. "Is Steve happy?"

"Yeah," he said as he laughed and looked down. "She was a little dehydrated, not feeling her best, but she seemed all right. Apparently, her kind of mermaid gets dehydrated in saltwater."

I just smiled.

"Enough of that. You ready for a story?" Jared said.

I let him talk and listened as I closed my eyes. I wasn't listening so much to the words as I was listening to his voice. I was happy. I closed my eyes and drifted into a blissful sleep.

"Wake up," he said, shaking me awake.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry to wake you, but it's getting late. And there's something I want to tell you. Something I want to ask you."

"Yes?" I asked.

He looked nervous as he looked to his right, and then he looked at me.

"I love you. Ever since you came into my life, everything has changed. I was thinking about something."

"What is it?" I asked.

He grinned. "Run away with me."

DECISION



He smiled then, and he seemed so sure of himself, so sure of the way he felt about me. My heart was soaring, and I crashed into his arms.

He laughed as he held me. “You don’t have to give me an answer today. But I will expect one by prom. I say after prom, we leave—just the two of us.”

“But what about the Coast Guard?”

“I’m going to leave it all behind,” he said, smiling.

I looked up at him, and I kissed him. I wanted to be with him. Truly, I did. I was going to have to make this decision and soon.

* * *

“THANKS FOR JOINING ME TODAY, girls. I have so much to ask you about,” Jan said when we arrived at the aquarium the next day. She met us outside, and then she motioned for us to follow her.

Lila, June, and I walked through the front doors. June

raised her eyebrows as she walked through the aquarium and looked into the tanks. She wore her brown wavy hair down today, and I watched as she pressed her finger to the glass.

As I walked in, I saw Matt holding a clipboard as he was walking. I ran up to him with Lila behind me.

"Matt, I'd like you to meet Lila," I said.

"Nice to meet you," he said, smiling. "I'm a little busy today, but, Kate, if you need anything at all, just call me," he said.

Lila raised her eyebrows when he left, and I stood there a little shocked at his curtness. He was usually so friendly. He had left rather quickly, and he disappeared around the corner.

I turned to Lila and said, "When everyone leaves, I'll dive for the crown." She nodded, and June came over. "Are you two ready to volunteer?"

"Hold up," I heard. Jan came behind us. "I'd like to talk to them. Kate told me about how you know dolphins have good healing abilities. I was wondering if you could tell me more about that?"

June smiled and said, "Sure, I'll tell you all about it."

Lila stayed behind with me, and I watched June and Jan walk down the hall toward Jan's office.

"You should go with them," I said.

Lila shook her head. "That's June's specialty. I think we should try to retrieve the crown now."

"Lila, there are people everywhere."

"You'll be camouflaged," she said. "Plus, I don't want it to get too late."

"You're right," I said. "Fine, let's go."

Lila and I went up the stairs and made our way to the tanks.

"It's this one. I'm sure of it," I said, slipping off my backpack.

"Be quick," Lila said. "I'll stand by the door so no one comes in."

I opened up the top of the tank, camouflaged, and I dove in. I knew I had buried it underneath some of the kelp, but I wasn't sure where.

I swam to the bottom and began digging through the sand. My hands met the box, and I grabbed it and swam out with it, hoping no one could see this unfolding.

I climbed out of the tank and gave Lila the box, scooting myself out of the tank.

I found a towel, and I dried off slightly as I walked back into the office. Lila's face had paled.

"The crown's gone," she said.

"What?"

I walked over, and I looked into the box. It *was* gone.

"Do you think Miranda found it?" I said.

"I'm not sure."

"What now?" I said. "What are we going to do?"

I sat down on a nearby chair and put my head in my hands. "We were so careless. We should have found a better hiding spot. How can we find out if she has the crown?"

"We can't," Lila said. "For now, I think we have to try to lay low."

I then heard voices outside of the office door, and the two of us looked at each other. The door opened, and Jan and June walked in. I sighed.

"What is it?" Jan asked.

"The crown's gone," I said.

. . .

WHEN WE GOT HOME, the three of us sat on the couch, unsure of what to say. I mean...what could we say? The crown was missing—our chance to make things right. My mother had gone to extreme lengths to hide the crown, and we had lost it only hours after finding it. Not only had we lost the crown, but Lila and June had lost their homes.

Lila was the first to speak. "So, we can stay here right?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, quietly.

"Where will we go when we need to go to the ocean?"

I thought about how in the last couple of months, I would dive into the aquariums. But I had a better idea. Something I remembered in Jared's words from before. I wasn't positive about it, but I figured we'd try to find out.

"I have an idea," I said. "Let's go."

The three of us stood up off the couch, and we went to the car. I drove the Jeep to the edge of the forest. It was as close as I could get.

It was windy today, and gray clouds were scattered throughout the sky. The redwood forest stood in front of us.

"Not the river again?" June asked, her eyebrows knitting together.

"No, not the river," I said. "Come with me."

We began hiking into the forest, and I remembered the path we needed to take—I had been here countless times in the last six months.

We climbed through the forest slowly. Lila and June could not help but look around the forest, watching as the birds flew or examining the different plants and flowers.

"It's different from the sea, but some things are so similar," June said as she looked at a fern, touching the edges of the green, spiky plant.

"Yeah, it is," I said as we continued forward. After thirty

minutes or so, I knew we were almost there because I could smell the sea.

We came up to the edge of the rocks, which extended toward the beach and the abandoned lighthouse.

"Can we go in?" June asked as we looked at the lighthouse.

"Let me check to see if anyone's in there. Stay here," I said.

I ran toward the lighthouse, opened the creaking door, and I smelled its familiar, musty scent.

I climbed up the steps quickly, and then I came into the room. I saw a coat in the corner, but that was it. No one was up here.

I ran down the stairs and waved to them to come. They came out of the forest to the rocks, and then we sat looking at the ocean.

"What are we going to do here?" Lila asked, sitting down.

"We're going to swim," I said.

"No, we can't," Lila said. "Miranda will find us."

"Jared told me something a while ago. He was adamant about me not going near beaches at all, but then he offered to teach me to swim at *this* beach. Do you know what this means?"

"NO!" Lila said. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"What?" June said.

"I think there are sharks around this beach. And if that's true, we'll be safe. Miranda's guards wouldn't dare come around here if it's infested with sharks."

Lila gulped. "This could be dangerous."

"I know, but we need a place to go. Unless you'd rather go to the aquarium," I said.

"So *that's* where you went," Lila said. I nodded. "No, I

need a place I can actually swim. I think we should try this. You can communicate with the sharks, right?" Lila asked.

"Yes."

"Let's try it," June said. She stepped out of her flip flops off and ran into the water. Lila and I went right behind her.

When we dove in, at first, I didn't see anything. And then my suspicions were true. From far off, I could see some sharks. They began moving closer.

"Please don't hurt us," I said.

And as soon as I said that, they turned around, and they left.

Lila was stunned as was June.

"Looks like we have a place to go," I said.

June swam to the top of the water, and we followed her. She then climbed up on some of the rocks and lay back on them, putting her arms behind her head.

"Someone will see you," I whispered.

"No, they won't," she said. "Come on. The sun's out. It feels good."

Lila and I looked at each other, shrugged, and then we followed her on the rocks. I closed my eyes and relaxed.

"How did we get to this point?" Lila asked as we all lay there.

We looked at her, and then the three of us smiled and started laughing.

June said, "No matter what happens, at least we have each other. We have the three of us."

I smiled at June, and then at Lila who reciprocated the smile.

"Agreed," I said.

WEDDING



May came around quickly. While I was stuck at school studying, June and Lila spent all their time at the aquarium or helping Jan plan for her wedding. Lila worked at the aquarium now as a tour guide, and while June helped out a lot with research, she was busy designing things for the wedding. She picked out the flowers, the centerpieces, and she was even making the bridesmaids' dresses. I was amazed at her skill in design.

After school, I often took June and Lila to the beach to help record Kristen surfing. Otherwise, I was either at the Rescue with Jared or studying.

The day of the wedding came fast. Jan chose Lila, June, her friend from Colorado, and a couple of women from church to be her bridesmaids. I was asked to be the maid of honor.

June had designed cornflower blue stunning dresses that went perfectly with the flowers and centerpieces. She had sewn a beautiful, slightly sparkly design on the dresses, and

she had set up twinkling lights and paper lanterns everywhere. The reception was waiting for us outside the church.

The only drawback to it all was that June was allergic to whichever flowers she had chosen. Her nose was slightly red, but she smiled through it nevertheless.

Jan walked down the aisle. She looked so beautiful and radiant as she approached the altar. Dr. Keys was smiling at her, and the two of them couldn't stop smiling the entire ceremony. When they were exchanging vows, I felt a few tears roll down my cheeks.

After church, we went outside to the reception. A large tent covered the food and the dance floor, and there were tables all over the lawn with lights and lanterns everywhere. It was so beautiful.

"Do you want to dance?" Jared asked me after we finished dinner.

"Sure," I said. Jared looked handsome in his suit, and I smiled as we began dancing under the lights.

I caught Matt in the corner with a frown on his face. He was sitting alone at a table under the tent, and I felt guilty.

Matt had distanced himself from me the last couple of months. It seemed like ever since I came back from Chicago, he was ignoring me. And when I'd go to the aquarium to volunteer, we only briefly chatted once in a while. It was all surface-level stuff. He didn't ask about the map anymore or the scale. I just didn't understand it.

"What's on your mind?" I heard Jared whisper into my ear as we were dancing. The lanterns and string lights under the white tent created a warm glow, and I looked up at them.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"About you—about how much I love you."

I blushed and said, "I love you too."

"Someday, this will be us," Jared said as we danced under

the lights. "I know you will make a beautiful bride," he said as he held me close. *His bride?*

As I looked up at him, I felt this guilt. He still didn't know the real me. And I couldn't go down the aisle with him without him knowing. But I let that thought drift away as we slow danced in the middle of the dance floor.

I caught Matt's eye, and he looked so sad. He stood up, put his napkin down, and walked out of the tent with his hands in his pockets. I wanted to run after him and ask him what was wrong, but then I heard a large round of applause.

I turned around, and I saw Jan and Keys cutting the cake. A moment later, Lila ran up to us. She looked so pretty tonight with her hair pulled up into a low bun.

"Have you tried this stuff?! It's amazing!" Lila said, handing me a plate.

"Want to sit down?" Jared asked. I nodded.

When we sat down, I looked at him, and I said, "The boat dance is coming up. I'd like to go."

"You're not going to that," he said. "It's too dangerous."

"But it's romantic," I said.

"Your safety is more important. Anyway, have you thought about our conversation a little more?"

"I have, and I have decided to tell you my decision at prom," I said.

"That's fine," he said. "I want you to be ready, Katrina. No matter what you choose, it's going to be okay."

"But what about Elle? Are you willing to give up on looking for her?" I said, looking around to see if anyone was listening.

"No, but my dad and Steve are so invested in the search. I think if I took a few years for myself—to us—it'd be okay. I just need to get out of here. I can't take any more calls from the Coast Guard. I just can't take it anymore," he said. "And I

hope you understand what I mean about running away together. I'd like to run away and get married—somewhere private."

My cheeks flushed suddenly, and I felt like I was going to pass out. I gripped the side of the table.

"Jared, you want to marry me?"

He held my hand a moment and said, "I know it probably feels fast, but I love you, and I know you are the one I want to be with. I want to spend our lives together."

I felt dizzy, but all that came out was, "I love you too."

He smiled, seemingly assured by that answer, and he got up.

"I have to go," he said. "But I'll see you soon."

I was left at the table stunned. What had just happened?

He wanted to marry me. Jared wanted to marry me. I couldn't believe it as I replayed the words in my head.

I was going to have to tell him the truth. I was going to tell him at prom. If Jared couldn't handle it, then at least he knew the truth. If I faced rejection, well, then I did. Jared deserved to know the truth.

BOAT PARTY



When I got home from school, June was waiting for me. She was sitting at the table reading a magazine.

"I heard there's a boat party today. I really want to go," June said.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said, putting my backpack on the ground.

"Please?"

I looked over at Lila who crossed her arms. "I think Katrina is right. I don't know how I feel about that either. What if Miranda tries to sink the boat?"

"There have been no boat sinkings in a long time. Isn't that true, Katrina?"

"It is. Jared hasn't been called out in a while."

"Still, I don't know..." Lila said, trailing off.

I grabbed my keys off the counter, and I said, "I'm heading out to go camping with Jared. I'll be back later."

He had been so romantic about it—he had dropped off

flowers to my doorstep and a note telling me to meet him at our usual hiking spot.

When I arrived at the edge of the redwoods, I was the first to arrive, so I waited. Ten minutes later, I looked at my watch, feeling impatient. *What was taking him so long?*

Jared's car finally showed up, and I smiled. But it wasn't Jared who came out of it. I took a few steps backward.

"I talked to the White Queen," I heard Steve say as he closed the door shut. Steve walked toward me, and I moved a few steps back. "She said that she is willing to make a trade. You for Elle. Frankly, I don't see the problem in doing that."

"But I saved Grey," I said, hesitating at the edge of the forest, ready to sprint.

"Did you? Not sure I can believe that," he said.

"I gave you the scale," I said.

"Not sure why you did that, but I know you saltwater mermaids. You're all the same. Ruthless, scheming, and selfish," he said.

"Why haven't you told Jared?" I asked him.

"I've tried a couple of times, but he doesn't seem to believe me. He believes the lie you are telling him." Suddenly, he moved a step closer, and I took off in a run. "You're not going to get away," he yelled.

I ran as fast as I could, brushing past bushes and ducking under branches as I ran. I sprinted through the woods quickly, unsure of where I was. I had veered off the path.

I could hear Steve behind me, but I wasn't sure how far he was. There was green—everywhere, blurring around me.

I pumped my arms as I ran, and my legs were on fire. I was fast—really fast. But so was Steve. I could hear him calling my name behind me. He was getting closer. After months of chasing me, Steve was the closest he'd been to catching me.

As I was running through the woods, I finally recognized where I was. I had spent so much time hiking through here that I was familiar with a few parts of the woods. I knew I was getting close to a way out—at least I hoped so.

Steve was only steps behind me now, and I ran and jumped, feeling his hand skimming the back of my head.

I felt weightless for a moment, and then I tumbled into the waves below me. The warm embrace of the waves made me forget that I was being chased for a moment. I swam to the top of the water, and I looked up.

Steve was standing on the ledge as he looked down at me.

“You’re not going to get away!” he called down to me.

I ducked under quickly and swam off. Without even realizing it, I had swum toward where the boat party was supposed to be.

I saw that some students were already on the boat, and I swam underneath a pier as I watched the students file on. I could hear their senseless chatter and as people stomped on the pier boards and climbed into the boat. I listened as music began to play.

My long hair draped over my arms as I hung onto the pier. My tail drifted upward slightly, and I brought my fins out of the water a moment. I wished I could be up there with them.

As I was under the pier, George suddenly popped up out of the water, causing a little bit of a splash.

“How did you know I was here?”

“I was nearby. How’s it going, fish girl?” George asked.

George saw me looking up through the floorboards at the kids who were piling onto the boat.

“How are things going?” I asked.

“Not good. Miranda is not happy. She heard about the incident

with the sharks. She knows that you, June, and Lila are to blame. She'd better not find you. You should leave—you're not safe here."

"Thanks, George, for your bravery. You saved us."

"That's what friends are for."

"Have you noticed anything different about Miranda's crown?"

"No, I don't think so."

I hoped that was confirmation that she didn't have the real crown.

I looked up and saw my friends dancing on the boat. The boat was filling up, and the music was blasting louder than before. Matt and Kristen were dancing together, laughing and having a great time.

"Cool!" I heard a little sea turtle say as he popped his head out of the water.

"What did I tell you?" I heard George say. "I told you guys I had a mermaid friend."

It was George's kids, and they were a little larger than the last time I had seen them.

"My name is Katrina," I said. The little turtles came around me, interested. "It's nice to meet you."

They were too shy to say hello, and they went back into the water.

"We should be getting back. Be careful, Katrina, okay?" I heard George say. And then he disappeared in the water.

Suddenly, the boat horn sounded, and I watched as it moved away from the dock.

I looked over at the sun, which was glowing orange on the horizon. I needed to get out of here.

I slipped out of the water, and just like that, the sun was gone. The sky was slowly turning deeper colors, and I watched as the boat went away, hearing the music becoming fainter and fainter.

I sat on the edge of the dock, looking out at the sea when I saw storm clouds appearing in the distance. I knew what was going to happen next.

The clouds rolled in, and the wind began to pick up. Soon, the waves were choppy, and they were slapping against the rocks near the shore.

The wind was gradually becoming stronger, and then a wave came up and over the dock and splashed me.

I stood up, looking at the sea. Soon, Jared and Steve would be heading toward the boat. I just had to wait. My hair was blowing around me, and I could feel the spray of the sea. I went and sat up on some rocks.

But as I waited, I started to panic. Jared and Steve should be here by now. Where were they?

I heard the first rolls of thunder, and then the rain started to fall. From a distance, I began to see the boat teetering back and forth, and then I stood up.

What if nobody was coming? What if they didn't get there in time?

More thunder rumbled. My friends were on that boat. I had to do something. I knew this was a huge risk, but I had to do something. Miranda could catch me and lock me up for good. But I couldn't let something happen to my friends.

I ran down the rocks and onto the pier, the boards moving underneath my feet, and then I jumped into the choppy waves.

I thought the waves were bad the last time I'd swam through a storm, but they were nothing compared to today. I was tossed around by the large waves, and I flicked my fins hard to push through them. I dove under deeper, but the currents were still strong.

I put my hands out in front of me as I made my way

through the water. I could hear the growing bellows of the thunder even underwater. I camouflaged myself, staying hidden from Miranda, and I took off toward the boat, my tail brushing across the sand.

I made it to the boat faster than I thought, and I could see there were already mermaids nearby. They were sending large waves onto the boat.

I swam up to the surface, searching for my friends' faces, but it seemed that most of the students had been filed inside—not that there would be too much room.

I dove under. I had to try to find Miranda to stop this. Moments later, I saw a dolphin. It looked like—could it be?!

"B!" I said.

"I can't see you. Where are you?"

"Get out of here! It's dangerous for you!"

"No way! We have to stop Miranda."

I could hear another boat pulling up. I went back up to the surface and saw Jared. He had finally made it. He looked serious, and I could see that Grey and Steve were with him. Jared had the steering wheel in his grip.

A whirlpool was forming. I began spinning slowly as it widened.

"B, don't let anything happen to you."

The whirlpool began spinning faster, and I was slammed against one of the boats. My camouflage came down.

"I knew you'd be here," I heard. It was Miranda's voice.

She was charging toward me. I dodged out of the way. She almost crashed into the boat, but then she turned around.

She began forming another whirlpool around me.

"What you're doing is wrong," I said to Miranda. She just swam away.

I tried to swim out of the whirlpool, but it was too strong, and it was growing larger.

“Help!” I screamed

I could see figures coming toward me. It was B, Lila, and June.

“Guys!” I said. “What should I do?”

“Hold on! We’ll get you out of there!” June said. June put her hand up, and the whirlpool stopped spinning.

“How are you doing that?” I asked her.

“My talent is a mimic talent,” June said. “If a mermaid is close by, I can use their talent. I can stop Miranda. But we have to work together.”

The whirlpool began to slow down, and when it was almost completely gone, I was able to swim out.

“Thanks,” I said.

Then we turned our attention back to the boat.

“B, go to the boat and make sure everyone is okay.”

B disappeared, and then all of us tried to stop the storm and the whirlpool by working together.

We put our hands up to try to stop the whirlpool and waves—we needed to slow it down so that the boat was able to pull away.

The waves started to falter, diminishing enough for the boat party to break free. I watched as the boat sped away toward shore. I heard Miranda shriek in frustration.

“We have to get out of here,” I said, and the three of us sped off fast.

“Bye, Katrina. I’ll be okay,” B called as we swam away.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I have a secret hiding spot,” Lila said. “Hurry!”

The waves were getting stronger again, and it became harder for us to swim through. The currents were picking up, and it was like trying to swim upstream. We held hands

as we swam, pushing our tails to the limit. Lila led us through a cave, and then another one. I looked at the dark blue walls, and I saw that they were covered in algae and sea stars. I saw a few spiky sea urchins on the sand as we swam through.

We finally stopped in a small cave.

“We should be safe in here,” Lila said, panting.

The three of us sank onto the sand in exhaustion. I rested my head on the sand and closed my eyes.

* * *

I OPENED MY EYES, and I exhaled as I watched a small fish dart through the brightly-lit cave.

Something popped out of the sand, and I screamed.

Lila opened her eyes a little as she looked over at me. She laughed. “It’s just a garden eel,” she said. “They’re completely harmless.”

“Right. I knew that,” I said, watching as the eels popped their tiny bodies out of the bottom of the sand, looking like worms.

As I looked around the cave, I sighed in relief. At least we were still here. Miranda hadn’t found us.

I was surprised that the cave was as bright as it was. I looked at my smartwatch—it was the morning! We had slept the entire night.

My stomach growled lightly. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast yesterday morning. All I could think about was how good some ice cream would be right now.

I went up the surface of the cave and sat on some rocks, letting my tail lay in the water.

I found some seaweed, and I took a few pieces. June came

up next to me, and then she got out and sat next to me in the cave.

"Thanks again for yesterday," I said.

"You're welcome."

"So, you have a mimic talent?"

Her smile was so pretty and lit up her face.

"Yeah, I guess I should've told you earlier, but it's not something I want a lot of people to know."

"Did you ever use the mimic talent around me?" I asked her.

"Yes, I did hear B a couple of times," she said, smiling.

I laughed. "Does your talent only work then when you're around other mermaids?"

"Yes."

Lila swam up to us, her hair floating around her like a mane. She flipped her blue tail slightly out of the water and sighed as she pulled a piece of seaweed from her hair.

"How will we know it's safe?" I asked, finally, feeling the stone beneath my hand.

"I can tell that Miranda's not here. Nor her guards. We should be okay," Lila said. "Are you two ready?"

June and I slipped into the water, and Lila led the way out of the cave. We were close to the shore, and we headed toward it.

Now that we were on two feet again, we ran into the forest. I was relieved that my friends were safe, but I called Kristen on my smartwatch to make sure.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"What happened last night?!"

"Yes, those were mermaids," I said. "I was able to hold them off with Lila and June. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay. I'm fine, but Sam's a little shell-shocked, I think. Everyone on the boat was freaking out, and I couldn't

find Matt for a bit, so I thought something had happened to him. But he's fine. I'm fine."

Oh, right. Matt. I was glad to hear he was okay.

"I'll see you at graduation, okay?" she said.

"See you then," I said.

GRADUATION



I walked through the hallways of Meadows on my last day of school. I had been more preoccupied my senior year with the ocean and the sea than I had been with what was happening at school—at least for most of the year. Nonetheless, I was graduating anyway.

I watched as senior students crowded through the hallways chatting and giggling as they went toward the gym for the ceremony.

As I thought about what was going to come after this, I remembered my conversation with Jared in the lighthouse. I could picture him sitting there, looking so confident about what he was asking me. To run away with him. And he even wanted to get married.

Was I really ready to walk down the aisle? I hadn't even walked down the aisle at my graduation. Well, I was about to.

But let's say we did go off and get married. What then?

Kristen appeared, and when she saw me, she ran up and hugged me.

"Happy Graduation Day!" she said with a huge smile on her face after we broke apart from our hug.

I was grateful for the friendships I had made while here.

"So, what are your plans for after you graduate?" Kristen asked as we walked down the hallway.

"I don't know," I said.

"I thought you wanted to be a marine biologist," she said.

"I did. I still do, but I'm still figuring it out. How about you? What are your plans?"

She smiled. "I've decided to do online college, and I'm going to keep surfing. I didn't make it in the Champions Tour this year, but maybe next year."

"I'm so happy to hear that you're following your dreams."

We made it to the door into the gym, and I held my breath a minute.

"Yeah, I don't want to go in either," Kristen said. I looked over at her, and she had tears in her eyes. "I don't want things to change. I've had so much fun this year."

"Kristen, we'll always be best friends," I said, and we hugged.

"You ready?" I nodded. "Wait. Your tassel isn't right," she said, her eyebrows knitting together as she moved the tassel to the correct side.

"Let's go."

Graduation was a roar of cheers and a constant flash of cameras. It felt like more of a show than anything else. When my name was called, my legs felt like Jello-O as I walked up and received my diploma. I could hear cheering, but I was much more focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

When it was over, I expected everyone to throw their caps, but no one did. Jared, though, took his cap off and walked toward me—we'd been seated in alphabetical order, so he was only a row away from me.

"Hi," he said as he wrapped me in a hug.

"We did it!"

When he pulled apart, he motioned toward Jan, Lila, and June who were waiting to greet me. I caught up to them after.

"Congratulations, sweetheart," Jan said, pulling me into a hug. "Let's celebrate. I ordered some food at the house. Do you want to meet me back there?"

"Sure," I said.

"Bye," she said. Lila and June smiled and waved, and they disappeared out the door.

Luke, Jared's little brother, came running up to us. His mom was laughing and smiling as she caught up.

She hugged Jared. "Congratulations, Jared. Have you seen Steve? He disappeared after the ceremony," she said. He shook his head.

Then his mom turned to me and said, "Congratulations, darling." She pulled me into a hug, and when we let go, she had tears in her eyes.

"Can I talk to Katrina alone for a moment?" she asked Jared. He smiled and nodded, and he left with Luke.

Mrs. O'Connor said, "I want to apologize for my behavior. I know we've never talked before really, and I want to say I'm sorry. You are a wonderful girl. But you deserve an explanation." She hesitated, and she said, "You remind me of my daughter. I know Jared told you about her. But you remind me so much of her. I always envisioned that when she grew up, she'd look just like this. Just like you," she said.

I took her hands. "I'm so sorry about what happened to her," I said, looking down. I felt so guilty.

"Regardless, I want to thank you for what joy you've brought back into my son's life. I felt like...we were losing him somehow. All that time spent working for the Coast

Guard wore on him. I knew he was too young when he started working for them, but I just...I'm so grateful that he's our old Jared again. Thank you."

Suddenly, she was hugging me, and I hugged her back, and I caught the smell of expensive perfume. When she pulled away, she handed me something.

"I meant to give this to Elle someday...if she ever returned...but I want you to have it."

She handed me a prayer box.

"Annette, I can't take this."

"Jared told me that you pray a lot. And with your aunt," she said. "I was hoping you could pray for us. For our family," she said.

I pulled her into another hug. "Of course, I can. I will," I said.

THE MALL



“*L*ook what we have!” June said. Lila was holding a credit card.

“Your aunt gave this to us before she left for her honeymoon this morning. She said we could go shopping!

I smiled and said, “We’ll go to the mall.”

We drove toward the mall, and June was looking out the window. Lila was not as wide-eyed about being on land since our trip to Wisconsin, but I noticed she still looked curiously at the different buildings and people.

When we arrived and stepped inside, the two of them smiled at all the beautiful clothes and stores.

“Maravilloso!”

As we were looking around, we came to the prom dresses section.

“Would you want to go to prom?” I asked them as I noticed them looking at the beautiful gowns.

“YES!” June said.

“What’s prom?” Lila asked.

"You take a date and go and dance together with the rest of the class. You could invite Maverick, if you want."

Lila held up a lilac purple dress, and I went over and looked at it.

"That's pretty. Do you want to try it on?" I asked.

"Sure. Reminds me of our time with Maverick, right?" she said as she took the fabric into her hands.

"Right," I said.

Maybe she found those memories to be a little more favorable than I did, and I thought about the shark bite I had received.

June picked out a white dress. "Will you be trying on a dress?" she asked.

"No, I already have a dress."

"This is so fun," June said as we left our last store. We were exhausted. June had a really good eye for fashion, and she picked out a lot of cute clothes—white jeans, a couple of cute sweaters, a dress, and a skirt and blouse outfit.

All Lila seemed to want to wear were pretty dresses. I convinced her to get one pair of jeans and a sweater, but she liked the dresses better.

We sat down at a table in the food court, and I sighed. We were surrounded by a mountain of bags.

"Who knew shopping could be so tiring?" Lila said.

The three of us laughed.

"Hot pretzels?" I asked them.

They looked at each other and said, "YES!"

I bought them some hot pretzels and when I came back to the table, there were a couple of boys flirting with them.

June and Lila looked a little nervous and were only smiling slightly.

"They're taken," I said as I came to the table.

"What about you, then?" said one of them.

"Also taken."

They sighed and left, and I handed them each a hot pretzel. They tried them at the same time.

June said, "These are better than I was expecting, but it needs a little more salt."

Typical for a mermaid.

We were drinking some lemonade when I saw Helen come toward us. She was surrounded by a couple of girls I knew from school.

"Is this one of your friends?" June asked.

"Uh, kind of," I said.

"Hi," June said with a large smile.

"Hey, freaks," Helen said.

June's smile faded fast.

"Hi, Helen. This is June and Lila. Lila and June, this is Helen."

"Pleasure," Helen said, and she rolled her eyes, which sent the girls next to her laughing.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing, just thought you'd want to know."

"Know what?"

"Something happened to your hair. It's so strange," she said. "Maybe now Jared won't think you're pretty. That IS all he sees in you. I hope you know that."

I felt my hair, and something was caught in it.

"I think you have gum in your hair," Helen said, laughing. It wasn't a small piece of gum—there was a huge wad of it stuck to the back of my hair.

Tears crept to my eyes. "How could you be so cruel?" I asked. "I've been nothing but nice to you since I moved here."

"Nice to me? You stole my best friend from me and my crush all in the span of a couple of weeks."

"At least I'm kind to people, Helen. At least I don't have to hurt others to try to make myself feel better."

Helen looked down, and I could see her mouth twitch a moment.

"You're just jealous," June said, standing up.

Lila stood up too and said, "Say you're sorry or else."

"Or else what? What are you her babysitter?" she asked, looking at us.

"I think it's time for you to leave," I told Helen and crossed my arms.

She looked at the three of us and said, "You really are freaks."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and left.

"My hair," I said, sadly touching the back of my head again.

"We'll get it out for you," June said. "I think some jellyfish extract should do the trick."

"I have some of it, actually," Lila said. "Let's go home."

When we got home, Lila fished something out of her bag. "Don't even look. I'll be done fast," she said.

She poured some of the mixture on my hair, and a few minutes later, she had the wad of gum in her hands.

"Thanks," I said. "Is my hair still there?"

"Yes," she said. Then she turned to me and said, "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"Thanks, Lila. I still had a good day today."

"Me too," she said, smiling.

FISHING NET



The sounds of the thunder woke me up. I sat up in bed and looked out the window. The rain was coming down hard, and then I heard another roar of thunder.

"Lila, June, wake up," I said, shaking them gently. Lila groaned, and June fluttered her eyelids.

"What is it?" June said, sitting up and groaning. I saw Lila open her eyes.

I sat at the edge of the bed and motioned to the window. "It's storming."

"Sometimes it storms," Lila said softly as she closed her eyes again.

"I think we need to check it out," I said. "Just in case."

"I'm coming with you. Vamanos," June said, standing up and stretching.

"Lila, you can stay here if you're tired."

Lila sat up, her red hair falling onto her shoulders.

"No, I'm coming," she said as she sat up and yawned in her white nightgown.

"Let's get dressed," I said. "Then we have to go."

We left the house, holding our flashlights as we ran toward the ocean. It was pouring outside, but being mermaids, we didn't really mind. The only downside was that it made it hard to see.

We approached the beach, and when we arrived, the wind blew hard on us, whipping our hair against our faces. As I looked out at the sea. I couldn't really see anything from here. Maybe I was overthinking it.

But all of a sudden, I could see a boat drifting among the waves. The waves were huge, and I saw some lightning flash across the sky.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Lila asked.

"We have to! Jared could be out there. Or anyone!" I said. "But I can't make you guys risk this. I can go alone."

"No way! I'm coming with you," June said, running into the waves.

Lila looked nervous, and I could see her trembling slightly as she looked at the waves.

"Lila, you don't have to do this," I said. "You can go home."

Lila straightened up, took off her shoes, and said, "No. Let's go!"

"June?!" I screamed once we were all in the water. "I can't see you!"

"I'm over here," June said.

We somehow made it to her, and the three of us held hands as we swam through the waves. As we got closer, I could see two boats, not one, and one of them was sinking. I approached the boats, and I looked to see who was on it.

Jared, Steve, Blake, Logan, and even Grey were on one of the boats trying to board the people on it.

"What were these people doing out here?!" I asked Lila.

"I see people on boats at night all the time," Lila said.

“Yeah, it’s pretty common,” June said.

The three of us floated on top of the water, hoping they couldn’t see us. I didn’t want to camouflage in case June and Lila couldn’t see me.

Suddenly, a wave hit us, and we went flying at the boat. I felt a couple of my scales come off after we hit the boat. One of the people on the boats tripped off, and I reached my hand out to help. I grabbed the woman, and then I lifted her onto Steve’s boat.

“I see one of them!” Steve said as he looked at me. I wasn’t sure if he’d noticed what just happened.

Then the two of us made eye contact, and I think I saw recognition flicker across his face. I ducked under the water before anyone else could see me.

And then the boat was sinking.

“Lila, June, help me keep this boat afloat,” I said. We swam over to the damaged boat, and we lifted it up slightly, trying to keep it from completely sinking as the last of the people boarded the other boat.

“We caught one!”

It was Coralia, one of Miranda’s closest friends. I saw her look out at us, and I think she recognized us.

“We have to get out of here,” Lila said. “It’s almost sunrise. If we make it to shore soon, hopefully Miranda won’t find us.”

We nodded and swam to shore. We climbed out of the water, and I watched as Jared’s boat headed back toward shore.

THE LETTER



I received a call from Jared. “You ready for tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Have your decision ready,” he said, and I could hear the excitement in his voice.

“I will. I love you,” I said.

“I love you.”

Tomorrow was prom, and Jared was going to be waiting for my decision. I saw Lila and June walking up to the house, likely coming back from the aquarium, but I needed to make this decision alone. So I went to the only place I could be alone these days.

I ran up the creaking, dusty stairs of the abandoned lighthouse. When I reached the top, I looked around at the books, games, and blankets that were strewn across the floor.

I sat down on the ground, and I brought my knees to my chin as thoughts ran through my mind.

It would be so easy to run away with Jared—run away from all of this and start a completely new life together. I

wouldn't have to worry about mermaid queens, or shipwrecks, or any of this. It would just be Jared and me.

I loved Jared. Deeply. And as I imagined my future, I could picture him in it. I could see us becoming old together, living in a place near the sea, and our grandchildren would be running around in the backyard. I could see him waiting at the end of the aisle, his beautifully structured face smiling and his auburn hair shining. Part of me longed for that life with him. Part of me longed for an escape from all of this, and I could see how easy and wonderful a life with Jared could be.

But what about my friends? And what about...Brandon? How would he feel if I ran off with Jared?

But Brandon abandoned me. I cried for him for weeks and weeks. After Chicago, I'd texted him thanking him for his help. But he never texted back. Brandon had disappeared again. It was almost as if seeing him in the Shedd was some kind of distant dream...

And what about Elle? And Miranda? Could I leave all of that behind? And then I realized something. I didn't want to fight this fight anymore. It was becoming too much. Maybe I wasn't as brave as everyone else thought I was. I just wanted to live an ordinary life.

I began writing a letter to Lila with some instructions. I had made my decision. As I began writing it, tears flowed my cheeks. But I was so *tired*. I was so tired of this mess. And a life with Jared felt so sure. It felt so wonderful...blissful.

But this letter depended on one thing. I had to tell Jared who I was first.

Dear Lila,

Thank you for everything, but it's time I move on. From all of this. I left a photocopy of the map for you. Give it to Steve—I

think the snowflake drawing might lead them to where they need to go to find Elle.

Please tell Jan that I love her and that I am so grateful for all the years we could spend together—and that I will visit her soon. Tell Kristen that she is going to do great things as a professional women's surfer. Please tell Matt that I'm sorry, because I know I hurt him. Tell Grey that her courage makes her special. And in regards to the crown, I want you and June to go away somewhere. See if Maverick can take the two of you somewhere safe.

I'm not special. I just want the chance for a normal life. And so, if you're reading this, it means that Jared and I have gone away. We're going to start our lives over together.

June, I love you, and I know you would've made an excellent queen. And, Lila, thank you for your bravery and your love. For always being there for me through all of this.

With love,
Katrina

PROM



I tucked the note in the purse I would be bringing to prom. I'd give her the note after I told Jared the truth. Once he knew the truth, he could make his decision. And I had already made mine.

Lila and June were in their prom dresses and fixing their hair. Lila wore her red hair in long waves, and she looked so pretty in the lilac dress she had picked out. June had worn her brown hair in a side fishtail braid, and she had on golden eyeshadow.

"Can I do your hair?" Lila asked me, smiling as she grabbed a brush off of the bathroom counter.

"Sure."

"Is everything okay?" Lila asked me in the mirror. "You haven't been yourself since yesterday."

"I don't know. Can we talk about it later?"

Lila nodded, not asking any more questions. It was mostly quiet as she gently brushed my hair.

"June, can you do her makeup?" Lila asked. June came in with a smile and began working.

"Don't forget the barrette," I said to Lila. "It's in the white cabinet under the sink."

"Thanks," she said.

"She looks so pretty," June said after she and Lila were done.

"Look in the mirror," Lila said.

I gasped. There were sparkly aquamarine stones in my hair, and my hair had been tied up into a beautiful bun with the barrette. I had on glittery eye shadow with traces of blue and green that seemed to bring out my eyes.

"But I look like a mermaid," I said.

"You *are* a mermaid, Katrina."

June smiled and said, "I hope you don't mind. I jazzed up your prom dress a little."

She opened the closet, taking out the dress and bringing it back into the bathroom. It was more beautiful than it had been before. June had added such beautiful details to the dress. There were small stones that adorned the neckline, and the dress now glittered slightly.

"This is amazing," I said, looking at it. "Thank you so much."

"It seemed more you."

I slipped it on, and then I looked in the mirror. I felt beautiful.

"I wish your mom was here to see you," Lila said, and I could see a few tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Lila," I said, going over to hug her.

"I miss her so much," she said, wrapping her arms around me. "But when I see you, I'm reminded of her. I'm so grateful for you, Katrina."

I smiled, and I suddenly felt guilty as I thought about the note I would be giving her later. My stomach was squirming in anticipation of the night.

I saw June looking out my window.

She turned and grinned. "Your date's here."

Lila and I went to the window. Jared was standing outside of his truck wearing a tux. He looked so handsome.

"Good luck, Katrina. We'll see you there."

I grabbed my trench coat, put it on, and then I walked down the stairs.

"Oh, you look so beautiful!" Jan said, giving me a big hug. "Make sure you take lots of pictures. You have your album to fill."

Jared was at the door then, and Jan practically ran to open it.

"Hi, Mrs. Keys," Jared said.

"I'm going to get the corsage," Jan said as she walked past me to get it from the kitchen.

Jared came toward me. "You look stunning," he said. I felt my cheeks blush.

"Here you go," Jan said, handing me the corsage. "You kids be safe!"

"Bye."

We walked to the truck. He opened the door, and I tried to gracefully get in. He shut the door behind me, and I put my hands on my lap.

I had so much hope for tonight, but I was also afraid. When I revealed my secret to him, what if he didn't accept me? But there was no getting around it. If I was going to be running away with him, he needed to know.

When we arrived at the school, we made our way to the gym. As we went inside, I realized they did a pretty good job with the decorations. Everything was blue, and there were green seaweed streamers coming from the ceiling. On the wall, there was a screen of waves hitting the beach.

I took off my coat, and Jared's jaw dropped a little as he

looked at my dress. I guess this was my Cinderella moment. But did she feel this distressed when she was meeting the prince?

"You are so beautiful," Jared said as I walked toward him. I half-expected him to kiss my hand. As if on cue, he said, "Would you like to dance?"

I took his hand as we walked toward the dance floor. The song was slow, and only a few other couples were out on the floor. As we danced, I leaned my head against his chest. I didn't want to let go.

"So...have you made your decision?" Jared asked as we danced.

"I...um—"

"Katrina!" I heard from behind me.

It was Kristen. She had walked in with June and Lila, and the three of them were waving at me.

"I'd better go over there," I mumbled as I dizzily ran into their arms.

"Look who made it," June said. We turned around, and I saw Maverick enter the gym. He was holding a single rose in his hand, and he was wearing a tux with shiny black shoes. He was probably the best-dressed here.

Lila's cheeks blushed, and she walked over to him. He grinned when he saw her, and he handed her the rose.

"Who's that?" Jared said, coming to stand up next to me. His eyebrows were pulled together as he looked at Maverick, who was making his way to the food table with Lila.

I spotted Helen sitting in the corner, completely and utterly alone.

"I'll be right back," I said. This might be last time I ever saw Helen, and I needed to talk to her.

She frowned when she saw me, and she opened her

mouth. But before she did, I said, "I forgive you for being unkind to me. And I hope the best for you."

She closed her mouth and looked surprised. "I'm sorry, too. I was just...I was so jealous of you."

I leaned in to hug her, and she hugged me back.

"I'll be in Florida for college," she said. "If you're ever over there, feel free to call me and we'll get lunch or something. I really am sorry, Katrina," she said. "Bye."

Helen stood up and walked away as Jared came up to me.

"Dance with me?"

We began dancing to another slow song, and as we did, a tear slid down my cheek.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"There's something I need to tell you," I said.

"I need to tell you something first," he said. "Two people drowned out on their boat yesterday," he said. "And..." he paused, pulling something from his pocket and placing it in my hand. We found a mermaid scale." He looked at the ground. And suddenly he put his face in his hands. He looked at me. "Kate, we're going to after them tonight," he said.

I gasped. "You can't!"

"Kate, these are murderers. They took my sister. They've killed people, and they aren't stopping. What if they took you?" he said, cupping my face in his hands. "We kidnapped one of the mermaids—so we know there's going to be another shipwreck tonight. They're going after a cruise ship."

I didn't know how to react, but I knew how I felt. My world was crumbling. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach and hit by a train. I knew that I couldn't tell him about me now. Tears started pouring down my face.

"Kate, it's okay," he said, pulling me close to him. I hung on tight because sooner or later, I realized he was going to let me go. But for real. "I don't feel good about what I'm

doing, but, Kate, more people will die.” I sunk onto him. And then suddenly, I felt the need to escape. “One last fight, and then it’s just you and me,” he said. “Did you decide yet?”

As I looked at him, I realized this changed everything. I wanted to leave with him and run away now, but I couldn’t. I had to do something about this, about all of this. Mermaids would die, and I feared that Jared could as well. We couldn’t run away. My dreams were fading, and I began to feel even dizzier than before.

I had to stop this.

“I’m drowning,” I whispered, and I hung onto him.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

“I need to go to the bathroom.”

I swung open the door to the bathroom and ran toward the sink. I sunk against the wall. There were no more tears. I just felt empty.

As I sunk against the wall, I heard soft crying. I found Grey in her silver-gray prom dress sitting in the far corner of the bathroom crying.

“Grey, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“I did something. I shouldn’t have, but I did something.”

She looked up at me, and her gray eyes were a little red.

She took my hands. “I told him. I told Steve that I suspected you were a mermaid from the beginning. I was the one who brought you into the forest. Steve wasn’t completely sure up until recently. But he’s planning on telling Jared tonight—he has evidence now. He took a picture of you. You can’t see a tail, but it shows you were in the water in the storm. Oh, Kate, I’m so sorry!”

I didn’t know what to do. I was frozen in place.

“But then I saw how kind you were at school to people and the kind of person you were. I’d never met a kind ocean

mermaid. And that's when I decided to help you. Oh, Kate, I've made such a mistake. I'm so sorry."

My heart was racing a little, but as I looked at her crying, I couldn't be mad at her. She had helped me so many times.

I hugged her and said, "I'm not mad. I promise. Grey, you have been a true friend to me all this time."

"Thank you," I said. She stopped crying and wiped the tears from her eyes.

She held my hands and said, "You need to go. You need to run—Steve is going to take you. He's planning on doing it after prom. And, Kate, they're going after the mermaids tonight."

"I know."

"Call your friends and get out of here."

I tried to communicate to Lila, but she wasn't nearby. Like, anywhere near here. But I was able to communicate to June.

"We have to go NOW. Meet me in the hallway."

I looked into the gym, and I could see Jared. He was staring at me in the hallway. He looked confused, and I saw Steve approach him. Steve was whispering something in Jared's ear.

June caught up to me, and I turned away. How was I going to get out of here?

And then I remembered what Matt said months ago. I could call him if I needed to. I felt awkward doing it because we hadn't really talked in a while, but I called him quickly. I really needed him.

"You need to pick us up NOW! And hurry!"

"What's wrong?!" he asked.

"Please just come."

"I'm actually...in the parking lot. Just meet me outside."

I took off my heels, and we ran down the hallway. Matt

pulled up outside the entrance of the school, and we opened the car door and jumped in.

"Get in!" he said. "Where to?"

I tried to explain to him what was going on.

"It's okay. Just calm down and tell me where you need to go."

"We need to get to the beach."

"What's going on?" June asked.

"They're planning an attack on the mermaids."

"What?!" June said. "We have to warn them!"

"I know," I said.

"What's wrong?" Matt said. Tears were running down my cheeks.

"A lot."

"You couldn't tell him, could you?" Matt said. "You were going to tell him the truth tonight, weren't you?"

"It doesn't matter. Steve is telling Jared after prom anyway. I think he might have just told him actually."

Matt looked over at me, but he stayed silent.

"June, where's Lila?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "She took off right around when you ran to the bathroom."

We pulled up to the beach parking lot. It was still light outside—we had at least an hour or two until it would get dark.

"June, you go ahead. I'll be there soon. Be careful," I said.

She nodded, got out of the car, and ran into the waves.

I unbuckled my seatbelt, but Matt held onto my arm.

"I don't want you going in there. Don't go into those waves," Matt said.

"Why?"

"Why?! It's dangerous. Why don't we just take you to a hotel to hide or something?"

"Why have you been ignoring me the last couple of months? How about that?"

He didn't say anything. I then noticed something on the floor. It was a water bottle. I picked it up and turned it over. The initials MAB were written on them. It was the water bottle from the camping trip.

And it belonged to Matt.

"It wasn't just Steve, was it?" I said. Matt looked down suddenly. "You were there—the night I was kidnapped in the forest. You were helping them, weren't you? And the beach! It makes sense now. You knew I would be walking home that night. You were the one in the hoodie."

"I can explain—"

"Stop this car!" He didn't stop me this time as I opened the car door, and I ran out. I began running toward the water. I heard him get out of the car, and I said, "Tell me! Were you working with Steve?"

"Katrina! You're wrong." I turned around, and I couldn't believe my eyes. It couldn't be?! "I was the bear that night. I was saving you, not hurting you. And I was the dog the night you were almost kidnapped. And a dolphin."

"B," I said in disbelief.

Tears were streaming down my face and emotion filled me up. I ran as fast as I could back to him and hugged him. I was sobbing as he held me against my chest.

"It's been you all along," I said.

"Yes."

"I thought you left. I thought you'd forgotten about me," I said.

"I could never forget you."

I looked up at him.

"Brandon."

"Kate," he said as I held onto him. "Is this the dress you

were going to wear to homecoming?" he asked as he looked at the silky, blue dress.

"Yes," I said. He rubbed the tears from my cheeks, and I still couldn't believe it was him. "You never broke your promise," I whispered.

"No, I didn't. When have I ever broken a promise to you?" he said.

I just couldn't believe it was him. His golden hair was back as well.

"Why now? Why didn't you tell me who you were earlier? You wouldn't respond to my texts. Or my calls."

"I was waiting for the right time," he said. "Thanks for the telescope by the way," he said with his crooked smile.

"The chameleon," I said. "And you're a shapeshifter. What does that mean?"

"I can change my face, and I can change into an animal. It's why your boyfriend didn't like me. He thought I was dangerous. It's why his dad didn't want to play me."

"But you were there for me," I said.

"Yeah."

"I cried for you," I said. "I thought you'd left me for good."

"You cried for me?" I nodded. "You know, Jan called me and told me what happened to you in the hospital. She said you were calling for me in your sleep and when you started waking up."

"I did?"

"Can I just ask for one thing in return?" he asked.

"Of course."

"A dance?"

He took my hand, and then we began dancing. The time stopped, and as he looked into my eyes, he looked so...I couldn't describe it. But it made me feel good...I was so happy to see him.

"I can't believe you were here all this time."

"Don't worry. Just dance with me," he said.

I did dance with him, and as I did, I could feel dread forming. What did the rest of the night hold?

But as I looked up at Brandon, I knew that things would be okay. My best friend was back. And more so—he hadn't abandoned me like I thought he did. He was there for me—the entire time. When we ended the dance, his face was just inches away from mine when he suddenly pulled back.

"It's time," he said, looking at the water and taking off his shoes. "But first, here's this."

He pulled something out of his bag.

"Where did you—?! How?!"

It was the crown.

"I followed you. Some guards had followed you into the aquarium. And I knew they were going to go after it, so I dove for it and hid it myself not long after you did."

"Thanks."

I looked into his car, and I noticed something on the top of it. I went over, and I grabbed it.

"What is that for?" Brandon asked.

"I have an idea," I said. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," he said, and the two of us ran into the water.

MONTEREY



I swam toward Monterey with Brandon, and when we got there, I could see Steve on a boat, standing next to Grey. It had probably been an hour since we'd left the prom.

There were multiple boats all near the shore. I could see that Jared's cousins were on another one of the boats with a few people I didn't know. I guessed they were protectors.

"Whose side are we on this time?" I asked Brandon as we took in the scene.

"*Good question,*" Brandon said. He had changed back into a dolphin. "*So, what are we waiting for?*"

"Jared said there would be a cruise ship. So I guess we're waiting for that."

From far off, I could see a large ship coming into a view. The water started to become choppy, and I noticed that it had begun to rain in sheets onto the gray-blue ocean. The boats were starting to move toward the cruise ship.

"*June. June, where are you?*"

"*Katrina.*" I could hear her in the distance.

I had to get the crown on her so that she could become queen and put a stop to all of this, but I knew it would be a challenge. The waves were growing, and I could feel the beginning of strong currents in the water.

"You know the plan."

"Yes. Good luck, Kit Kat."

I dove under the choppy waves and swam through the water, which was growing darker with each passing minute. I swam fast, but the currents were becoming thicker.

I popped up. I had made it to Steve's boat. Then I heard, "The storm is almost as large as the one when Elle was kidnapped. The wind is getting stronger by the minute."

It was true. The wind was biting against my face, pushing me forward. I held onto the side of the boat, being careful of propellers, and I camouflaged as we headed toward the cruise ship. When we arrived, the protectors began throwing spears into the water.

"June!" I called.

I ducked into the water and searched for her, swimming through the mermaids and between the spears.

Then I saw Miranda. She was creating a whirlpool, and June was strapped to the bottom of the sea with a rope. The whirlpool created a dome-like structure around them. I didn't want to swim through, worried that if I came any closer, I would get sucked in.

"June!"

"Get Miranda. If you can distract her, I could probably get out of this whirlpool. I'll come find you. But don't get sucked into the whirlpool. Leave."

I nodded, and I kept swimming. The cruise ship was heading toward shore, and the boats and mermaids began heading that way.

"I have you trapped," I heard Miranda say. "I know you're here, Katrina," she said.

I began swimming quickly, trying to avoid the arms of the whirlpool as they reached out to grab me. But it was hard.

I had to distract Miranda.

"Where are you?!" I yelled, hoping that if I could get her attention on me, June would be able to escape.

"You think you're so strong and brave. But after tonight, I will have the *real* crown, and I will be the true queen," she said. "You must be wondering how I knew who you were. A guard informed me that you could speak to animals. He'd heard you and your friends talking about it near Lila's cave," she said. "I contacted the White Queen, and she told Steve about you. He was supposed to catch you, but somehow you got away from him...Regardless, it's over now, and all will be as it should be, shortly."

"Why? Why did you kill my mother?" I yelled, letting her see me now.

"Because she was too kind, too perfect, and because she had such a love for humans. The same love you do," she said.

"And her voice," I said.

She screeched. "How did you know about that?!"

"Miranda, you don't have to be this way. It doesn't have to be this way. I've been around humans all my life. We can work together, and we can stop the White Queen together," I said. "Please stop this!"

"I will never work with you. You're just as weak as your mother," she said. "Guards seize her!"

I saw some guards advance toward me. They tried to grab me, but I was faster, and I slipped out of their grips.

"B and any great white sharks out there, come help me."

I was waving my tail as hard as I could, and soon, I saw Brandon, who had transformed into a shark.

"Looking good," I said.

"Never better."

I knew that this was my chance. I tried to swim toward Miranda, but it was no use. There were too many waves and whirlpools to get to her. I needed a different route. So, I had to use my idea.

I held the surfboard, the item I had found in the car, and I took a deep breath. I remembered how Kristen looked when she paddled and then jumped onto her surfboard.

I broke the surface, and I began paddling up a monster of a wave. I felt weightless as the wave took me up. I kept expecting it to peak, but it was growing taller and taller. It seemed like the wave would not stop growing, but then I saw the slight peak.

This was my moment.

I crouched down on my surfboard, preventing myself from falling in by moving the water.

Then the time stopped as I descended on that wave. I looked to the right and saw the white cap was forming, and the swell was turning crescent-shaped. The blue water was beginning its topple.

But as I slid down the wave, I felt like I had wings. I felt like I was flying.

I could see images of the past passing before me. I saw Brandon's smile at the aquarium and Kristen as she snapped off the wave when I first went to record her at the beach. I remembered laughing with Lila and with June. I saw Jan as she was getting married. And I saw Matt as he put his hand against the glass at the aquarium. I saw Matt and Sam playing lacrosse together and high-fiving. And I saw Jared's smile—the way he looked at me, rowing during our boat

ride, and holding me close. All of these things, all of these people. And then I saw my mother, smiling down at me as I went in to hug her...

I didn't know what was going to happen after this, but I knew I had to try.

I zoomed down the wave, and I used the water to keep me propelling through the water like a boat.

The wave had descended, but I was flying forward fast. I looked at the beach and saw some of the mermaids fighting against the protectors. But then I saw many of them swimming away.

As I was on my surfboard, I finally saw Miranda. She looked up at me, shocked. I reached out toward her and grabbed the fake crown off her head. I hoped I was able to distract her long enough for June to get out of the whirlpool.

Suddenly, June came to the surface, sending water flying. I threw the bag at June, and she jumped up and caught it and went back into the waves. I saw the sharks, and they were now circling around Miranda.

I was still on my surfboard and zooming fast toward shore. I noticed someone standing on the beach, waving for me. It was Jared.

"Katrina!" he yelled as I was surfing closer.

"Jared!" I screamed.

I approached him on the surfboard and caught a glance at him through the rain. His bronze hair was soaked against his face, and he was grinning—he looked relieved.

He reached his hand out to me, and I went to grab it. I could just make out the fingertips of his warm hands when suddenly I felt something moving underneath me. The whirlpool that Miranda created was spinning underneath me and trying to suck me in.

"Jared!" I screamed as I tried to reach out to him. His fingers were extended, but I was being sucked in.

"Katrina!" I reached out again, and then suddenly I was sucked into the whirlpool, and I screamed.

The sharks were in small whirlpools themselves, and Miranda came over and said, "You thought you could beat me."

She headed toward me, and suddenly, her hands were around my throat. I tried to push her away, but she was stronger than me.

"Not so fast!" I heard. It was June, and she was coming toward us. She had the crown on her head.

June pushed her, and Miranda went flying. The whirlpool began to cease, and mermaids and sharks began to swim toward us.

"June is the true queen. Miranda's crown is a fake!" I yelled.

"She's lying!" Miranda screamed, but the sharks were once again surrounding her.

The mermaids looked confused, but then I heard Bryn, one of Miranda's friends say something. "It's true. It's a fake."

"How could you, Bryn?"

"Miranda, your time is done," Bryn said. "I know that you let them take Coralina. And I am going to do the right thing for once."

I swam toward Miranda. "You can kill me now," she said as she saw me approaching.

I looked at her, and I remembered the quote my mom had sent me and my Christian faith.

"Love your enemies," I said out loud. I had to love her, regardless of what she had done.

"Miranda, I love you. And I forgive you for what you did to my mother and to me."

"You forgive me? Love me?" Miranda said as she looked at me. She looked at me in disbelief.

"Yes, I do."

She looked relieved but shell-shocked. She didn't know what to say.

June came forward and said, "Guards, take Miranda to the prison. From this day forward, we are not going to hurt humans anymore. Anyone who disagrees may leave. But we are not going to be murderers. We are going to love them. And from this day forward, singing is no longer outlawed. Anyone that disagrees may leave and find a new pod of mermaids."

Some of the mermaids *did* leave. And for the ones who stayed, I saw many of them swimming toward other mermaids who were hurt.

As I watched them, I noticed that the sea was growing dark. Soon, I wouldn't be able to get out of the water.

Jared—what did Jared think? I then remembered. The last thing he saw was his dream coming true—me being pulled into the water.

I had to go to him and tell him that I loved him so that we could go away together like we had planned. It was time to say goodbye to June. I went up and hugged her.

"Gracias," June said.

"You are going to make a wonderful queen."

"So, what are you going to do? Where are you going to go?"

I saw a merman swim over. He had brown hair with hints of gold in them and very kind eyes.

"Is this—"

"Katrina, I want you to meet my boyfriend Jayson."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"The infamous Katrina. Bitten by a shark and lived to tell the tale. Do you have a scar?" he asked.

I brought my tail around, and there was a jagged line where I had been bitten.

"Gnarly," he said, smiling as he looked at it.

"Hey, don't say that," June said, laughing.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," he said.

All three of us started laughing.

"Take care of each other. I don't know when I'm going to be back."

"Where are you going?" June asked.

"Away."

"I'll miss you," June said as she came up and hugged me.

"I'll miss you too."

As I looked one final time, I was so relieved, so happy that things were set right. June was going to make a good queen.

I swam away and went toward the beach, hoping that I still had time before the sun was set. I popped up out of the water and turned around, but the sun had already set.

I came closer to the beach when I saw Jared. I turned to swim away, but we caught eye contact.

He looked at me. His eyes were hurt—he was in pain and confused. His eyes went from shock to anger slowly. He looked at me like I was a monster. I didn't want to look, but something broke inside me. It was like my heart was crumbling in pieces with just that one look.

"We sure scared them off," I heard Blake say close by. They didn't understand—they didn't see what had just happened. That Miranda was no longer queen.

I began to cry right in front of him as Blake put a knife to my throat all of a sudden. I don't think he recognized me, and I hadn't heard him coming up next to me.

I didn't say anything. I didn't move. I was frozen in place. Jared's stare locked me into this position. I just waited. And just as his hand was about to strike me, Jared stopped him, "Stop."

Blake's arm stood straight in the air trembling. I suddenly looked from Jared to Blake. He looked just as confused as I was.

"I'll take care of this one. I'll see you at home."

He ran off, and Jared slowly came toward me, taking a knife from his belt. It was just him and me now. I was frozen.

He glanced at my tail for a moment, and a look of awe washed over his face, but it was gone a moment later. His eyebrows furrowed together, and he looked sickened at the sight of me.

I began feeling dizzy and nauseous. I wanted to get out of here. Away from him. But I felt frozen—I couldn't move and even my lips felt sealed. I just watched him. Then I looked away.

"Don't come back," was all he could manage to say.

He turned around and stormed off into the forest. Tears ran like streams down my face. He was...breaking up with me? I felt my heart break as I hoisted myself onto the rocks, watching him walk away. I wanted my tail to disappear, but it wouldn't budge. I wanted to run after him—but I couldn't.

I felt broken as the wind pierced my scales, tears splashing down into my hands. My chest heaved as sobs overtook me. I felt hands trying to push me back into the water. I screamed and fought them off. I was searching the outskirts of the woods, looking for Jared. Maybe he'd turn around and come back.

"Get off me!" I yelled.

"They are going to hear you. You have to come with me," she said.

"I can't," I said with tears still flowing.

"You are the bravest mermaid I have ever met. You saved us. But you have to leave. Come on."

I slid back into the water, but my eyes were still on the forest. I was waiting to wake up from this bad dream.

We both clung onto the rocks as waves hit our backs. I looked over at June, and she looked at me.

"I need to be alone. I'm sorry." She nodded and disappeared into the water, and I waited a little while more as I watched the shore.

Finally, after an hour, I closed my eyes and drifted into the sea. I was crying, but it was hard to distinguish what was the sea and what were my tears.

I thought about how he told me I was different from the other girls, but then I realized, maybe what really threw him off was that I was supposed to be his escape out of this world. His own dream collapsed on him.

His smiles, and the way he felt about me, were all shattered now. I replayed in my head the times we spent laughing in the lighthouse. The first time he saw me at his lacrosse game. I saw him getting me my favorite ice cream. I remembered holding his hand as we laughed on the roller coaster...

As tears slid down my cheeks, I looked at the sky. It was filled with so many beautiful stars. I took some water in my hand and looked down at it. It reflected the stars too.

I closed my eyes, and I drifted in and out of sleep.

I woke up, and then I realized...where was I? It was still nighttime, and I wasn't sure where I was. I remembered Brandon telling me that I could use the stars to find my way home.

But where was home?

I began swimming back toward the coast, hoping that I was going closer to and not further away. The sun was

beginning to rise, and I saw that I was close to the coast now. When I reached it, I pulled myself out of the water. I was so fatigued.

I came up on the beach, my legs coming back to me, and I started walking home. But as I walked, I saw someone sitting on a rock with a crumpled paper in his hands. It was Brandon. His hands were shaking, and he was crying.

“Brandon.”

“You were going to run away with him?” I heard Brandon say. He looked so hurt. So crushed.

“Brandon, please,” I said. Where did he find that?

He slammed down the paper and ran off. I began crying again. Everyone was abandoning me. And I’d hurt Brandon—that was the last thing I wanted to do.

But what now? I had two choices—I could run away for good. Or I could do one more thing.

ONWARD



I ran home, and I packed anything I could find. I packed an entire suitcase of things. I knew I couldn't stay long as I heard Jared's voice in my mind.

"Don't come back."

"Where are you going?" I heard. Jan was up, and she was in her pajamas, standing near my door.

"I'm leaving. I'll call you soon."

"You're going to need a phone." She disappeared into the other room and came back out. "It's a graduation present," she said, handing me a new phone.

"Thanks," I said, putting it in the bag as well.

"Is it something I did?"

"No, of course it's not. Jan, thank you."

"I'm scared for you. Is it safe?"

I looked down and then back up at her. "I don't think it is, but there's a girl that's in danger, and I have to try to find her."

"Come here," she said, and she pulled me into a hug. "No matter what, know that I love you."

"Thank you."

And then I remembered the words of Jared's grandma. Your family is who you love. And I realized she was right. It didn't matter that Jan wasn't my biological family, or Lila, June, Kristen, Sam, or Brandon. I loved them, and they were my family.

I left with my suitcase, and I headed toward the abandoned lighthouse. I had a note written in one hand and the barrette in the other. I figured Jared would find this note soon.

GONE TO FIND ELLE. I'M GOING TO BRING HER BACK.

KATRINA

I left the note in the lighthouse on a ledge near the window, and I left the green-blue barrette sitting on top of it.

A tear slipped out, just one simple tear, and I swiped it away. This was the last time I was going to cry over Jared, I told myself. A day ago, we were running away together. Today, I was running away from him.

I looked one more time at all the books, jackets, and blankets, and I reached down and put something in my bag.

With one more look at the lighthouse, I went down the stairs and out the door, knowing I didn't have much time. Suddenly, I felt hands on me. Steve put his hands around my throat and began choking me against a tree. I tried to gasp for air, but he was holding me tight. Finally, he let go, and I fell down and began coughing.

"You're so predictable," he said.

I screamed, "Help!"

"If it wasn't for your little animal friend, I would've had you a long time ago."

"Animal friend?" I asked. He then kicked me onto my side. And the blow felt like getting hit by a truck.

"You think you had me fooled? You may have had Jared

fooled and the rest of the boys, but I saw through you from the beginning.”

“I never wanted to hurt anyone,” I told him, getting to my feet.

“Liar!” he snarled and shoved me back to the ground.

“It wasn’t me—your sister. I want to go after her and find her,” I said.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“I’m bringing you to the queen.”

“Get off her!” a voice screamed. It was Brandon. Brandon took a swing at Steve, who ducked.

“A little late this time,” he told Brandon. Brandon took another swing and caught Steve in the jaw, who yelled out in pain. I got to my feet.

He punched Brandon and then lunged toward him. Brandon fell onto the ground. I had forgotten how strong the protectors were.

“No!” I screamed.

Steve was about to go near him, but I was faster, and I tripped him onto his knees. I then threw some water from the sea onto Steve and froze it, so he was stuck there.

“Brandon!” I yelled as I ran toward him.

“I’m fine,” he said as he slowly stood up.

We hugged each other, and Steve said, “I knew you played Jared. From the beginning. Look at you two.”

“I am going to find your sister,” I said. “And you can come with us if you’d like.”

“What are you doing?” Brandon asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

I went toward Steve, and I held out my hand, unfreezing his knees.

"Come with me," I told Steve. Steve looked confused and utterly shocked.

"I'm coming too," I heard. It was Grey.

"What do you say?" I asked Steve.

"After all I did to you, you're going to trust me?" Steve asked in shock.

"It goes against my better judgment, but we need all the help we can get if we are going to stop the White Queen and rescue Elle."

Steve took my hand and stood up. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but you're right."

I turned around and said, "Brandon, will you come with me?"

"Kate, you are the only family I have," he told me. "I won't ever leave you."

"We have to go."

I hugged him again. The last time we had hugged like this, it was goodbye. But now, this hug meant we could be together again.

I saw Kristen and Sam approaching.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Lila told us you were in trouble. We want to help."

"Kristen and Sam, I need you to stay and watch over Jan," I told them.

"What are we going to do for a boat? How will we even get there?" Brandon asked.

"I don't know."

We turned around, and a large boat was approaching.

"You have to be kidding me," I said, grinning.

Lila and Maverick were standing on the edge of the boat and waving.

"Get in," they said.

"Who is that?" Brandon asked.

"A friend," I said as I climbed into the boat and pulled Lila into my arms.

"Maverick, this is Brandon. Brandon, Maverick." And they shook hands. I had a feeling they were going to be friends.

Kristen looked over at us with wide eyes. "Are you sure I can't come?"

"Kristen, we need someone here to make sure things don't get worse again, and we need someone to protect Jan. Plus you have your competitions," I told her. "I'll call you."

Kristen and I hugged.

"How do you know you'll be okay?"

"I have faith, Kristen. It's about having faith. And thank you for everything," I told her. "You're my best friend."

"You're my best friend, too. Be safe, okay?"

We waved goodbye and sat on his boat, looking out into the sea. Grey and Steve held hands as they looked out onto the water. Mav was at the steer, and Lila was looking out as well.

I turned to Brandon. He didn't smile. He too was looking out into the sea. From far away, I could see Jared. He was staring out at us, and I was staring back at him. He seemed to be holding a paper in his hand.

I thought about all that had happened. I'm not sure exactly how things led to where I was, but now we were heading toward a new journey. I turned around. I turned away from him, away from the beach, and away from my old life in California. It was time for new beginnings. A new start.

"Where to?" Brandon asked.

"Alaska."

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Iridescent*. Writing this book has truly been an amazing experience, and I am so glad that I was able to share it with you.

I started writing *Iridescent* when I was in my Junior Year of college. I was in a cold, Midwestern college town, and I was dreaming of the ocean and adventures somewhere warmer.

I began researching different coastal cities and towns, and when I found Santa Cruz, I knew it was going to be perfect for the story with its surfing beaches, the Redwoods, beautiful kelp forests, and the aquarium in Monterey.

I loved learning more about the ocean around Monterey and Santa Cruz, the Redwoods, and the animals. It was fun to find out what kind of animals or fish really do live off of the coast of Santa Cruz, and each fish mentioned in the story are found in the area.

My Christian faith is something that is important to me, and so I wanted to add those elements and themes of faith within the story. Forgiveness is a one of those themes, and it

became important that my main protagonist find forgiveness in her heart no matter the circumstances.

Other themes included faith, love, and the importance of family and friendships.

Overall, writing *Iridescent* truly has been a journey. I cannot wait to continue writing Katrina's adventure and finding out what awaits.

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Thank you so much for all of your support.

A.J. for all the incredible editing that you did for my book. Thank you for all your hard work. You are truly talented at what you do.

Thank you to my family and friends for all of your love and support. Thank you for letting me bounce ideas off of you and for cheering me on the whole way!

A special thanks to all those who have supported me on social media. You have been so supportive of my writing, and I am so grateful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. H. Everly is an emerging author of ya fiction. Be sure to follow my social media accounts to stay tuned for more updates and information regarding the Iridescent Series.

Please consider writing a review on Amazon and or Goodreads.



SANTA CRUZ



*H*ere are some beautiful photos my friend Heidi took while on a trip in Santa Cruz. I hope you enjoy them.





