

LISTEN

(excerpt)

K. J. Howe

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"THE SAILOR'S GRAVE AT CLO-OOSE, V.I."

Written by Marjorie Lowry Pickthall

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LISTEN

listen

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*Out of the winds' and the waves' riot,
Out of the loud foam,
He has put in to a great quiet
And a still home.*

*Here he may lie at ease and wonder
Why the old ship waits,
And hark for the surge and the strong thunder
Of the full Straits,*

*And look for the fishing fleet at morning,
Shadows like lost souls,
Slide through the fog where the seal's warning
Betrays the shoals,*

*And watch for the deep-sea liner climbing
Out of the bright West,
With a salmon-sky and her wake shining
Like a tern's breast, —*

*And never know he is done for ever
With the old sea's pride,
Borne from the fight and the full endeavour
On an ebb tide.*

“The Sailor’s Grave at Clo-oose, V.I.” (Vancouver Island)

Little Songs: A Book of Poems
by Marjorie Lowry Christie Pickthall

McClelland and Stewart, Publisher (Toronto)
1922

<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/1598.html>

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For as long as I can remember, the island elders have preached that whenever a creature dies, it sends a message into the world. They say if the world is ready, it'll hear that message.

I guess I never really believed it. Every time I'd hear them say it, I'd think about all the bugs splattered over the fronts of people's cars. What would their message be? Make softer windshields?

Just silly superstitions.

Which is why it bothers me now, a whole year after that baby gray whale beached itself in Timothy's Cove, the same day Dad set out on the *Blue*. Could I have been wrong? Did I miss something when I wasn't listening?

My mother worries too much.

"Write," she says. Not that I've asked for her advice on the matter. "Write it before it all slips away, every last little detail."

She tells me it'll be therapeutic. But when I ask her what that's supposed to mean, she just frowns at me over her thin wire glasses. It startles me, seeing her like that. I can't remember her ever wearing them so much before. But there they are, sitting up there all the time now, it seems, perched on the tip of her nose. I keep waiting for them to fall.

"Why is it therapeutic, Mom?"

She sighs and peels a strand of her cobweb hair from her face. She says, "Because..." And then, "I don't know," before she tries again: "Because of what you went through, Calli. What you're still putting yourself through. You've always been that way."

"What way?"

"Afraid."

I watch her fingers brush the air. She looks like she's working on another canvas, except this one's invisible to me. It hangs in the space between us. I wish I could see what she sees.

"Afraid and stubborn," she finishes. "Just like your father."

She knows how this makes me feel, so I don't dignify it with a response. But I do wonder: *Is it true? Have I really always been that way?*

I decide she's obviously confused. Where she got this idea that I should write is beyond me. I suspect what she really thinks is that I'm worried about forgetting. Like she's already started to do. The smallest of details—I've noticed them slip away from her, like shadows vanishing into the out-of-the-way corners ahead of the new day. Or dust motes swirling in a shaft of sunlight, waiting to settle, to be swept up. That's why she paints. She took it up after Grandpa died, so she could deal with the pain—*heal from* it—before moving on. It helps her forget.

"It's not so easy," I finally tell her.

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“Oh, Calli,” she says. “Why not?”

“I just can’t explain it.”

I’ve irritated her. She flicks her brush and pastel diamonds spatter to the floor—cobalt blue as the sky in summer, flecks of white shimmering in the bright morning sunlight. Bits of color, that’s all they are to me, but for her each one carries the weight of a thought, an image. A memory.

It’s truth I’m looking for. Something to fill this emptiness.

“Then I can’t help you,” she says.

So I write:

It was a Sunday, the first day of June, the day the baby gray whale came to us in the storm.

I remember that day, a year ago now. I was fifteen then, and it was my eleventh year on the island. Eleven years, and yet I’d never been as close to a living whale before; nor have I since. You just don’t know how big they truly are— not in any real sense, anyway— not until you can stand there and look one in the eye. How completely real. How *timeless*. And yet, how fleeting.

Early in the morning when the sun rises up over Fidalgo, it shines on the spot where the calf came ashore. When the sun is high and the beach warms, the air almost shimmers. But it’s gone now.

Almost every day since then, I’ve come and sat up here on my bluff. I’ve watched the boats on the Sound. Each day I write a little more in my journal. But it’s hard, and what’s worse, Mom can’t possibly understand why. That’s the most frustrating part. She doesn’t see things the way I do. Writing is nothing at all like

painting. She thinks you can make meaning flow from words as easily as images do from her fingertips, but you can't create meaning where there is none to begin with. How do I explain that to her? The truth doesn't come from putting idle words together on paper; it has to come from somewhere else.

Take something she's done, for example, some painting or sketch. She'll look at it and find somewhere in it the answer to whatever question she might have been thinking at the very moment the image first appeared there. It's not the same with words. No matter how many times you write them, no matter how many times you read them, words can only tell you what they know.

And it's the things I don't know that I so badly want them to say.

It was a Sunday, the first day of June, the day the baby gray whale came to us in the storm. That morning, as Dad and I stood next to it and wondered what to do next, the whale took in this breath. It was deep and heavy. It held it for a moment, then it let it out again.

This is what I write: facts. Pages filled with them. Meaningless truths. I try to combine them in different ways, rearrange them, but they never tell me anything new. If there is a message, I still haven't found it.

A breeze ruffles the pages of my notebook. This afternoon, this Monday the first day of June, it had grown uncomfortably warm and humid. I'd stood on the deck of the ferry coming home from school and watched the Sound, just as I have every day this whole last year. But it was all the same. I flatten the

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page, grateful for the breeze. Only now is the day starting to cool, now that the sun is beginning to set. The first cobwebs of evening mist are beginning to form over the island, tangling themselves in the junipers' scratchy tops, capturing the slanted rays of light.

Jauncy barks impatiently. She dashes back and forth below me, between the old worn steps and the edge of the beach, back and forth again a half-dozen times on her too-short legs, barking all the while. She's a little slower now than she used to be, on account of her arthritis and the broken paw that never healed quite right, but it hasn't stopped her. She spins, stops, spins again, and I feel it tugging at me, like an invisible string. I climb onto the rocks at the end of my beach. I think maybe I'll go and sit in the cave over in the cove.

But just as I reach the top, someone calls to me from the bluff. "Callista!" A man's voice, familiar, though it's been a long time since I heard it last. And then I hear Jauncy barking all super-excited below me. I'm always amazed at how she can remember people like that, the sounds of their voices after so much time has passed.

I look up and the silhouette splits: two halves joined by the rope of entwined arms, then the string of fingers, until even that finally breaks. I shout and Jauncy barks some more; there's laughter in both our voices. It sounds strange to my ears. The man steps forward, makes his way down the cliff.

Out on the water, boats push themselves across the darkening strait. Here on its edge, I wait for answers, the words that will help fill the emptiness of never knowing. I don't know if he'll bring me the message the elders are always talking about. I don't know if it's already in my notebook somewhere, the truth,

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hidden in the hundreds of passages I've written. I uncap my pen and add:

It's hard to write about something you know is taking its last breaths.

But even before the ink can dry, I've already crossed it out.

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ONE YEAR EARLIER

1

“Hush!” Mom shouts over the dogs’ barks. “Calli, can you let them out? They’re driving me crazy.”

This is typical. Most mornings, come rain or shine, Jauncy scratches impatiently at the door. She makes me hurry through my breakfast— if I’m lucky enough to even get it— and then she makes me late to the ferry if it’s a school day. Weekends are no different. She refuses to understand the concept of sleeping in. It certainly doesn’t help having a half-grown puppy around, either.

I open the door and out they go, clattering down the steps and racing across the yard in full bray. The puppy stops to sniff, while Jauncy doesn’t even slow down, like there’s a fire somewhere and her services are needed to extinguish it.

You can’t help but laugh. Watching the way her ears and tail flop around, you’d think they were trying to trade places in her willy-nilly mad rush into the day. She flies along the path, not even bothering to stop to pee, just dribbling along without an

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ounce of dignity. Crashing through the broken gate like a wave hitting the shore. That's why it never stays closed unless you set the latch on it just right, which we never do anymore, on account of she broke her paw once when someone did. She was just a pup then, and it never really healed right. It obviously hasn't slowed her down much.

Over the wet grass she goes, straight to the cliff's edge. Doesn't even stop there, just disappears right up and over, down to where the barrier rocks jut out into the water like the skeleton fin of some ancient sea creature that long ago fell asleep and grew an island on its back.

From our backyard, you can look out over Rosario Strait and see Fidalgo Island, which is where I go to school, in Anacortes. You might think it's a part of the mainland, but it's not. From the middle of the Rainbow Bridge, you can see how the narrow Swinomish Channel slices Fidalgo off of Skagit and the rest of Washington State. On the mainland side, the houses crowd together, pressing against the channel's eastern shore, looking as if they're going to elbow each other into the water at any moment. On the island side, the prairie grass grows tall in summer and the wind tumbles over it unimpeded.

Rosario Strait is much wider than the Swinomish, three miles separating our home on Galton from Fidalgo, a thirty minute ferry ride every morning for school.

We moved to Galton when I was four, and it's been my home ever since. At most, a hundred people live on the island, though only about fifty or so of us are year-round. We live in the house Grandpa Nick built almost fifty years ago. He was sick, so my mother came to take care of him, bringing me with her and leaving Dad behind; after Grandpa died, Dad came and we ended

up settling in permanently. I'm fifteen now and, except for a few dim memories from before and a handful of car trips up into Canada or to southwestern Washington, Puget Sound is all I've ever really known.

"Calli, keep an eye on them," Mom says. As much as they make her crazy, she still worries. "Those harebrained dogs'll get caught by a wave." I pull my jacket on and head out.

The wind is still blowing. It makes my eyes water and slaps the plastic bucket against my leg. I intend to collect fresh kelp off the beach and compost it for the garden. After storms is the best time for gathering it up.

The sky is still overcast, a somber roiling gray only slightly paler than the Sound. From the top of the bluff, I watch as a splotch of pale white light burns through the darkness. An opening forms, widens, spills golden light over the water. Seagulls wheel about in it, chasing each other as they follow the nets of the fishing trawlers brooding out to sea. I can't hear them, of course, being so far away and the wind blowing as it is; even so, my ears fill with the memories of the chugging motors, the eager cries, the slap of water against the sides of the boats.

Below me, waves the color of steel wool roll in, tall and rough as a humpback's shoulder. It's still high tide, made higher by the storm surge that even now continues to batter the beach, sounding like a million glass bottles breaking all at once. The earth shakes beneath my feet, and the wind flings icy slivers into the air.

The storm had blown itself in around eleven last night, announcing itself in a sudden noisy fury of rain that woke me up like the roar of an approaching train. Lashing itself against the windows of the house. Wailing to be let in. I was cozy and warm

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beneath my blankets, Jauncy nestled up tight against my back. Though the storm woke me from what was already a troubled sleep, it wasn't the noise that kept me awake.

At some point I heard Dad go outside, out into the wind and the rain. He was gone for awhile, though I couldn't say exactly how long; the clock on my nightstand had gone dark. As I lay there, it blinked open its red midnight eyes, startled from its sleep by the abrupt hum of the gas generator. A moment later, Dad stomped the rain from his boots. Then came the *crick* of the floorboards below me, the *scritch* of the mattress springs, the puppy whining. I heard my mother's worried murmur, my father's muffled reassurances. Silence after that. For the rest of the night, mostly the sounds of the storm and the generator kept me company, talking to each other, arguing.

The way the wind was carrying on, you'd think it planned on sticking around, as ill-mannered guests sometimes do. It rudely banged the gate and threatened Dad's scheduled launch for Santa Genevieve the next day. But when we rose in the morning, we could see that the clouds had been filled more with bluster than not. A few puddles still stood in the yard, not many. The Olympic Mountains do a fair job of wringing the excess moisture from sou'westers before they reach us.

Jauncy's barks carry up to me from our beach. She's celebrating the storm leaving and probably thinks she's responsible for chasing it away. Silly, but still not entirely harebrained. I know she'll give the waves the respect they deserve, so I take my time getting down to her. The puppy's still in the yard doing his business.

First thing I do is check out my garden, make sure the wind hasn't ravaged my berries. The trail leads me out above

Timothy's Cove, which is part of the natural reserve just north of our property. The cove is protected on three sides by the cliff and the rocks. On the fourth side, an unfriendly coastline guards it. Huge, invisible boulders ready to suck you down and trap you forever if you're not careful. I like that it's so private.

"There's a whale in Timothy's!" I shout as I rush through the door and into the kitchen.

Dad lowers his coffee, a pinched look crossing his face.

"Orca? In the cove?" Mom says. "Is it injured?"

Grays aren't as common here in the Sound— certainly not as common as killers, in any case— though they do visit us often enough that if you spend any amount of time on the water you're bound to see one. So, naturally, I'd seen them before— a handful of times— from the ferries, from shore. It's always very exciting, no matter how long you've lived here, no matter how many you've seen. Someone shouts and you look out to where they're pointing. If you're lucky and the winds are calm that day, you might catch the surface of the water bulging up just the tiniest bit. That's the first clue. Or you might catch the spray from their spout. You have to be quick, because it disappears in an instant and you can never really be sure of having seen it. But if you're really lucky, you'll see the gray stick its head straight up out of the water, as they sometimes do, before it sinks silently away into the slate-dark depths and disappears forever.

"Looks like a gray," I say. I'd almost missed it in the morning's dim light. The smooth unbroken gray of its back had been nearly indistinguishable from the mottled gray of the beach gravel. At first I'd mistaken it for a chunk of the cliff that had fallen away and settled in a heap, like I'd seen it do in past storms. "It's beached. I can't tell if it's still alive."

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“Gray whale?” Dad says. “Are you sure? You didn’t go down there, did you?”

I shake my head. The only way to safely get into the cove is to climb over the spine of rocks from our beach. It’s not as easy as it sounds. When the tide is high, like it is this morning, the waves can easily knock you into the water. Even at low tide, you’re likely to get soaked at least up to your knees.

“Pretty sure,” I answer.

Mom turns back to the stove. “Stay out of the cove,” she warns me. “The ocean’s still too rough.”

Dad nods. “We’ll go down after I hook up the *Blue* to the truck.”

The *Blue Summer*, a thirty-foot single mast sailboat that Grandpa Nick built by hand nearly forty years ago. When he was alive, he sailed it from Cape Abstention down along the coast to Cabos in Mexico at least once a year. One of the woven blankets he’d brought back from there still decorates my bed, and the dusty shelves in the mudroom are still cluttered with his collection of alebrijes eleven years later. After he came down with the cancer and died, the boat rotted away in the slip on the other side of the harbor. Dad pulled her out and dry-docked her in our barn eight, maybe nine, summers ago. And there she’d sat, moldering away beneath layers of pigeon guano.

I was eleven when Dad first announced his plans to sail her to Santa Genevieve. I remember Mom had given him that sideways look that pretty much said *Go ahead. I’ll believe it when it happens*. The *Blue* was looking pretty ratty by then. “Moldy in the sails,” Mom had once told me.

“I need to stay on schedule,” Dad says to me, referring to his planned launch at noon. I nod and quietly wait for him to finish

his usual breakfast of runny fried eggs on soggy toast. It's obvious his mind is elsewhere. His eyes drift back to the map he's studying. Every so often he'll make a mark on it in pencil and mutter something under his breath.

After he finishes, he looks out the window, then at me. "Tide's still too high."

We head over to the barn instead and he hitches the sailboat up to the truck. Mom stays in the house. She's been very hands-off about the whole solo trip thing. Dad tells me that she's in denial and is going to be in denial until she wakes up one morning over the next couple weeks and realizes his snoring isn't waking her up. Dad's fishing trips usually last three or four days—a week on the rare occasion—so he's often gone several nights in a row. This time, he's planning on being out about a month.

The barn is a confusion of old scraps of wood and metal and plastic. "I'll clean it up," he tells me. I nod, noticing most of the cardboard boxes—supplies and spare parts—are already gone. "After I get back."

At first I figure he's telling me this in case Mom gets mad at the mess he's leaving, although that's unlikely. She rarely ever comes in here. Once in a while she'll go and sit in the loft and stare out over the water for artistic inspiration. I realize the promise is his way of telling me he knows he has obligations after his trip and he intends to keep them.

After he checks the trailer lights and tow chains, he lifts his jacket off the hook by the door and we head out across the yard. He can tell that the tide is down by the sound of the waves, the smell of the air. High above us the wind tatters the last clouds across the sky.

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I let him go first. I'm not afraid of the whale, so much as I am afraid *for* it. Like our simply being there might be wrong. Jauncy stays over on our beach. She's always been afraid of climbing over the rocks, so she rarely ever ventures over into the cove.

Dad stands in front of the gray for a moment, a foot away, maybe two. Then he reaches out and presses his hand onto the whale's side, just behind its eye. I keep my distance. I'm not sure why, but I don't want to touch it. After a moment, Dad opens his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"Grays calve in January and February," he explains, "so this one's probably about four months old."

He shows me how the gray's skin hasn't been mottled by parasites, such as whale lice and barnacles and the like, or torn by the fangs of larger predators. But his careful explanations seem to skitter past me, carried by the wind, drowned by the whale's immensity. Eighteen feet at least. Its spine rises nearly to my shoulder. Its huge, dark eye seems as bottomless the Strait itself.

As we stand there, the great beast shudders. Its back lifts and falls with a sigh that feels as if it had drawn its breath from a place far below us and outside of time. The exhale is dry, whistling low and sounding dull and full of pain and resignation. The gray is still alive, though barely. Even if we could somehow get it back into the water, which we can't, or keep it cool, which we might, it's already too late to save it. Its own weight is crushing it to death.

"Soon as it starts to warm up," Dad says, "it'll start to stink. It'll need to be towed out, or buried, or else this whole place will be unbearable to be around for a very long time." He looks

around himself then, as if getting his bearings. “You might want to let Al Cordova know.”

“Why Al?”

“On second thought,” he says, changing his mind, “don’t bother him with this.”

I know Dad is thinking that the best thing for all of us is for another storm to come and take it back out, to bury it deep beneath the blanket of the Sound where the sea can take care of its own and not leave us puny human beings to manage it. But the furthest thing on my father’s mind is figuring out what to do with a whale carcass, and the last thing he would wish for now is a sea high enough to come take it away from here.

He turns away and shrugs, tells me to mind Jauncy. “Let the whale be. I’ll notify Fisheries.”

Then he goes up and makes his phone call.

2

“Hurry up, Calli!” Mom calls out to me. “You’re going to miss the ferry.”

It’s the same thing every morning. Forget the fact that I’ve been taking the ferry to Fidalgo by myself nearly every day for the past nine years. Besides, old Ozzie the ferry pilot always stays in dock a minute or two longer than he’s supposed to, just in case I’m running behind. He grumbles like it’s such a bother, but he’s harmless.

I hurry up the steps to the back door, muttering reassuringly to myself, “Just five more days before summer vacation. You’ll survive.” I check my watch, do the math: Dad’s been out about eighteen hours. He should be in open water by now.

“I was checking on the whale, Mom. It died.”

“Well, it’s not going anywhere,” she says. She shakes her head. “Why does it have to be like this every morning? I hate that you’re always rushing around at the last minute.”

“It’s not my fault we live as far away from the harbor as possible,” I say, but I instantly regret it. It’s not her fault either.

Our house sits on land the locals call Cape Abstention. It’s little more than a rocky outcropping at the southern tip of Galton Island that somehow managed to produce a strand of pine trees and some scraggly grass despite the barren soil. During storm surges the bridge floods at a place called the Neck and temporarily becomes impassible. The only way to get across is by wading, which isn’t recommended, or by using the aluminum raft tied up there on pulleys. Since most folks get from one place to another by boat anyway, it’s not really a big deal. Boats or golf carts, but carts tend not to work very well in water more than ankle deep.

“Why don’t you let me drive you?” Mom says as I rush through the kitchen, grabbing a slice of bread and shoving it into my mouth. “You might not make it in time.”

“I got ten minutes,” I yell over my shoulder, though the words come out all muffled.

“You’re cutting it close!”

Truth of the matter is, I’d rather not have her drive me, not in her work jeep. I tried to explain it to her once, but she just laughed and dismissed it. “Everyone knows I’m your mother,” she’d said, like it’s a matter of fact that everyone’s mom happens to be the island’s entire police force. And jailer. And, informally, judge and jury. Anyway, ask any kid on the island, they’d rather walk in sleet than be seen riding around in the Sheriff’s car, even if ninety-nine percent of the time it’s more of a taxi than anything else.

We don’t see much crime. Most emergency calls my mother gets are from security systems going off at the houses on Angel’s

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Hill, and then it's usually because something electrical shorted out, like when a raccoon chewed through some wires and ended up electrifying itself. Other times, someone will report "suspicious activity," and Mom will have to go and investigate.

"What was it this time," Dad will say, after she gets home again. "Another crispy critter?"

"Goose. Helping itself to dinner out of someone's koi pond."

"You haul it off to jail?"

"The handcuffs kept falling off, so I gave it a good scare instead."

Dad always laughs at that one. I think Mom lost her handcuffs a few years back. And even though she's got a gun, she doesn't wear it.

The most excitement Mom gets is when there's a fight over at Vinny's, which is the only restaurant and bar on the island, although calling it a restaurant is a bit of an exaggeration. The fights are almost always between the two Greenwood brothers, Kenny and Denny. Sometimes Mom will go down and give them a talking to, but if the bridge is flooded or if she's in the middle of a painting, she won't even bother.

"Weather's nice," I say, as I grab my lunch bag. "I'll just ride my bike to the harbor."

Mom nods distractedly, holding her glasses up and peering intently at some random spot on her painting. Dad's been gone less than a day and already the kitchen looks like a tornado struck an art studio and vomited up a mess of paints and canvases in various states of completion. Watercolors, oils, still-lives, experimental impressionism. She has a hard time settling on any one technique.

"Depends on my mood," she says, "and the subject."

The tornado happens whenever Dad leaves on one of his longer fishing excursions. Mom'll empty out the guestroom, spread out the paintings, take a half day to choose one to work on. The rest she leaves wherever they fall. And so everything sits until Dad comes home again and puts everything back together. You can tell it bothers him that he can't even sit down and relax in his own chair the minute he arrives home after several days out, dog-tired and ready for the world to stop rocking. But he never says anything. Not once has he ever said a word about it.

"Take your raincoat," Mom mumbles.

"It's not going to rain."

She sighs. "It always rains when you think it's not going to, Calli. Did you pack your lunch?"

I hold up the bag— cup of applesauce, PB&J sandwich, hardboiled egg— and Mom nods again, though she still doesn't look up.

"I'm leaving."

She leans back and looks at me. For a second I think she might say something sappy, but instead she asks, "Want to have dinner out tonight?" Which means she wants a fried steak sandwich at Vinny's.

"Sure," I say. "We'll try that new Chinese place."

She frowns. "Chinese? What? Oh, you're joking. Go on. I'll meet you at the ferry after school."

"Okay," I say, and then I'm out the door.

After crossing the bridge, I stop at Cindy Thackeray's house. She's a year younger than me, still in eighth grade at the middle school in Anacortes. Next year she'll join me at the high school. Her parents like that we walk to the ferry together, since Cindy's very shy and they think I'm a bit shy, too, even though I'm really

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not. I just like being outdoors. But Cindy would rather have her nose stuck in a book or some news blog or something than be outdoors.

From Cindy's house, we head straight for the ferry landing. Up and over Angel's Hill, past the meadow behind Mister Dumfy's place where, in the summertime, swarms of dragonflies buzz. There's an old water tank you can climb up. The catwalk along the top is a perfect place to see all the major islands around us: Fidalgo to the east, Lopez and Decatur to the west, Cypress to the north. Galton in the middle of all that water, like a green egg in a gray nest.

We come around the last bend and I can see Ozzie's already there, motors rumbling, white smoke and spray spewing from the back. The air smells of diesel exhaust.

"We're late!"

Cindy hops onto the seat and wraps her arms around me, smushing her face into my backpack. We fly down the road, down the last few hundred feet of slope. Out of the corner of my eye I see a flash of color, and then Phil Whitewolf races past us on his bike, sticking out his tongue and saying, "Nyaaah!"

Cindy squeals when I stand up to pedal. My backpack jolts around on my back and threatens to knock her from the seat. She squeezes me even tighter. By the time I skid to a stop at the bike rack, Phil's already standing on the ramp waiting for us.

"No fair," I complain, gasping for air. "You had a head start. Besides, Cindy was squeezing me too tight. I couldn't breathe."

"Like a tube of toothpaste, eh?" Phil says. He smiles and winks at Cindy. Cindy stares at the ground, blushing like crazy, and it makes me want to go over and punch him.

Phil's a junior, two years older than me, though he doesn't always act it. He talks a lot about leaving Galton, leaving the Sound and the islands behind, leaving Washington State even. But of all the kids left here, I can't imagine one who's less likely to leave, unless it's me. The Whitewolf family has lived on the island forever. His older brother is even on the council and works a lot with the Swinomish government over on Fidalgo. Still, I secretly fear Phil might just actually fool himself into following his own words.

"You had a head start, Cal," he croons. "I'm just faster."

"Any day now, ladies," Ozzie yells over to us. He looks pointedly at Phil's long hair, at the leather strap that holds it against the back of his head. "You should know better than to tease the young ladies."

"He's not teasing. He's flirting," someone shouts from the deck. There's scattered laughter. "Watch out for them Whitewolf boys. They're trouble."

"Teasing builds character," Phil says as he passes Ozzie. I'm glad he can't see how red my face feels.

"What do you know about character?" Ozzie grumbles back. "Character is what you get from living a hard life, not from living in paradise." We all smile. Ozzie's face has enough character in it for several hard lifetimes. And while Galton isn't exactly paradise, most of the time it comes pretty darn close.

"Come on," Phil says to us. "I see Gordy's already on. He's saved us a spot on a bench." He grabs my wrist and pulls me through the small crowd clustered in the boarding area. I'm dimly aware that Cindy is following along behind.

After we've settled in and the ferry is chugging away into the strait, I remember my big news.

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“There’s a gray whale calf washed up on our beach.” The engines rumble beneath my legs. It’s a warm day, and the wind pulls at my hair. It’ll be a tangled mess by the time we get to school, but it feels too good to worry about it now. “I found it yesterday when I went down to collect seaweed.”

“A calf?” Phil says. He blinks each time my hair hits him in the face. “Killer get it?”

He watches as I pull out my egg and peel it. The shell is shattered from the bike ride down the hill, and my PB&J has an egg-shaped bruise in it now. I carefully drop the pieces of the eggshell back into the bag. Ozzie always yells whenever I throw the shells into the water, even though I’ve tried telling him it’s good for the shellfish.

I can see the expectation in Phil’s face, hope that I’ll give him half of my egg. He’s always hungry and, besides, now that his old girlfriend, Brin Decaffrey, moved away, he’s always begging food off of me. I don’t mind.

Except this morning I plop the whole egg into my mouth all at once and give Phil an apologetic shrug. He drops his head, clearly disappointed.

“Mphff whphh gahh.”

“Excuse me?”

I quickly finish chewing and swallow. “Sorry,” I say. “I missed breakfast this morning. I was too busy collecting kelp and checking on the gray.”

“So, what do you think was wrong with it? Why’d it beach itself?”

I shrug. “There weren’t any bite marks or blood, and it was still alive when we went down to check on it last night. But it

died sometime before this morning. Dad called Fisheries and they said they're sending a guy out."

"Speaking of kelp, how is your garden, anyway?" Phil asks.

I blush as a warm feeling floods through me, gladness that he'd take an interest in something as simple as my garden. But that's Phil. He walks and talks the part of someone with big plans, but he pays attention to the details. "The strawberries are doing great," I say. "They're just starting to color. I think I'm going to get a lot this year."

"Pinch some of them off," Cindy says. She doesn't look up, instead explains to her lap how she read somewhere that it helps plants put more energy into the remaining fruit. "It makes them bigger and sweeter."

"Anything else growing?" Phil asks.

"My melons shriveled up."

"Too much salt," Cindy says.

"Maybe," I say. "I wash the seaweed in rainwater. Dry it and chop it before putting it in the composter. Might be bugs. The leaves look all chewed up."

Phil shrugs. "You're lucky to get anything to grow down there. My mom's garden looks like a test site for toxic chemicals. Everything's dead except for the thistles."

"Better not let her hear you say that."

He laughs. "She's the one who says that." He puts his hand on his stomach, as if all this talk about food is making him hungry.

"Soon as they're ready, I'll bring you some," I quickly tell him. "Strawberries, I mean."

"Sure, okay." He nods. "I can do strawberries."

Gordy Cordova snorts from the other side of the bench and repeats Phil's last words in a mocking voice, but Phil just

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chuckles. They're best friends, both juniors. Gordy starts drumming his thumbs on his thigh to some tune that's only in his head, pretending he doesn't see me glaring at him.

"Hey," Phil says, "remember that killer that washed up over on the east side of the island a couple summers ago?"

I wrinkle my nose at the memory. Orca. It had gotten tangled in a fisherman's net and the net had caught on the rocks on Devrie's beach and kept it from washing back out to sea. After a few weeks, you could smell it a quarter-mile away, and you couldn't even get to within a dozen feet of it without being attacked by a swarm of flies. A bunch of us kids had managed to extract a couple dozen of its teeth, flies buzzing in our eyes and crawling into our ears and noses. It was messy work, disgusting, and this one kid, Freddie Bombour, had puked his guts out just to get his one measly tooth. It wasn't even that good of one, kind of small and the tip was chipped. But nobody ever teased him about getting sick, even though he was one of the rich kids from Angel's Hill. You had to respect him for it. None of the other Hill kids would even get close.

"How much did you make selling the teeth," Phil asks.

"Almost thirty dollars," I answer, "but don't tell your brother. I don't want Mister Galton finding out we made money on them."

"Right."

When Old Man Galton found out about us kids taking the teeth out of the orca, he'd gotten pretty riled up. It's true that the island is named after his family, which had settled it back in the late eighteen hundreds, and that he's its oldest living resident, but he's always acting like he owns the whole entire place and everything on it. You can't even sneeze at a plant without him

saying something about it. Heck, even the native people aren't as radical about the island and the wildlife and overpopulation and such as he is.

"Sheriff, those no good teenagers need to learn some respect for life and dignity for the dead." According to him, what we'd done was desecration.

"Well, what would you like me to do, Mister Galton," Mom had answered, "throw them in jail?"

"Don't be silly, Bess."

"They're just kids. Leave them be."

"Bess, I have known you since you were a baby. I know *you* wouldn't have done anything like what your little girl did. I know your father taught you to have respect for the Sound. Kids these days, they don't care."

I wonder what he would've said if he knew we'd sold the teeth and then bought candy with some of the money afterwards.

Later, Mom told me she couldn't understand how I'd had the stomach to take a knife to the killer in the first place. "Not that I feel sorry for it," she'd said, "but I'll never understand what could make you do such a thing, Calli."

"It was already dead."

"Well, Mister Galton is right, to a point. It does seem disrespectful. You're only twelve, so maybe you can be excused, but that Phillip Whitewolf is old enough to know better. I hope Tom gives him a talking to."

I still have a dozen of the teeth kicking around at home, mostly wrapped up in a tissue in my dresser in my room. Dad had promised to drill tiny holes in some of them so I could string them into a necklace. I never got around to it though. I'd always forget to bring the teeth with me to Dad's workshop in the barn. I

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guess I still felt a little guilty about the whole thing and didn't want to remind him of what I'd done.

Shortly after that, the orca disappeared, and all that was left on the beach was a big, brown greasy shadow on the gravel and mats of dead maggots pooled into the spaces where they'd fallen, almost as if it had been vaporized away. It still smelled for a long time afterward, though, especially since it didn't rain for nearly another month.

My stomach clenches involuntarily.

"Looking a little green there, Cal," Phil says, smirking. It's probably why he had to go and remind me of the orca in the first place, to tease me for not sharing my egg.

"Comes from sitting downwind of you."

Phil's grin widens.

"Hey," he says, elbowing Gordy, "maybe you can get your uncle to take care of Cal's whale. She doesn't want it sitting there all summer."

"No manches!" Gordy cries. "I'm not touching it. And don't you say nothing to Uncle Al either!"

I look at the two of them, remembering what Dad had said the day before about calling Al and then changing his mind right after that. I frown and ask, "What are you talking about?"

"Gordy's uncle was the one who got rid of the killer, you know, after it started to rot."

"I always wondered—"

"I'm not going through that again," Gordy says, scowling. "I had to throw away my clothes afterward. And my good work boots, too. And my hands stank for, like, two weeks afterward from cutting it up. Even the pigs never smelled *that* bad." Gordy

had grown up on a pig farm in Sonora, Mexico, before the accident that left him an orphan.

“You... cut it up?”

“Had to. Towing it out would’ve been easier, but the netting was all gone rotten and it kept breaking. *Guácala*. What a mess that was!”

“What’d Mister Galton say?” I ask.

“Are you kidding? After he went all loco from us collecting those teeth, no way were we going to tell him we were planning on cutting it up and dumping the pieces in the water. You know how he is, all *Let the sea take its own* and stuff. That’s why we waited until we knew he was going to be off island on business.”

He probably knew about it anyway. I remember hearing about Gordy’s uncle’s boat getting vandalized and Mom being all mum about the investigation afterwards. Now that I think about it, I don’t want to believe that Mister Galton would’ve done anything to the Cordova’s boat, but after hearing some of the things he spouts sometimes, you have to wonder. Maybe that’s why Dad had changed his mind. Maybe he didn’t want Al Cordova’s boat to get trashed again.

“Well,” I say, “Dad hopes it’ll go out with the tide.” Mentioning my father brings another tickle to my stomach.

“How high up is it?”

“Close to the base of the cliff. Ten, twelve feet from the opening of the cave.”

Gordy snorts. “It’s not a cave.”

“Is too!”

He shakes his head. I know he’s right— it’s really just a deep hollow in the rocks made by the ocean scratching away at the cliff for a hundred thousand years— but it still bugs me, like he

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knows more about it than I do. It used to have a reputation for being a teen hangout, but not so much anymore now that most of the island kids are gone. I still find empty beer cans and cigarette packs and burnt driftwood in it. Once, I even found a bra, but that was a few years back. I buried it in the rocks. Storms like the one that brought in the gray will wash the trash out again. For a while afterwards, the cave'll be nice and clean, just wet and dank with the familiar smell of sea rot, which I don't mind.

Phil shakes his head. "That high up?" I can see him picturing the cove, placing the whale in it the way I'd described. "It's not going anywhere. Mind if we come down after school and see it?"

But before anyone answers, the engines shut off and the ferry tilts as it slows, throwing me onto Phil's lap. He grabs my arm and helps me back to the bench. "I'll take that as an okay," he says.

Gordy grabs his backpack and heads for the ramp. "Not me," he shouts over his shoulder.

3

It's raining when we get out of school— big, warm raindrops coming out of the east. We ride the Oakes Avenue bus to the ferry terminal, past the airport where the small planes sit forlornly out in the open, looking like miserable wet pigeons. The trees thin out, give way to a thick fog that hides Guemes and Cypress Islands a mile away. Before we get on the ferry, Phil gives me his slicker for the ride across the Sound. I barely even have to look at Gordy before he groans loudly and hands his jacket over to Cindy. "I was gonna do it!" he tells me. "What? I didn't say anything," I answer. "You were thinking it." Phil laughs and shakes his head. Cindy doesn't even look up from her book, but I can see her face turning red.

Once we're on the boat, we gather together in a corner of the passenger compartment. It's warm and humid. We watch as the rain slides down the windows like hordes of silver worms. Few of the passengers are in the mood to talk, so it's mostly just the

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endless whisper of the rain and the hum of the engines and Ozzie's bell that sounds like we're a million miles away from anywhere. All that whiteness turns the bright red railings of the ferry a faint pink, and the only way we know we're moving is by the swaying of the floor and how quickly the foghorn at the terminal fades away.

"I wonder how Ozzie knows where to go," I say.

Phil shrugs and guesses that he must use a satellite positioning system, but Gordy insists that Ozzie does it by feel and intuition. A passenger sitting near us snorts and looks away. Gordy gives him the evil eye, which the passenger doesn't see. The rest of us snicker.

At the dock on Galton, I see Mom's bright yellow and green umbrella waiting for me, and then I remember about dinner. I turn and apologize to Phil. "I forgot we were staying down here this afternoon and having supper at Vinny's."

He shrugs. "It's raining anyway. Maybe tomorrow afternoon you can show me your whale."

"If it's still there."

He laughs. "It's just a little rain shower, Cal. It's not going to wash it away." He points and says, "There isn't even any chop."

I realize he's right. The rain falls straight down, presses the surface of the harbor flat, piercing it with a billion tiny pinpricks. I think of Dad out in this rain. He's sailed in much worse weather before. Still, I hope the seas aren't too rough for him.

I give Phil back his jacket and rush over and huddle under Mom's umbrella. She doesn't need to say anything, just gives me a look that says *I told you so about the rain* and *Look at your hair*. She makes a big deal out of thanking Phil for sharing.

"No problem, Missus Meyer," he says.

Cindy's mom is waiting in the parking lot in their little canvas-covered golf cart. There's just enough room for three, if they squeeze together. Definitely not enough room for both Phil and Gordy.

Mom offers to put their bikes on the jeep's rack, but they shake their heads.

Once, a few years ago, Gordy told everyone he was allergic to riding in Mom's jeep. He totally believes this is true, and no amount of teasing by me or Phil will ever change his mind about it. Mom shrugs, drapes her arm around my shoulder and leads me away.

"How was school?" she asks.

I sigh. *School is school*, I think to myself, *what's there to tell?* Mom satisfies herself with my shrug as an answer.

Since it's still too early for dinner, we stop in at her office first, where she trades in her umbrella for a towel. She throws me another. "Your hair's a disaster," she says at last. She can't stop herself.

"Yes, Mom, you were right about the rain," I tell her, rolling my eyes at the back of her head. Better to say it now than to have her poking at me about it for the rest of the day.

I sit inside the tiny jail cell bolted into the corner of the room and give my hair an experimental tug with the brush she brings me. "It's freezing in here," I complain.

"You should've worn a coat."

"Heard from Dad yet?"

"He called this morning after you left." She shuffles through some mail on her desk.

"And?"

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“From Sooke. He had to stop and fix something, but he didn’t think he’d finish until sometime after noon today.”

I look up in alarm. Sooke is just barely around the southern horn of Vancouver Island, only about fifty miles from here. We’d spent a few weeks camping near there a few summers ago, a place called Matheson Lake, although that time we’d driven there by car. But what troubles me now is that it’s fifty miles short of Clo-oose, which is where Dad had planned to spend the night.

Clo-oose. The name meant ‘safe landing.’

A couple nights ago, he’d read aloud a passage from one of Grandpa’s old books: “*Out of the winds’ and the waves’ riot, / out of the loud foam, / he has put in to a great quiet / and a still home.*”

“What’s that?” I’d asked him, looking over his shoulder.

“It’s an old poem about Clo-oose.” He’d closed the book, but not before I’d seen the poem’s title: *The Sailor’s Grave*.

Mom sees the look on my face and laughs. “Calli, it was nothing serious.” She rubs the towel behind her ears.

“What you mean nothing serious?”

“Just repeating what your father told me, ‘Nothing serious.’ I wish I knew more, but I don’t, so we just have to accept that it means just what it means. Anyway, he said he’s going to try to make Gold River by tonight, said he’s going to stay close to Vancouver Island as long as he can until he’s sure he’s got all the kinks worked out.”

I picture the map I’d made myself memorize. Gold River is about two-thirds of the way up the western coast of the island. If he stays along the shore until he reaches the northern tip instead of heading straight west as he’d planned, then that gives him

another day and a half before open water. Somehow, this change of plans doesn't make me feel any better.

"He'd better have all the kinks worked out quick," I mutter.

"Stop being such a worrier," Mom says. "He said he'll try and call again before we're in bed tonight. If he can find a payphone. He said he wanted to talk with you before school's out for the summer." She comes over and sits with me. "Before we even know it, he'll be landing in Santa Genevieve, and then he'll be heading back home again."

Santa Genevieve. Suddenly I wish I'd never heard of the place.

After all these years of Dad describing it, only now does the island seem so real, so tiny and remote. Five hundred miles south of the Aleutians, a four thousand-mile roundtrip from here. It might as well be the moon.

Only a couple hundred people live in the Equity Islands cluster. Santa Genevieve is the biggest. It's pretty undeveloped, though. They fish and trap the feral pigs, grow whatever food they can, which is to say, mostly potatoes and yams. They also raise sheep. And they keep their chickens in barns to protect them against the torrential rains, which they get eight months out of the year.

The rest of the people are transplants, ex-pats and commercial tour guides for example, which always seemed a bit strange to me. Why anyone would want to live there by choice or take such a dreary vacation as you get on those islands makes no sense to me whatsoever.

Apparently, Mom felt the same way.

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“Why not go someplace warm?” she’d asked Dad. This was a couple summers ago, when it became obvious he was serious about doing his solo. “Like Catalina, for example.”

“Because I know Santa Genevieve. I know the way.”

Each year, he and Jimmy Dumfy and a handful of other islanders take a small cargo ship there. They load it up with seeds and canned goods, medical supplies, fuel and books and other items the islanders can’t easily get. It’s all part of some church’s missionary work, even though Dad has never been a member. He does it for his own reasons.

“I’m beginning to think your father feels more at home on the water than he does on land,” Mom once told me. It was another thing we agreed upon.

If you knew my Dad only since he and Jimmy took over Grandpa’s fishing business, you’d probably think he was born into the maritime trades. Truth is, he came into it late in life, after Grandpa died. Despite this, Dad managed to learn to read the stars as well as any natural born seaman. Jimmy had taught him that much, plus things about fishing and operating a boat and how to look at the sky and the sea to tell what it was thinking of doing next.

“Instinct and intuition,” Dad had once told me. “Invaluable tools.” He had come from a world where you depended on technology to do everything, and gone into a world where Mother Nature does its own thing. Still, you’d never catch him without his cell phone and laptop.

Dad installed all the latest gadgets into the trawler when he took over the business— GPS, fish-finding sonar, satellite internet. It’s not like one of those big commercial operations, just the forty-five-foot trawler that shares its name with Grandpa’s

old sailboat. Grandpa wasn't exactly an outside-the-box thinker when it came to things like that.

They go out about once a week and stay out just long enough to keep Mister Forde over at the general store and the cooks at Vinny's restaurant stocked with fresh fish most times during the year. Any extra catch they get they sell at the market in Oak Harbor, usually on Wednesdays or Fridays, though Dad doesn't really care much if they don't sell anything. Fishing gives him a reason to be out on the water.

I'm pretty sure it was Jimmy who first convinced Dad to fix up the sailboat. He even volunteered to help, but Dad wanted to do most of it on his own. The first thing he did was to replace her two small inboard engines with more powerful ones. They're really only for maneuvering and emergencies, in case there isn't any wind or the mast breaks; the wind is what the sailboat had been built to use. Dad knew that, but he also knew you couldn't always rely on it to be there.

When he thought the *Blue* was ready, he took her out into the strait on a couple short trips. Then, last September, he sailed her for almost a week up into the Strait of Georgia on the east side of Vancouver. He called us as he was bringing her in. "She's holding up fine. I'll be back in dock by early afternoon. Think I'll take her through Lopez Sound, see how she handles there." The wind there can swirl from six different directions all at once, which puts a lot of strain on the rigging.

It was almost sunset when we caught sight of the *Blue* motoring in, her sail furled and tied to the boom. Mom was practically frantic by then. Funny thing was, she never acted that way when Dad was out in the trawler with Jimmy, even when they were hours overdue.

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“Why didn’t you call?” she demanded.

“I lost my phone.”

“What? How?”

He explained that he’d run into a bit of trouble. “I was just about to call and say I was going to be a little late when a cleat tore out of its mount. It snapped up on the end of its line and knocked the phone from my hand.” He showed us the ugly gash it left on his knuckles. “Before I knew it, the boom came back around. I ducked just in time, but not before that cleat whipped back through and tore a hole in the sail.”

“Lucky for you it only took yer phone,” Isabella, the waitress at Vinny’s, told him. “Mighta taken a part of you the rest of us are more fondly attached to, like yer head.” The folks down there sure had a good laugh over that one, but it just made Dad more determined than ever to make this trip happen.

The next morning, he pried away some of the boards to get an idea of the damage. What he found was bunches of old newspaper, *La Tribuna* from Mexico, all rolled up and bound with string and crammed into the spaces around the hull. They were stiffened and mildewed from cycles of wetting and drying. Dad pulled them all out and threw them all into the bed of the truck. It was a disgusting mess, black and moldy like old bones.

“I never knew Nick could read Spanish,” Dad had said.

“I didn’t either,” Mom answered.

I remember Dad bending down over me and whispering, “If you ask me, I think he was going a little soft in the futtocks.” It was still loud enough for Mom to hear, and she gave Dad a dirty look for it. You could tell she didn’t know what a futtock was—well, I didn’t either. But even after Dad explained it to her, she still told me not to repeat it. “It’s not a polite-sounding word.” I

guess if she ever found out some of the language the kids use at school, she'd probably yank me out of class and teach me at home.

I found the newspapers in the truck days later, forgotten and bleaching in the sun. I tossed them all into the compost heap to rot with my seaweed.

By then, Dad was busy dealing with the woodrot he'd found in the portside gunnel up near the bow. "Still not too serious," he insisted, showing me where the dark stain of decay was beginning to reach the stringers. He had her back out of the water in a jiffy. "Better to fix it now than after it's too late." He figured it was easier than completely dismantling the boat and starting the hull with fresh wood and fiberglass, which would've been way beyond his abilities or desire.

Come April, when the repairs were complete, Dad promised the *Blue* would survive anything short of a hurricane. He'd added metal plating to the inside to strengthen her.

"Lost about an inch on the freeboard," he said, which meant the *Blue* was running heavier than before, "but it's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried," I tell Mom. But deep down I am.

I worry about that afternoon's rain shower, the result of a low pressure system cycling inland off the Oregon coast. I worry about Dad having problems so soon after starting out on his trip, about him missing his safe landing at Clo-oose. *Nothing serious*, he'd said. Still, my worries scurry around inside my head and pester me for the rest of the afternoon. They keep me from

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concentrating on my studies for final exams. They bother me even after we've gone over to Vinny's and ordered our dinner.

"Calli?"

I look up from my lap and blink. "Yeah?"

"Did you hear what I was just saying about the whale down in the cove?"

"The gray?" I say, frowning. Another strange coincidence: Dad leaving, the whale showing up. "What about it?"

"I said I'm picking up a couple researchers on the noon ferry tomorrow."

I shake my head, confused, but Isabella arrives right then with our dinners. She lowers a chef's salad in front of Mom instead of her usual fried steak sandwich. "Fresh outta steak, dearie," she says, winking at me. "I decided you should have a salad instead." She plops down my usual cheeseburger. "Hold the pickle," she whispers conspiratorially. Mom sighs, picks up her fork and pokes at her lettuce. Neither of us says anything for the next few minutes.

"NOAA," Mom finally says. "From California."

"Noah? Who's Noah from California?"

She spells it out for me: "N. O. A. A. It stands for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration." I roll my eyes at her. Of course I know what NOAA means. You don't live on an island for long and not know what it means. You don't have a father spending days at a time on a boat and not have heard about them at least a million times. "They're from somewhere down near San Francisco," she continues. "They want to see if they can figure out why baby grays are suddenly beaching themselves."

"Baby grays? Ours isn't the only one?"

“Apparently not. This is the fifth one they’ve seen in the last month or so.”

Five baby gray whales. I turn this over in my mind. Eastern Pacific grays aren’t endangered anymore, not like other populations, or like the blues and humpbacks are, but even as few as five individuals seems like an awful lot for any whale species to lose.

“What are they going to do with it?”

Mom shrugs and chews thoughtfully. I can hear her lettuce and bacon bits getting ground into a mushy pulp. Everyone’s got a strange pet peeve. Noisy food is mine. To make matters worse, Mom’s always been a noisy eater. My cheeseburger (no crunchy pickles) and mushy fries with ketchup are much quieter.

“They’ll probably draw blood, I guess,” she says. “Take tissue samples, do some tests. I don’t know, I never paid attention to that stuff in class— not that you shouldn’t pay attention in school.” I shake my head impatiently at her, but she ignores it.

“How long are they going to be here?” I ask, more to deflect the conversation than out of curiosity.

“A few days is what they told me.”

“A few *days*?” I lower my fork and frown. “Where are they going to stay? Fidalgo? There aren’t any hotels on Galton.”

She shakes her head and my heart sinks. I know what this means. It means we’ll be adding innkeeper to Mom’s resume.

“They’ll have equipment, dear. I offered our guest room. And the barn can be used to store things since the *Blue* isn’t in there anymore.”

“Why do we have to let them stay with us? I need peace and quiet to study. Remember? Finals?”

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“They’ll be quiet. Besides, where else is there?” She gets this gleam in her eye and says, “I suppose I could send them over to Jimmy’s.”

I almost choke on a bite of my burger.

Mom smiles and winks. “It’s just for a day or two, dear.” Then her face gets all serious, and she adds, “At least this way I’ll be able to keep an eye on things, make sure there’s no trouble.”

She means Mister Galton and Tom Whitewolf and the other island elders.

“The quicker they come and go, the better off we’ll all be.”

4

Cindy and I arrive early for the ferry on Tuesday morning. It's already warm. A barge passes a quarter mile out and its wake rolls in minutes later, rocking the boats in the harbor, clanging the pulleys on their masts. The Sound is crowded with trawlers and ferries, and the air smells of seawater drying on old wooden pilings.

"Phil's late again," I say, holding my hand over my eyes.

Gordy stops playing his imaginary drums and says, "He's not late. You're just early." He gives Cindy a knowing glance, but she doesn't see it.

She shows me today's Seattle Times, the article at the bottom of page six: "GRAY WHALE WASHES UP ON GALTON IS.: SCIENTISTS BAFFLED BY FIFTH IN PUGET SD."

"Hey, that's not Timothy's Cove!" I exclaim, squinting at the photo.

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Gordy looks over. “Yup, that’s your beach and house all right. Looks like it was taken from a plane.”

“And we’re not in Puget Sound, either,” Cindy says to the newspaper.

“Of course we are,” Gordy argues.

Cindy shakes her head at him. “Nope.”

I sigh. This is an endless argument among islanders.

“I bet if you ask that guy over there, he’d say this is Puget Sound.”

Gordy points to a man leaning against the rail. He’s dressed in black pants and a windbreaker and is watching the crew of the Coast Guard cutter pulling out of the dock. I feel Cindy shrinking against me, as if the idea of talking to a stranger scares her.

“You want me to ask?” Gordy says beginning to stand up.

“Sit down.” I grab his shirt and pull him back down. “It’s not important if it’s Puget Sound or Rosario Strait.” Cindy gives me a horrified look, but I shrug. I’m more concerned about the article than whether people know where exactly where Galton Island is on a map. There’s no date on the picture, just AP FILE PHOTO. I don’t know why, but it bothers me to see my beach and our house in the newspaper like that, like someone’s watching us. “Why they would even bother showing an empty beach? It’s not even the right one!”

“Maybe they had extra space to fill,” Gordy guesses. “What does the article say?”

“*Devan Hollingsworth*,” Cindy reads, “*a professor of marine mammal biology, suggested the beachings may be the result of underwater testing by the Navy.*”

“What testing?” Gordy asks.

“Sonar. The Navy uses it to check how warm the water is.”

“That’s probably why NOAA is involved,” I say.

Gordy gives me a strange look, but Cindy keeps reading. “*According to Professor Hollingsworth, the water temperature is a degree and a half higher than normal for this time of year.*”

“That’s nothing,” Gordy says. “If it was, like, thirty degrees warmer, then we could all swim in it whenever we wanted to.”

Cindy lifts her head and gives Gordy a frown.

“What? I’m just saying.”

“How does sonar measure water temperature?” I ask.

Cindy rolls her eyes, like this is elementary science class material and I should know the answer already. Gordy snorts.

“Yeah, like you know,” I tell him.

Cindy takes a deep breath. “Sound travels at a different speed depending on the water temperature— faster in warmer water, slower in colder. The Navy plants these devices on the ocean floor that send out a sound pulse that can be detected hundreds of miles away. The time it takes for the pulse to travel lets them calculate the temperature.”

Neither of us says anything for a moment. This is the most Cindy’s said to us at any one time. Ever.

“Yup, I knew that,” Gordy finally announces.

“Did not.”

“Did so.”

I shake my head. “I wonder if that professor guy is who my mom’s picking up here on the noon ferry.”

“Don’t you mean woman? Devan’s not a guy’s name.”

Cindy shakes her head. “He’s a man all right. He sounds British.”

“What, like, g’day, mate? Pip pip cheerio?”

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“Shut up, dork,” I say. But then I nod and add, “Mom says they’re staying with us, in our guestroom.”

“*Your* guestroom? Ooh, sucks to be you.”

“Tell me about it.” I reach out for the paper and Cindy reluctantly hands it over to me, but there’s nothing more in the story that I don’t already know. It mentions our beach by name, which seems strange, mentions Dad and that he used to work as an investment banker before starting his own fishing company, which isn’t true. It was Grandpa Nick’s company, A&D Fishing. Dad just took it over. I fold the paper and hold it over my eyes, a little miffed that my own name isn’t mentioned and yet at the same time glad that it’s not.

The man over by the railing sees me looking at him and he starts to walk over. “Excuse me,” he says. “I couldn’t help overhearing you kids saying something about the Meyers. Do you know them?”

“I’m Calli Meyer,” I say. I can see Gordy frowning. He doesn’t like being called a kid. I hope he doesn’t start asking him if he thinks we’re in Puget Sound.

The man’s smile widens. “I’m Alex Firestone.” He holds out his hand and I shake it. “I’d like to talk to your father, if I can. Harry Meyer?”

“Are the guy my dad called? With Fisheries?”

He clears his throat. “I’m with another government agency.”

“You must be NOAA then.”

“Er, no. I’m Alex. Alex Firestone.”

“No,” I say, laughing. “I meant you’re with the Atmospheric Administration.”

The man laughs and nods. “I see.”

“Well, Dad’s out on the *Blue*, so you’ll have to talk to my mom instead. She’s still home— I don’t think she was expecting anyone this early. If you wait an hour or so, she’ll be in her office. She’s the sheriff.” I point to a low building across the landing. “It’s over there.”

“Sheriff, eh?” Alex Firestone says, raising his eyebrows. “You must be her posse then.”

Gordy snorts. Cindy pushes herself up against me.

“Uh, yeah,” I say. “That’s funny. Anyway, Dad’s out on his boat. But you probably already knew that, since he’s the one who called you guys.”

“About?”

“The gray whale calf? In Timothy’s Cove?”

“Oh, right. And when will he be back?”

“Not for four weeks.”

Gordy jumps up. “Here comes Oz,” he says. He hurries over to the boarding ramp, abandoning me and Cindy.

“Four weeks?” Mister Firestone says. “That long?” He sounds more curious than disappointed.

I nod.

“May I ask where he went?”

“Why do you want to know that?”

Before he gets a chance to answer, Phil skids to a stop behind him. “Let’s go, fellow Storm Troopers,” he shouts. Phil’s a big Star Wars fanatic. You can always tell whenever he’s watched one of his Star Wars movies because the whole next day he goes around quoting lines from it and calling us Storm Troopers and Jedi Padawans.

“I’m sorry,” I tell the man, “but you should probably talk to my mother. I have to catch the ferry now. For school,” I explain.

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“Yes, of course. You study hard,” he says, which elicits a chuckle from Phil.

Once we’re on the ferry Gordy whispers at me, “That guy was a total dork.”

“Why are you whispering?” I say. “He’s still back on the dock. It’s not like he can possibly hear you now.”

Phil gives me a questioning look and I shrug.

“I’m just saying,” Gordy says, and Cindy actually nods in agreement. She mumbles, so only I can hear: “He was creeping me out.”

“Yeah, well, what do you expect from a guy who probably sits around and studies fish or sonars all day?”

“Fish? Sonars?” Phil says. “I thought he was some kind truant officer or something.”

“No, I think it was the guy Dad called on Sunday about the whale.”

“He said he wasn’t from Fisheries.”

“Yeah, well,” I say, “as long as they take care of the carcass, I don’t care who it is.”

“Aw, just get Gordy and Al to do it,” Phil teases.

Gordy coughs and quickly asks about my strawberries.

I push him in the arm. “Don’t change the subject.”

On the other side of me, Phil groans and holds his stomach. “And especially don’t talk about food. I totally missed breakfast again this morning.”

I turn and punch him, too, but then I pull two eggs out of my lunch bag and hand one over. His eyebrows bunch together. “A whole one? For reals? What’d I do to deserve this?”

“Nothing.”

Phil takes Cindy's Seattle Times from me and sets it on his lap to read the article. I don't think Cindy likes that he's dropping bits of eggshell on it. She keeps reaching over and picking them up and dropping them into my lunch bag.

"Was the whale still there this morning?" Phil asks, not looking up. He holds the egg up to his mouth but doesn't take a bite.

"No," I say. "It flew away in the middle of the night."

"You know," he says, ignoring me. He points at the photo. "This isn't even Timothy's Cove."

"Yeah, we know."

That afternoon, after Oz drops us off from school, Phil asks if he can come out to Cape Abstention. I offer to show them all the whale, but Cindy surprises us by offering Gordy a lift home. I like Gordy—pretty much everyone does—but I'm glad when he decides to accept Cindy's offer. I know she has a crush on him.

The road is hot in the sunlight, cold in the shade, but there's a nice breeze as we walk up Story Road. Phil tells me about the trip he's planning to take to New Orleans as soon as school's out.

"It's a jazz camp," he explains. He plays classical guitar, which I have a hard time figuring out how that fits in with jazz.

"Your parents are letting you go all the way to Louisiana alone?"

"I think they're glad to be getting rid of me," he jokes. We pass the tiny cemetery where his grandparents are buried and he clacks a stick across the rails of the fence. He's tall enough that he could step over it without standing on tiptoes. The few dozen

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simple tombstones scattered about seem to listen to us as we pass. “I think they’re jealous. They wish they could go, too.”

“Why don’t they? They’re retired, aren’t they?”

Phil laughs. It’s an easy laugh, full of honesty. You always know exactly where you stand with him.

“Yeah, retired,” he says, “just like your mother is retired.”

This is a running joke amongst us kids on the island, at least those whose parents work for a living. Unlike the rich folks who own the big houses on the Hill and who home-school their kids. Phil’s father teaches math and science to a bunch of them, and Miss Hadley teaches music and English.

The road up Angel’s Hill tops out at Breaker’s Lookout, then winds down through a strand of redwood. Jimmy Dumfy’s house is off to the right, up a short gravel drive that winds through the trees. There isn’t a fence or a gate, but a sign tacked to a tree by the road unnecessarily discourages solicitors. I doubt the island has had a single traveling salesman ever set foot on it.

“I saw Jimmy driving down to the harbor this morning,” Phil says. “He passed right by me without even slowing down.”

“He probably didn’t see you.”

“Oh, he saw me, all right. Anyway, he looked like he was getting ready to go fishing, but I didn’t see your father with him.”

“Dad’s off on a solo trip on that sailboat he was fixing up.”

“Solo? You never told me that. Where’s he going?”

“The Equities. Santa Genevieve. He’ll be gone almost a month.”

“Whoa. Way out there? Brave, your father is,” Phil says in his Yoda voice, “by himself to go.”

“Yeah,” I nod, forcing a smile. Once more, my stomach hurts from worry. “The force is strong in him.”

There’s no reason why I should be worried, especially after last night, and yet I can feel it growing inside me, somewhere deep down.

After Mom and I had finished dinner, I’d begged her to take us straight home. I was getting antsy about Dad calling us. I knew Mom had her cell phone with her and that he’d probably call that number first, but you never know. He might have, for some odd reason, forgotten or lost her number or decided to only call the house. Mom said I was being silly, but she admitted that she was feeling a bit anxious too, so she paid the check and we left. Isabella boxed up some blueberry pie for us to take home, which we accidentally left in the jeep overnight. A raccoon got into it and made a huge mess. There were little blue paw prints all over the place.

“You okay, hon?” Mom had asked, as we topped Angel’s Point. I remember passing Jimmy’s house. The spot light was on his truck and it looked like he was loading it up with supplies.

A low fog had settled over the water, but the air was warm, so we drove with the windows open. The breeze was blowing my hair about my face until it probably did look like the bird’s nest Mom was always complaining about. I could smell the salt in the air, wet and heavy with the fragrance of burning logs.

If you’ve never been on any of the smaller islands in the Sound, you can’t know how absolutely dark it can get at night. There are no streetlights, and people tend to go to bed early, or retire to their bedrooms and back rooms away from the road. A

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single lit window in the darkness casts little light and no warmth, despite what you might think; at least, that's how I see it. Knowing that you're the only one out and about only makes you want to rush back to the coziness of your own home. If it weren't for the inescapable sound of the ocean, the emptiness of being surrounded by such total darkness might make you feel as if the entire world had picked itself up and walked off without telling you.

"I'm fine," I answered her. "I'm just tired." I had my arm hanging out the window, and when I brought it in, it felt hot.

"And you still have to study."

"Yeah."

We'd driven another minute or so before she spoke again: "He'll call. Dad won't let us down."

And he had called, just as he had said he would. Everything was fine, in fact. He had made it to Gold River after his minor delay and was settling in for the night. The puppy— we'd not bothered to give him a name, except to call him Puppy— had adapted perfectly well to life on a boat. They'd taken their time exploring a few protected coves and Puppy had gleefully jumped out and swum about in circles until he was too exhausted to even climb back in on his own. Dad had had to pull him out of the water with a fishing net, which Puppy grabbed with his teeth and allowed himself to be dragged on board like a soggy tangle of kelp. Both of us had laughed at Dad's description of this.

This morning I'd noticed a new watercolor on the easel, only partially finished and beginning to ripple slightly in the morning sunlight. The picture was of Dad pulling Puppy aboard just the way he'd described it on the phone last night. Mom must've stayed up all night working on it. Something about the way she

had done the lighting made the painting seem almost real, and yet like something seen through water. I believed that if I blinked, something in the painting would change. Maybe Puppy would drop away, back into the sea, or the boat would sail off. The more I stared at it, the more convinced I became from the way she had painted Dad leaning awkwardly over the railing that Puppy was going to pull him over the side instead of the other way around. It was disquieting, to say the least. Maybe that's the reason Mom had turned it away from the middle of the room.

“Just to let you know, I'll be out on the open ocean for another couple days before I plan on calling again,” Dad had told us at the end of the conversation. He hadn't been able to get to a payphone and wanted to save the batteries on his cell, especially since the laptop connected to the internet through it.

Three, four days without human interaction, just Puppy. I didn't know whether I should feel more alone for him or for us.

The last thing he'd said was, “Give each other a goodnight kiss for me.”

“You and Puppy, too,” I'd answered. The last thing I heard before he disconnected was the sound of his laughter and Puppy barking in the background.

5

Mom's jeep is parked out in front of the house when Phil and I get there.

“What's all this?” he asks, pointing to the boxes piled up on top of the jeep and in the back seat. He goes over and takes a closer look at the blue and gold labels plastered all over them. “University of California?”

Seeing them makes me feel cranky. Strangers intruding on my privacy. Strangers down on my beach— well, Timothy's Cove, but you have to go down to my beach to get there. Strangers looking at my whale. I was kind of hoping Phil would be the first to see it before anyone else.

“Mom?” I yell. There's no answer from the house.

Phil grabs my wrist and leads me around the side. “They're probably down in the cove,” he says.

“I should tell Mom I’m home,” I argue. But even though Phil’s hand feels rough on mine, like sandpaper, I don’t resist or pull away. I don’t want him to let go.

As we near the bluff, I start to hear Jauncy, so I know she’s down on the beach. Sure enough, there she is, running around in circles just beyond Mom’s reach. Mom is trying to get her to behave, but not doing a very good job at it. Standing in the cove next to the whale are two men. It startles me to see how much the carcass is beginning to sag in places, and the skin has lost its sheen. One of the men is writing in a notebook, the other is walking around the calf, measuring, marking the skin with white paint. Neither of them looks like the Doctor Firestone guy from this morning.

“Calli!” Mom yells up to me. Jauncy spins and nearly trips Mom. “Calli, call Jauncy, she’s driving me crazy. She won’t leave us alone.”

“She won’t go over into the cove,” I say.

“Just call her!”

“Jauncy!” I shout, then whistle. Jauncy sees me and starts barking again. She comes bounding up the steps, happy I’m home. She gets to the top and races across the grass. I brace for the impact, but it’s not me she jumps on. Phil laughs and wrestles with her as she tries desperately to lick his face. Finally, he kneels down and lets her.

“Take her to the house, Calli!” Mom says. She starts to pick her way over the rocks, trying hard not to get wet. “Lock her in the downstairs bathroom.”

“Did Doctor Firestone find you?” I ask.

“Who?”

“Firestone. From the government.”

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Mom holds her hands up in exasperation. “Go take care of that dog of yours first. Then we’ll talk.”

I grab Jauncy’s collar and the three of us walk back to the house.

“Want a drink, girl?” I say, scratching her on the head. “Snack?”

“Sure, I’m starving,” Phil says, sounding like Scooby Doo.

“I’m going to start calling you ‘Phil me.’”

“Phil you?”

“No, *Phil me*, because you’re always empty.”

When we reach the back porch, I have to stop and ask, “So, did you see it?” Jauncy stands at the door and whines, scratching to be let in. I open it and she runs into the darkness, barking like mad.

“See what?”

“The whale, silly.”

“Well, it looks like a baby gray all right,” he says. “When can we go down?”

“After the scientists leave, I guess.”

“They sure got here quick, didn’t they? When do you suppose they’ll be done?”

“For good? Couple of days. Did I tell you they’re staying here, with us?”

Phil shakes his head. “Couple days? Don’t you have, like, only one guestroom?” He raises his eyebrows and wags them at me.

“Cut that out.”

“And your father’s gone and—”

“Shut-up, there’s two beds in the guestroom.”

“I don’t know, Cal. You know how small this island is. People talk.”

I try to change the subject. “Not as much as if they’d stayed over at Jimmy’s?” Phil snorts. “Yeah, that’s my mom’s idea of a joke.”

Jimmy’s in his early fifties and not exactly the most sociable guy you’ll ever meet. Not by a long shot. The thing about him is he’s totally deaf. The story is that his mother had some disease like the measles when she was pregnant with him, and that’s just the way he came out. I always thought it must be hard for a mother to have a baby born deaf, who can’t even hear her voice, or even its own crying. But Jimmy seems to do well enough by reading lips and writing notes in a pad he keeps with him with a stub of a pencil he stows behind his ear.

He lives by himself in the house at the top of Story Road and nobody ever bothers him. Aside from the Galton place, it’s the oldest house on the island. It used to be the biggest and most elegant house, too, after the Weaver place burned down from a coal-stove accident years back. But after the dot-com boom, Angel’s Hill was taken over by millionaires. They built their houses, but they’re almost never in them. They’re like gypsy ghosts, haunting the island for only a few months each year. Anyway, now Mister Dumfy’s place looks tiny and rundown in comparison.

Jauncy slurps noisily from her water bowl in the kitchen. I can’t see her in the darkness inside the house, but I can sure hear her. The bowl scrapes across the floor, then there’s a scratching sound and more barking.

Phil leans against the door, watching me.

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“Come on,” I say, suddenly uncomfortable standing there. I reach for his wrist, but at the last second I chicken out and grab his sleeve instead. “We might as well see it now. Before they do anything to it.”

“But, I thought—”

“Just come on! It’ll be quick and I’ll find you something to eat afterwards. Maybe we’ve got a pot roast in the fridge or something you can gnaw on.”

“Ooh, that sounds good.”

When we get back to the cliff, Mom is over in Timothy’s with the two men. Her pant legs are darkened from the knees down, but they’re not as wet as the men’s pants are. A few words float up to us— *specimens, necropsy, decomposition*. It makes me think of those forensic cop shows on TV.

Phil’s already halfway down the steps. He waves over to me to hurry. “Come on,” he says. “You don’t expect me to go by myself, do you?”

When he gets to the rocks, he reaches down and offers his hand. I ignore it this time. This is my beach. I’ve climbed over these rocks a thousand times. Maybe ten thousand. And, besides, Mom might be looking. I know she’s a bit leery of Phil, especially since that orca incident, but she keeps her opinions to herself. I can’t really say the same about everyone else on the island. You know what they’re thinking whenever they see me with Phil or Gordy, like it’s expected that one of them will end up being my boyfriend since I’m the closest in age to them. It puts a lot of pressure on me.

I’m up and past Phil and down the other side of the rocks before he has a chance to react. Only one of my pant legs is wet,

and then only just above the ankle. Phil chuckles and follows as close behind me as he can.

“I haven’t been down here in ages,” he whispers to me as we pick our way across the loose rocks. I nod and blush and wonder if it was with Brin.

The adults stop their discussion and turn and look at us.

“Calli,” Mom says. She tries to smile, but I can tell she’s not feeling particularly happy at the moment. “Doctor Yang,” she says, introducing an elderly gentleman in slacks and a windbreaker. “He’s a veterinarian.” We nod to each other. The other man is a young guy, good-looking with broad shoulders and a nice tan. “And Professor...”

“Hollinsworth,” the younger guy says. “Devan Hollinsworth.”

“Hollingsworth?” Phil says. “Aren’t you’re the guy from the newspaper article?”

The professor reaches out his hand and smiles. “Yes, well, that would be me, though it’s Hollinsworth— without the g.”

I keep expecting him to say ‘Cheerio,’ but he doesn’t even sound British at all.

“Please, call me Dev.”

Doctor Yang shifts his feet uncomfortably. He also smiles at me, but the look he gives Doctor Hollinsworth is one of mild annoyance.

“So, you’re the one who discovered the whale?” the professor says to me.

I nod. “But Dad was the one who called you guys.”

“Well, not me directly. It was Doctor Yang’s office in Skagit that got the call and—”

“Doctor Firestone!”

Dev looks at Doctor Yang, then back at me. “Sorry?”

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“Doctor Firestone. From NOAA. I met him at the landing this morning. He said he was going to come down and talk to you, Mom.”

Mom shakes her head like she doesn’t know what I’m talking about, and both Dev and Doctor Yang shrug.

“Typical,” Dev says. “Once the government gets involved, you’ve got four thousand different departments who want in on the conference call— Parks, Interior, Fish and Game, whoever. They all say they want to be involved, but then that’s the last you hear from them.” Doctor Yang coughs into his hand. “Right, sorry, Bill. Present company excluded, of course. Anyway, I’m from the University of California. I work with NOAA down in Santa Cruz on issues related to ocean wildlife.”

“Who’s Noah?” Phil whispers at me.

I roll my eyes at him.

“Was there something you wanted, hon?” Mom asks me. She gives Phil a sideways glance.

“Just a look.”

“Oh, hey, no problem,” Dev says. “Bill, you don’t mind, do you? Bill’s got federal jurisdiction, but he brought me in since this is such a fresh specimen. I happened to be down in Port Townsend yesterday with another gray. Now I’m here.”

“Port Townsend?”

He frowns and nods slightly. “It’s my group that’s been studying these beachings. There’s another calf, but it was already badly decomposed and pretty chewed up by scavengers. We figure it’d been dead about three weeks.” He gestures over to the whale behind him and his face softens. “We’re lucky to have this one so soon.”

“It’s too bad it died,” Phil says.

“Well, that’s unfortunate, obviously. We think this calf died less than forty-eight hours ago.”

I nod.

“Have you seen any other grays out off the shore in the area recently? It’s not uncommon for a nursing mother to hang around for a while.

“No.”

The professor shrugs and says, “All right. Wish we could’ve gotten here sooner, when it was still alive. We might’ve been able to rescue it. Still, this is one of the better that we’ve had to work with.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, usually we aren’t able to get to a whale until after a considerable amount of time has already passed, after there’s been some decay. Plus, usually there’s a significant amount of damage, either from ship propellers or bows. And, of course, there’s always scavenging, as I said.”

I shudder.

“How old do you think she is?” Phil asks.

Doctor Yang clears his throat. “Well, we’re not positive about the gender just yet, son. But from the size we can make a reasonable guess about its age.” He consults the clipboard in Dev’s hands and says, “From our estimates, we think the calf is between four and six weeks old.”

“Four and six *weeks*?” I say. “That’s all?”

“Yes. It’s actually the youngest of the six we’ve already seen,” Dev says.

“I thought there were five? That’s what Mom said. And the newspaper, too.”

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“Yes, well, another was found just this morning. It was also in poor condition.” He and Doctor Yang exchange a look.

“And what do you think happened to her, Doctor Yang?” Phil asks, gesturing to the gray. I elbow him. “I mean *it*, the calf.”

“There’s no obvious physical trauma,” he answers. “We’ll run some tissue and blood analyses, carry out at least a partial necropsy. As I was telling the sheriff— your mother, Callista— given that it’s fully intact, we’re considering collecting the bones for display, though it would take a considerable amount of effort to accomplish that in this setting.”

“The university,” Dev says, speaking softly but firmly, “would greatly benefit from taking the lead on this study.”

I can’t be sure, but I sense he’s directing this last bit to Doctor Yang. It feels like they’re fighting over jurisdiction or something.

“And,” Dev continues, “the skeleton.”

“Skeleton?”

He nods. “We figure it’ll take at least a week, maybe two, to wrap things up here.”

And then I realize why Mom’s looking so unhappy. This is exactly the kind of thing that will rile Mister Galton and some of the other islanders up. They won’t want the researchers to put the bones in some museum far away.

I turn to Mom, but I can tell there’s nothing she can do about it.

“But, of course,” Dev says, smiling gently down at me, “whatever we do, you’ll be the one to get the credit for its discovery.”

I notice Mom’s jaw tighten. She doesn’t care about credit. Recognition of this sort will only bring unwelcome attention. But

K. J. Howe

Phil smiles and passes his hand through the air like he's reading a banner. "Callista Meyer," he says, "discoverer of bones. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

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