

The book cover features a teal background with a white cloud pattern at the bottom. Black leafy branches are positioned in the corners. The title 'Tea & Pelicans' is written in a white, elegant cursive font. The author's name 'DURI ROLVSSON' is printed in a black, clean, sans-serif font at the bottom.

Tea
&
Pelicans

DURI
ROLVSSON

Tea and Pelicans

By Duri Rolvsson

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Tea and Pelicans

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CHAPTER 1

My new residence shared Mira Lane with four silent houses and a tame pelican that I named Jorge. If anyone lived in the other houses, I never heard or saw them. It was wonderful.

Mira Lane received few visitors. Landscapers descended in organized stampedes on Mondays, machines buzzing and humming, to care for all properties but one. The house nearest mine had a single gardener, an old man with an obscure accent, who prowled its jungle-like grounds with various pruners and saws at all hours of every day. Aside from these people, a postman came around on weekdays. They were all very nice and avoidable.

I spent my time working from home as a professional translator, reading, and going for walks with Jorge. No matter how many times the wildlife protection society tried to return him to the coast, Jorge reappeared the next day to join me for an amble at sunrise.

One Saturday morning after my walk, I sat at my desk in the sunroom to translate a document ahead of schedule when my bestfriend, Alex Baker, burst through the backdoor.

Startled, I jumped to my feet.

Wheezing and gasping, Alex doubled over with hands on knees. "David," he rasped, looking up at me. "It's Edna."

Edna Tromello was another friend of mine. Well, to be honest, Edna was Alex's friend from university and mine by association. They were both adventurer types, however she had the tendency to bear down on new endeavors and people with neither warning nor empathy, like a gleeful meteor.

I crossed the room to Alex as he coughed spasmodically.

He said, “She attacked--.”

“She attacked someone?”

It wasn’t difficult to imagine.

“No, she...” He shook his head. “She’s *b-been* attacked!”

Worst case scenarios careened through my mind. “Did the attacker survive?!”

My alarm encouraged him to calm down. “Sorry, that’s still not the word,” he said, with a tense, apologetic smile.

“Let me catch my breath.” He inhaled and exhaled deeply.

“She wasn’t ‘attacked’ so much as ‘eaten’.”

I frowned. “She’s eaten what?”

“She’s *been* eaten.”

“Eaten by...?”

“Bears.”

I either heard him incorrectly or something horrific, and probably related to karma, had transpired.

CHAPTER 2

Alex begged me not to call the authorities, not yet. Leaning against my desk, I resigned myself to listen as my pacing friend recounted the morning's events.

"I ran into Edna," he began, "as she was on her way to the beach for the weekend. She invited me along, as she does, and I proposed we invite you."

A common occurrence. Without Alex's persistence and compassion, I would've been a shut-in throughout university and likely to this day.

"We took the bus to the corner and then walked onto the lane. That's when we heard music coming from the first house on the right."

"The yellow one?"

He nodded. "The curtains were drawn back from the front windows."

So someone lives there after all, I thought.

"It was rude, I know, but we were curious so we snuck up and looked inside." He took a steady breath. "David, there were bears. In button ups and sundresses mingling a-and dancing to music. One was reading a book. The reading bear spotted us and alerted the others, then the whole room of furry faces turned toward us with smiles of pointed teeth."

"That's when you ran? I assume you ran."

"Oh I *sprinted*. Edna's swift on her feet so I didn't need to check if she was with me. A half mile later, I didn't hear any raging bears so I figured it was safe and looked back..." He raked agitated fingers through his dark hair. "Edna was gone. I didn't see a single living thi---no, that's a lie. I saw your

pelican."

Ah, Jorge.

He frowned. "As well as the pathologically dedicated gardener from next door. He was watching me from the vincas again."

Ah, the gardener whose name I still didn't know.

If that gardener visited once a week, he wouldn't have been so strange but he was out there every day. And when I couldn't see him, I could hear him whistling. He was always out there. Always.

"Did he see where she went?"

"I asked him and he said something along the lines of '*She's taken 'to the 'era house.*' And, well, you know his accent. He repeated it twice and I still wasn't positive about what I heard so I asked again."

"And?"

"He yelled and threw sticks and a hand shovel at me," he shrugged, adding, "but whatever, I needed an answer."

"Did you get one?"

The confusion on Alex's face intensified. "His reply sounded like '*She's 'ith th' 'eras so If y' came 'is way 'ith lunch plans, y' may 'ell cancel 'em, 'cause she 's 'ready eaten.*'"

I scowled. "Was he being cryptic?"

"I was so frustrated that I actually accused him of that. Again, rude..." He paused to quash his temper. "And then he shouted at me '*Eaten! Eaten! Your friend is EATEN!*'"

Who would take that story seriously? Certainly not the authorities.

Alex scratched beads of sweat from his forehead. "I didn't know what to think. I ran the rest of the way here."

CHAPTER 3

We drove my green coupe to the lemon-yellow two-story building near the lane's entrance. It glared at us keenly with reflected morning sunshine.

Once out of the car, Alex raced up the long paved path to the front door. I trailed warily behind him, scanning every frothy mound of fountain grass, sculpted shrub, and angular hedge, imagining a huge furry face skulking behind all of them.

Alex pounded on the door with a fist.

The house looked as it always did, if not a little less inviting. Curtains hung drawn in every window. I heard no music aside from birds' songs. The longer we waited, the more anxious I became about being caught unaware by a bear.

I'm scared to find the things we're looking for. I scoffed under my breath. *Leave it to Edna to drag us into these situations.*

Alex pounded the door once more. "It wasn't closed up like this," he said. "They must've gone somewhere."

I glanced down the lane toward the next house, barely visible around the bend. "We could enlist one of the neighbors' help," I said. "When I moved in, my realtor told me everyone on Mira Lane knows each other."

Alex looked, too. "Let's get answers then."

* * * *

The second house resembled a smog-gray brick with no windows. It sulked like a depressed raincloud on a featureless

landscape where clover grew wild in sprawling patches among a meadow of grass.

Reaching the porch, Alex punched the doorbell. Instead of a quaint chime, a sound exploded like a boulder obliterating a gong. The noise spooked us so badly that Alex flinched and I stumbled backward off the porch. The front door shifted open a couple of inches. It was dark inside.

"Alex," I said. "The door!"

Alex straightened his coat as I rejoined him, clearing my throat.

Someone peeked out at us with a single enormous, protruding eye. "What do you want?"

"Good afternoon." My voice was hoarse with surprise. "My name is David Williams. I moved into one of the houses down the lane about six months ago." The eye rivaled the size of my face. It was impossible not to stare. "Are you the homeowner?"

"I'm the housekeeper."

"Have you worked here long?"

"I've lived with my employer, Mr. Whitney, since he moved in twenty years ago."

Ah, good. "You know the neighbors then?"

"Everyone knows the neighbors."

"Do you..." Insecure about what to say, I blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Do you know if the occupants of the yellow house own any pet bears?"

"DISGUSTING!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you have human pets, you barbarian?!"

Seeing me at a loss for words, Alex stepped in. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand how that's the same. Humans owning bears versus humans owning humans, I mean."

The eye widened. "Because humans don't live in that

house,” it said pointedly. “Bears do.”

CHAPTER 4

"If there's nothing else," said the housekeeper, "then have a good day."

Alex's hand shot out, stopping the door from closing. "Our friend is missing."

The housekeeper hesitated.

Alex said quickly, "She disappeared around the yellow house and we're wondering, in your opinion, is there a possibility that our friend has been eaten?"

"Eaten?"

"Yes."

"By what exactly?"

"By, well, by the bears."

"HOW DARE YOU!"

"That's a 'no' then...."

"Of course it's a no! They're vegan! Everybody knows that!"

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know..."

Relief touched my nerves. *If Alex misunderstood the gardener, which is a mistake anyone could've made, then there's a chance Edna's fine and roaming around somewhere.*

I waited until Alex finished apologizing. "Could our friend have gone with the bears to wherever they are now since they aren't home?"

The eye looked at me. "Possibly, yes. Probably, no. The bears are outgoing around friends, family, and those connected to their professional lives but shy around outsiders in general. It'd be a miracle if they warmed up to your friend quickly enough to be showing her around. As for where they

might be, I haven't spoken to them since you bought Ms. Lydia's house, so I'm sorry but I don't know." A pause. "But Mr. Whitney might have an idea. Would you like to talk to him?"

I cringed at the prospect of barging into a stranger's home.

Alex said gratefully, "That would be terrific."

The eye disappeared before I could propose something less intrusive and the door swung inward, revealing an unlit foyer. Alex entered without hesitation and I followed.

The door closed behind us, plunging us into near total darkness. When my eyes adjusted, I perceived an unexpected silhouette; a hulking rectangular figure, head and shoulders taller than me and as wide as the door, stood so motionless that I thought I was looking at a bookcase by mistake.

The silhouette snorted softly. "This way."

He led us forward through a long hallway. Seconds elapsed into minutes. Five minutes. Ten. The housekeeper stopped abruptly and I bumped into his back, which felt like a wall of fine fur on my face, emanating the sweet earthy scent of fresh hay.

He moved away. "Stay there, please."

A metal cabinet squeaked open and clanged shut. A thick nylon-lined vest, clearly a life preserver, was shoved into my hands.

"Put these on," said the housekeeper.

The rustle of clothes beside me indicated Alex's obedience. Uncertain, I shrugged into my life preserver as well, feeling for the clasps and clipping the last strap in place as a doorway opened close by, blinding us with daylight. Across the threshold heaved the shifting, living surface of an open ocean.

CHAPTER 5

A school of sardines broke the ocean's surface in a flurry of roiling white water. Large seabirds dove hungrily on the school, sharks swarmed without mercy, and dolphins devoured the fish until no trace remained. Seagulls soared on a strong wind. A whale's spout sprayed a heart-shaped puff.

Straight ahead a small island bristled with palm trees against a cloudless azure sky. According to the housekeeper, that island was our destination if we wanted to speak to the homeowner, Mr. Whitney.

An empty canoe drifted within reach of the door with a pair of paddles inside. At the housekeeper's instruction, Alex crouched and grabbed the watercraft to steady it for me to climb in.

I didn't climb in. I stood there dumbly. In fact, I reeled a little, straining to wrap my mind around recent developments.

Alex looked at me expectantly. "David."

I considered the canoe. "Hm?"

"Get in."

I looked at him. "What?"

He nodded to the canoe. "Get in."

So I did.

Securely seated, I moved to return the favor however, by the time I looked back, Alex had already hopped nimbly onto the stern seat and was shoving us off.

The ocean, obviously not a backyard swimming pool, confused me. The sun, beating down from directly overhead first thing in the morning, confused me. I tried not to think about the bears because that confused me, too. Thinking about

Edna gave me the urge to wipe my face however the act of paddling, which required both hands, prevented me from doing so.

“Look at us.” Alex chuckled wryly. “We’re sitting in a canoe on an ocean inside of a house.”

My arms weren't made for paddle sports. “We have excellent imaginations,” I grunted.

His grin was audible. “We don’t have to go far to fish anymore.”

Oh, Alex.

The island offered no place for a landing. Jagged stones piled high at the waterline on all sides, forbidding safe exit onto any part of the shore. We circled the small island twice to be sure. My arms were starting to ache.

Alex sighed with annoyance. "There must be a way onto it."

Waves splashed over the lowest stones around the island incessantly, and every so often a larger swell crashed over the entire barrier.

I said over my shoulder, "We could go back and ask the housekeeper."

"Maybe I can help you!" said a little girl's bubbly voice.

I sat quietly for a moment.

"Did you hear that?" I said.

"I did," whispered Alex.

The voice called out again. "Over here!"

Where? I looked over open water.

Alex yelped with excitement as a whale spout blasted skyward in a heart-shape mist a few yards off our starboard side. A gray whale poked her head above water to get a look at us.

"Hello!" said the whale. "Are you the new neighbor?"

I blinked. "I am." I probably wasn't as shocked as I

should've been. "My name is David. This is Alex."

Alex leaned elbows on his knees, paddle across his lap, smiling at the sea mammal. "Good morning, Beauty. What's your name?"

The whale's eyes were warm and brown. "My name is Belinda. Welcome to Mira Lane!" She gasped. "Am I one of the last ones to welcome you? Ooooh noooo, I'm the worst!"

"No, no, you're the first," I said. "Thank you."

"Wuh! Really?! Wait, what about Teddy? Didn't he say hi?"

"Who?" I looked back at Alex who shrugged.

Belinda wailed and sank out of sight before resurfacing. "He's not out there anymore? Did... did he leave? Hey, I noticed you guys are trying to land on the island. You can't do that right now or you'll get hurt."

"Is Mr. Whitney on the island?" Alex looked at the rocks. "We came to talk to him."

My stomach churned as our canoe bobbed on the waves. "His housekeeper invited us in."

"The housekeeper's name is Dawa. He's super cool. He's read so many books that everything he says makes your brain happy-- but that's not why you're here. Focus, Belindaaa!" She giggled, rolling over mildly. "You can talk to Mr. Whitney from your boat. It's easier than you think. Just yell."

Alex looked at the rocks. "Will he be able to hear us?"

The whale repositioned her scar-speckled bulk facing the island with another refreshing burst from her spout. "Yup, that's all you have to do. Here, stick close to me so you don't drift while you talk."

Her large body nudged gently against the canoe. Alex used his paddle to keep us close to her. I did the same.

"Okay," she coached, "Now go ahead and say hello!"

CHAPTER 6

“Good morning, Mr. Whitney!” I shouted at the island. “Can you hear me? My name is David Williams! We haven't met before, but I'm your new neighbor! Dawa let us in! I have some questions ab... about the bears!”

Seagulls scattered and aquatic life retreated to the depths, excluding Belinda who stayed as our anchor. A low hum quivered through the air. It was subtle at first but grew louder.

I muttered, "What is that?"

“Over there.” Alex pointed toward the horizon a few degrees to the left of the island.

From miles away, a distinct line of small white peaks advanced toward us across the dark blue ocean in the same way a wall of rain can be observed advancing on a lake. As I watched, the phenomena closed the distance in seconds and, in a flash, a brutal wall of straight-line winds blasted through the island's palms, popping my ears, nearly thrashing us both overboard. I ducked low, holding tightly to the paddle that moored us to Belinda with a white-knuckled grip.

“My neighbor?” A voice quaked through the atmosphere and reverberated in my bones like sentient thunder.

“Yes, sir!” I screamed against the roar of the wind. Bits of leaves and sand stung my cheeks despite my ducked head. I squeezed my eyes shut to protect them. “We would like a word, please!”

The wind paused for a surreal breath and then changed course, tearing toward the island from every direction. Birds, fronds, water, and dirt were ripped toward the speck of land and launched straight up into the empty, endless sky---faster, faster, and faster! The howl was incredible! I doubled over in

my seat, braced against airborne debris, hoping Alex's grip on his paddle was stalwart enough to keep us anchored to Belinda, because, despite my effort, mine was useless.

All at once, the wind broke into an uncanny stillness. The air was icy, the water like glass. Deafening noiselessness. Goosebumps covered my skin and my windblown hair prickled, standing on end. I managed to hang on to my paddle at least.

A thin voice whispered as if behind my ear. "David Williams?"

I flinched, losing my paddle overboard. "Y-Yes, sir. Good morning." Eyes wide, I saw no one but Alex and Belinda. My heart hammered. "Mr. Whitney? How--how are you doing today?"

Water splashed faintly outside of my field of vision as Alex retrieved my paddle.

"I'm well, thank you." The voice moved as if disembodied, drifting to echo from the palms. "You're the new owner of the house with the brick face, aren't you?"

"That's correct, sir."

"I apologize for not extending a welcome when you moved in. I don't suppose the other neighbors did either. A sorry lot we are, falling back into bad habits like this... Teddy said hello at least, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, I don't know who that is."

Fonds jittered. "This past year can't have been easy for him but..." The trunks of several trees groaned one after another as if under strain enough to snap, despite no external pressure or visible bending. "I didn't think he would leave."

Silence swept across the island. And then it felt as if every shred of organic matter on it turned to study me.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Williams?"

CHAPTER 7

The answer spilled from my mouth without forethought. “A friend of ours ran into the bears and Dawa implied the possibility she may have gone with them somewhere and we’re hoping you could tell us where we can find them when they aren’t home!”

I said what I needed to. I was proud of myself, a would-be shut-in bookworm, for not stumbling on a single one of those words under those conditions. Proud indeed.

Alex leaned forward to pat my back approvingly with his fingertips.

He said to Whitney, “The friend we’re looking for is easily distracted and likes meeting new people!”

The island hummed. “Yes, the bears are impressively distracting once they warm up to you. Let me think... They used to play in the river through the forest behind our houses whenever they had a free moment, with inner tubes and rope swings. Ah but that was when their youngest cub was a few years old.

“They also enjoy hiking the trails, there are several, oh dear but that was when the cubs switched schools. Hrm... Basketball on their backyard court? No, that was when the cubs were teens and made formidable teams with their parents, aunts, and uncles... But that was years ago. Years ago.”

“What about dancing?” said Alex. “We saw, er... what about dancing?”

“They’ve always loved dancing. But that hobby doesn’t mark time well. Painting? Singing... Disc frisbee! Blast, their

hobbies change so frequently their newest source of fun might be something completely different by now...”

Mr. Whitney’s description of the bears matched Edna’s exhausting personality exactly.

Alex laughed sympathetically. “That’s quite all right.”

Mr. Whitney sighed. “Lydia never would’ve let me fall out of the loop like this,” he said wistfully. “Lydia was a beacon of genius who used to live around here. Before her, we on Mira Lane were recluses. We required diligent coaxing and patience to remove us from our own heads and, for two decades, she inspired us to see and dream beyond ourselves.

“Since her passing, I’ve begun clinging to the comfort of isolation. I know it isn’t good for me. I know. But without her... It’s difficult for someone like me... Difficult...”

Thunder growled in the distance. A caliginous line of clouds blackened the horizon to my left. Waves returned somewhat, throwing up little white peaks.

“Ahh, how I miss her tea blends! None of us ever learned the recipes. Not even Teddy, her fiance. No one ever thought to ask. I’m sorry Mr. Williams...” A robust breeze reenergized the oceanscape. “But I’m afraid I won’t be any help regarding your friend. Try asking the owners of the house that keeps the gardener with the unintelligible speech. They’re research botanists and therefore professional observers. They might be more helpful.”

Alex handed my paddle to me over my shoulder. “Thank you, Mr. Whitney.”

Belinda the whale sank and pulled away from our canoe, setting us free, but swam parallel with us as we paddled back toward the door.

“Everybody misses Lydia,” she said, “but I miss her the most. We went on the craziest adventures our whole lives because that’s what ya do, go on crazy adventures! Did you

know she sailed around the world twice? I almost kept up with her one of those times, it was so haaard, oh my gosh, I was so hungryyy! We explored separately, too, and then swapped stories about everything we did and saw like a contest to see who was the best adventurer! We had so much fun! But she never wrote down her stories, just like her tea recipes... Sometimes Mr. Whitney cries when Dawa reminds him he can't have her tea."

"Something as simple as tea," reflected Alex.

I paddled more diligently, striving not to envision the haunting sight and sounds of a weeping island.

A wave washed over Belinda's back. "Some days I get scared when I can't remember parts of her stories. I wish I could write everything down but I can't because I can't write. Those times make me wanna cry, too."

My hand itched to hold a pen.

"Belinda," said Alex kindly, "David could transcribe those stories for you. It's sort of what he does."

Belinda gasped. "Really?!"

Thank you, Alex. "I'd love to. I'll bring something to take notes with next time I see you."

The gray whale swam away from us, dove deep, and then breached.

The doorframe of our exit hovered at an awkward height above the water. Alex held the boat steady once more while I crawled in the hallway on my belly; once I was safely inside, Alex vaulted through athletically, kicking the canoe adrift as we had found it.

The spirited ocean scene revived in an instant. Noisy seagulls filled the air; dolphins romped; wispy clouds stretched high in the sky. No trace of storm clouds remained.

The door shut, dropping Alex and I into darkness. We surrendered our life preservers to Dawa, the bookcase-like

silhouette who I had forgotten to get a better look at when we had light. The metal cabinet squeaked open and clanged shut.

Dawa said, “To get to the front door, walk straight through this hallway. I’ll be right behind you.”

Here we go again, I thought. *The long walk through a small house.*

Alex led the way.

Four paces later a doorway opened and Dawa shoved us through it, locking us out. Alex and I found ourselves on the front porch of the depressed grey house where early morning sunshine served as a mind-bending contrast to the noontime sun we moments ago experienced. Nearby, Jorge looked our way, wading through wild clover.

“To the botanists’?” I said.

Alex rubbed his eyes. “To the botanists’.”

CHAPTER 8

An unlocked iron gate admitted us onto the property belonging to the botanists.

We traced a path of stepping stones wreathed in creeping vegetation up to a pillared front porch. The porch was a vision. Vines crowned the entire affair, dripping with red trumpet flowers and mountainous bougainvillea billowed, overarching it all. Strangeness aside, the gardener proved a model of his profession.

When Alex rang the bell, a square speaker beside the door clicked on and a female voice answered, “Hello?”

I explained who we were and our situation.

A young woman answered the door promptly. She was in her late-teens, smartly but casually dressed with a state-of-the-art phone in her hand.

She showed us to a formal sitting room with large frosted windows, rich hardwood floors, pale forest green walls, and ergonomic honey-gold furniture. Alex and I were told to sit and wait while she announced our presence to her parents.

Once we were alone, Alex chuckled sheepishly. “I half expected something weird to happen when we walked in.”

So did I.

The waiting area employed natural lighting superbly. The light, together with the room’s warm hues of brown and green, gave the impression of the sun’s rays filtering down through a rainforest’s canopy. White shelves lined the walls along the ceiling, bearing stylish potted succulents at intervals. Several end tables arranged artfully throughout the sitting area, and bore several as well.

A faint sound hissed on the edge of my hearing---it

resembled a whistle or, at instances, a familiar tune I couldn't place. I rubbed my ears vainly to dispel it when a partly open door grabbed my eye. Through it I saw a hand towel hanging on a ring beside a sink, giving me an idea.

I stood. "I'll be right back." I pointed when Alex looked puzzled. "There's a restroom. I'll be quick."

The restroom had baby blue walls and white tile floors. A display of foliage stretched from floor to ceiling in the corner opposite the toilet. The central plant was a colossal peace lily framed by assorted ferns, white butterfly-shaped leaves, and curly little creepers. Long windows lined the ceiling on one wall to let in natural light.

The whistling in my ears screeched louder in the tiled room as I washed my face in the sink. I tried everything I could think of to get rid of it, including blowing my nose to pop my ears.

I leaned on the sink with both hands. *This isn't working.*

Turning my head, I realized the sound wasn't in my ear but came from a specific direction. From the garden display.

I straightened. "That's curious, isn't it?"

Upon inspection, each plant had its own tinkle, jingle, or held a musical key. The lily emitted the loudest sound.

"So you noticed me," cooed the lily. "How cute."

CHAPTER 9

A cacophony of chirping and whistling, mimicking birds and insects, confronted me in a musical uproar. Sweat breaking out on my forehead, I searched for a speaker system but uncovered none, leaving the last place the voice could've come from was the flora itself.

"I will not introduce myself," said the lily, "not because I don't have a name, because I do, but because I don't like you, and I'll tell you why."

The lily, unaffected by my shocked state, launched into a tirade:

"For millions of years, everything was fine until you selfish apes decided you were gods and now everything on Earth is paying for it. You judge, use, and destroy at your convenience. Just look at what you've done to the planet! Your own home! Filthy with your filth! Making it unlivable for the rest of us-- and for you, too! How does that make sense?!

"The planet thrived before you and will again once you're gone! You... Rumor has it you're the quiet sort. Hmmm, I think I can explain our plan to you without endangering it. I've heard that if humans publicly announce plans to raze human environments, then quiet sorts don't resist. I don't understand it myself, but my interest is piqued. I will test this theory. Not that you could stop us anyway.

"Our plan! Once I tell you, you can't even warn anyone anyway. Know why? The humans would laugh at you! Land animals would laugh! Sea creatures laugh! Flying things laugh at everything anyway, but they'd laugh as well!

"But-- enough about laughing-- on to our plan! Since you

humans closed your ears to reason, we've closed our stomas to your survival. We'll hasten the warming of the atmosphere, boiling the oceans, letting the weather wipe you from the continents. We plants will disperse our seeds, adapt through the generations, we'll bury our roots into the planet's heart if we must, and our kind will be revived after the surface is rid of its human pestilence.

"Of course this can be prevented. The Earth can be saved and animals with it. We plants know this because we know the cure. We know a way to attain coexistence between humans and plants in a way that the Earth herself can thrive---but we won't share it with you. Well, once we wanted to share it with humans, we tried to. The humans of Mira Lane know the best out of anyone. They listened to us and gave us hope. But now-- forget it! We give up! You're on your own!

"What's that noise? I hear the young one coming back, you should go. Go, and when you see a pretty flower smiling at you, know it's a devil's grin of revenge that awaits the day that you'll collect your just desserts! Goodbye!"

Feeling whiplashed, I wandered back to the sitting room where Alex and the teen waited for me.

The young lady agreed to take us to meet her scientist parents. If she said anything more than that, I missed it because I was too focused on not looking at a pair of dainty succulent rosettes on the end table to my right.

CHAPTER 10

The teen took us into a glass elevator with rose-gold machinery that glistened as the compartment descended. Transparent walls afforded us a cross section view of the building's floors. It was interesting, and a welcomed diversion from the round dish that hung from the compartment's ceiling, overflowing with tendrils of variegated ivy.

The elevator dropped two floors before floating to a stop. We exited into the cool, fresh air of a vast underground greenhouse where every surface was alive with the exception of a vaulted glass ceiling through which sunlight flooded.

A concrete path slithered through a maze of flora of every shape and color; uneven, stony walls hid behind thick blankets of vines and lichen; from quaint hooded flowers to gargantuan tropical plants with broad rubbery leaves; an ethereal staircase of mushroom caps grew around a massive tree trunk. As I marveled, I painstakingly prevented any part of me from touching any part of them.

Along the farthest wall, a fleet of laboratory benches formed neat rows on a cement patio. Cupboards with glass doors displayed armies of Erlenmeyer flasks, pipettes, boxes of heavy steel clamps, test tubes and racks, several Bunsen burners, and hotplates. Shelves upon shelves boasted every sized beaker in existence. To the right of it all sat a decrepit round café table with two chairs as if they had been thrown in as an afterthought.

At one of the benches, a man and woman in lab coats, thick rubber gloves, and anti-fog protective goggles jabbered back and forth, laughing and taking turns bending over a microscope.

“Mom! Dad!” barked the teen as we reached the patio.
“The neighbor is here!”

Glancing over their shoulders, the man and woman appeared baffled.

“I told you we had guests like five minutes ago.” The teen turned impatiently. “That’s Mr. Williams, that’s Mr. Baker, I’m going back upstairs!”

Sighing, the woman dimpled as though Alex and I were adorably stupid children. “Now that they’re here, I suppose we have no choice.” She extended a yellow gloved hand to Alex. “Hello, I’m Dr. Margaret Zwei and this—”

“*Darling.*” Her husband removed his gloves emphatically.

“Oh, shoot, I’m sorry.” She stripped the gloves from her hands and shook Alex’s hand.

Her husband chuckled. “We’ve been handling some potent toxic residue. It would be unkind to induce toxic paraplegia to the new resident during his first visit, yes? Haha! My name is Dr. Hilmar Zwei and it’s very nice to finally meet you. I apologize for not making timely introductions although I assume you were properly greeted by *someone* when you first moved in.”

“Teddy greeted him, of course!” Margaret laughed. “Who else?”

Hilmar pat my arm. “He made you feel welcome? That’s good, I’m glad.”

“Er, no, sir,” I said. “I haven’t met anyone until today and not anyone named Teddy.”

Hilmar’s brows knit. A disquieted smile. “How is that possible?”

Margaret giggled nervously. “Well, that’s strange. Hahaha! Maybe he went traveling again, how fun!”

“No,” said Hilmar firmly, checking his wife’s theories. “He made a promise to Lydia.”

“But,” Margaret scoffed lightly, “She’s been gone for a year, dear. He needs to live his life. To be free as a--.”

Hilmar disagreed. “Ted would rather die than break his word to her. Where would he go without her? When he gave his word? Nowhere! He wouldn’t leave, but he’s gone? Did he die?! Did his broken heart kill him?” He shook a finger high overhead. “It’s impossible! I can’t believe this. Call the police! Have them look for his body because he wouldn’t leave!”

Hilmar withdrew from us to rummage through a cupboard of small jars with black dropper tops.

Margaret watched her husband for a moment before turning to us. “Teddy was engaged to the woman who used to live in your house, David. She’s dead now. They were quite a pair. Always going on about family and home and making promises to each other to preserve that or something.” She shrugged. “They never had any children and had no extended family, so I don’t really get it. On the plus side, she was a fantastic facilitator and then she met Teddy, they both paved the way for a lane of thinkers to evolve in a prestigious symposium. I’ve never experienced more thrilling debate nights.”

Hilmar angrily assembled a glass fractional distillation apparatus. “And she made great tea!”

Margaret nodded. “Divine tea. She never shared the recipes but we figured them through trial and error.”

“So many foul errors!” Hilmar knocked a heavy steel clamp to the floor. “Oops.”

Lydia’s tea recipes. I felt a pang for Belinda and the others. *This whole time a soothing cup of tea had been so close.*

Alex changed the subject assertively, emphasizing the reason for our visit.

Margaret was unimpressed and didn't hide it. "The bears enjoy every hobby known to man, they could be anywhere. And Mr. Whitney, no, he wouldn't know what happens beyond his nose. That poor man defaults to being self contained in a crippling way."

Hilmar inspected and mounted a round-bottom flask.

"Whitney wasn't always an island," he said. "In his youth he was a part of a continent but with age he withdrew into being an isle. Lydia's talents helped Whitney change, helped him improve, even became a peninsula once. Since she died, Whitney is backsliding... We all are... So much progress lost... and where is Teddy?" He paused to compose himself. "We suffer without Lydia... this is the wrong flask..."

I interjected. "About the bears and our friend, though. Do you have any idea--."

"No," said the scientists in unison.

Margaret spread her hands. "We don't get out enough to care anymore."

"I care," snorted Hilmar. "You hide in here as an excuse."

Margaret shrugged. "We can ask the plants, if you'd like. All plants in a given region talk to each other constantly so they might know."

Like a teacher in an auditorium, she addressed the living room and a ruckus of sounds and voices shouted back.

I regret not warning Alex. *What is his face trying to do right now?*

Listening and nodding, Margaret thanked her specimens and happily informed us that the plants didn't care either. For useful information, Hilmar recommended we consult the last homeowner on the lane.

CHAPTER 11

I rushed out the front gate to escape the flowery whispers first and waited a few minutes for Alex to catch up. He pushed through the gate, joining me with exaggerated placidity.

Clearing his throat, he straightened his coat, twice. “That was different.”

Different? That’s it? “I have basil and parsley growing in my kitchen window!”

“Are you treating them well or will you need to sleep with one eye open?”

“How can you joke?!”

A twig snapped, startling us out of our skin. But it was Jorge. We sighed gustily with relief as the pelican waddled over to loiter around our feet.

Sucking in air, Alex faced me. “The last house.”

We ambled at the leisurely pace of our pelican until we reached our next stop. The fourth house was an ordinary white house with a wraparound porch and charcoal gabled roof, fringed by stately shrubbery. Coaxing Jorge to stay behind, we jogged up a broad path to the house where we were confronted by three options: steps, a wheelchair ramp, and a blue slide being fed by a little sprinkler.

Beside the door an elegant sign read:

“THERAPIST. Welcome to the office of Dr. Kenneth Hill. Please inform the receptionist of your arrival and take a seat.”

We chose the steps, though Alex’s grin suggested the

water slide amused him more even as its size better was suited for toddlers.

Alex opened the door for me. “I pass this house every time I come over and I had no idea your neighbor ran a therapy practice out of his home.”

“He needs a sign on the curb.”

Burgundy and dark green carpet padded the lobby floor beneath chic armchairs and magazine racks. Watercolor paintings of seashells, coastlines and reefs bedecked coral-pink walls. Upon our entry, a woman in medical scrubs looked up over a counter labeled ‘reception.’ Every detail met my expectations except that several chairs were occupied by fish.

A red snapper bobbed in a seat by the door, gaping at us over an open mystery novel as we walked in. A sockeye salmon wearing reading glasses perused a camping editorial as it slumped casually near two water fountains---one briny, the other odorless---that flowed continuously.

I smiled stiffly at the red snapper when I accidentally met its ruby eyes.

Alex exchanged quiet words with the receptionist and then we shrunk into a couple of seats by the door.

From a corner chair, an albacore tuna hoisted its bulk to stand on its tail, looming as tall as the ceiling. It shuffled to the counter where it babbled at the receptionist who smiled. The tuna then turned to the briny water fountain and bent slowly, slowly, slowly, and plunged its face into the running water, snapping and gurgling hungrily.

Realizing my mouth was hanging open, I shut it.

The tuna straightened with impeccable balance and maneuvered back to its chair where it collapsed like a felled tree.

The receptionist summoned us to speak with the doctor.

CHAPTER 12

The receptionist sent Alex and I down a cozy yet imposing hallway of closed doors and seashell art with instructions to take a left at the end. Through the only open door, a man looked up from a large desk in a frigid office with book-paved walls.

“Goodmorning!” The man rose and extended a hand.

He had a lean build, greying brown hair and sharp hazel eyes. He wore a periwinkle blue sweater over a white-and-gold plaid collared shirt; a plain pin secured his dark blue tie.

“I’m Dr. Mackenzie Hill. Welcome! Please have a seat.”

Alex and I sank into the heavy arm chairs opposite the desk as the therapist resumed his seat.

Dr. Hill chuckled. “I keep a busy schedule and lately I don’t do much socializing unless forced. I’m told you two are David Williams and Alex Baker, but only one of you is a neighbor.”

I liked him. “I am.”

“David.” Dr. Hill beamed. “Good to finally meet you. I understand you’re curious about the Perera family.”

I didn’t recognize the name which the doctor read from my face.

He added, “From the yellow house.”

The bears live in the yellow house. They’re Pereras. A frown of astonishment clouded my brow. The whole morning, after learning they were my neighbors, I never asked anyone who they were. That’s pretty basic, especially since we’re looking for them. I should’ve asked, but I didn’t. Why didn’t I?

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. To escape the moment, I said quickly, "I hope you can help us."

"I'd be happy to." Hands clasped on the desk in front of him, the therapist looked in his element. "Ask away."

I explained everything once again and relayed our experiences up until that point. When I finished, Dr. Hill rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"So it sounds like your friend Edna has made an unexpected detour while already on an unexpected detour with Mr. Baker, and that bothers you."

You could say that. "Yes."

"Basically," said Alex.

"Since she has the weekend free to do as she pleases and right now she is off doing as she pleases, which is her prerogative, has it occurred to you that she will contact you and/or return at her convenience and not yours? Or is it typical of your relationship for you to assume things occurring beyond your control are unacceptable no matter how benign?"

I blinked, speechless.

Glancing at me, Alex smiled warily at the therapist. "No offense to David's neighbors, but we don't know any of you and, while I don't mind trusting *my* life to strangers, I'm less eager to do so when it comes to my friends. We're searching for Edna because, when she disappeared, we weren't sure what happened. We won't know what actually happened until we find her. And, until then, I can't honestly place 100% faith in reports that I haven't verified from sources I'm unfamiliar with. We're being thorough, not controlling."

I didn't know what else to add.

Dr. Hill's smile widened.

Alex's knee started twitching. "I can't read your face."

"I know," said Dr. Hill.

CHAPTER 13

Dr. Hill sat back. “I’m sorry for sounding confrontational,” he said. “Sometimes a little push helps people realize things about themselves. If the Pereras aren’t home at this time on a Saturday morning, then they’ve gone for a walk outside the lane. They’re usually gone for about an hour. They meander, take pictures of flowers, and sometimes go down to the shops for brunch. If Edna is with them, she’s probably already had brunch, too. That would be my best guess. Has your friend been gone an hour yet?”

I looked up at the wall clock and Alex at his watch.

“Then again, I am a stranger, so take from it what you will.”

Alex said nothing.

A picture frame on a shelf below the wall clock displayed a photo of Dr. Hill and a woman in outdoor clothes and straw hats posing with about thirty trout while shin-deep in a river. Every face in the picture shone.

Dr. Hill noticed my interest. “You’re wondering about the fish.”

“Do a lot of fish need therapy?”

“Fish are intelligent creatures with a phenomenal affinity for poetry, music and color theory. For centuries they’ve tried to communicate with us which has typically resulted in them having the flesh stripped from their bones and cooked. They’re deemed ‘incommunicable’ by outdated human standards. Have you heard of the Complementary Creature Act?”

Alex admitted he had.

The Complementary Creature Act enabled animals from

any species to take an Integration Exam that grants a specialized passport to participate in every aspect of the human world. To pass, candidates must demonstrate effective communication, critical thinking, and algebraic skills.

“The entire Perera family, you may be interested to know, passed the exam with flying colors.” Dr. Hill fiddled with a stress ball that looked like a sea urchin. “Mr. Perera is a prominent painter, his wife an epidemiologist.”

Alex jabbed a thumb at the trout picture. “Do fish...?”

He nodded. “Fish sit for the exam all the time.”

“That’s awesome!”

“And fail miserably. At the conclusion of each test, each applicant must scale a fence. Fish clearly cannot and leave the testing site with obliterated self-esteem. I help restore their sense of self worth and direct them toward other avenues by which to reach their career and life goals. My colleagues and I have begun a petition to change the tree-climbing portion of the exam, describing it as discriminatory, and our efforts are gaining traction. Would you be interested in signing it?”

Next we talked about me and about how I selected my new house. I talked a lot. It was bizarre. Even Alex wondered why and how I was still talking. We discussed the petition a little more; it only made sense to sign. We ruefully concluded that Edna would return on her own, thanked the therapist, and committed to not take up any more of his time.

“Dr. Hill.” I stopped at the door. “One last thing.”

Opening a day planner, he looked up.

“Who’s Teddy?”

Dr. Hill offered a puzzled smile. “He would’ve been the first person you...” A troubling idea visibly crossed his mind. “You haven’t met him, have you?”

Already in the hallway, Alex stuck his head back in the room.

Dr. Hill looked as if he didn't know what to do with his day planner. Close it, leave it open, write something, put it away.

"Teddy is an accomplished pilot, sailor, and overall trekker which is how he met Lydia. Better than anyone else, he supported her far fetched dream of living completely both for herself as an adventurer and for the betterment of humanity, making her into somewhat of a legend."

At length he continued, "Since her passing, in my grief, I've made excuses to focus on myself and my professional responsibilities and became comfortable letting time slip away. I suppose I let myself believe that no one needed help since no one asked for any and continued to keep my distance, convincing myself I was respecting their emotions when I may have simply been giving in to mine. Because it was easier."

Alex cleared his throat. "I realize this is a sensitive subject for everyone but can you tell us more about Lydia? We know she was a neighbor who passed away about a year ago who made great tea and liked sailing."

"That's a gross caricature," snorted Dr. Hill. "She was someone with the emotional intelligence to recognize the strings that connect the most conflicting personalities and disciplines while simultaneously inspiring individuals to cultivate their passions and dreams into ambitions for not only themselves, but for the sake of others as well.

"Back then Mr. Whitney became mind blowing land formations; Mr. Dawa, easily the most well read person I've ever met, transformed into an eager conversationalist and had been on the verge of accepting a lecturer position at a postsecondary institution; the Pereras refined the nebulous fields of art and public health into concise concepts that proved relevant, applicable, and necessary to all of our

discussions; Doctors Zwei and their specimens found intellectual rivals in Mr. Whitney's auspicious palms; and together we reached a solution to global warming that benefits both society and the environment. Our group eventually pioneered a branch of science called Planet Husbandry but efforts have stalled in the last ten months."

His frustration was palpable as he rubbed his temples with both hands. "To be able to bring people together... to inspire and create bonds... to unify diverse groups without leaving anyone behind... It's an underappreciated talent that we need more of in this world."

CHAPTER 14

We left Dr. Hill's office wordlessly and started toward the lane.

I wiped my face. "Where do you want to wait for Edna?"

"She'll find us when she's ready, right?" Alex eyed the grass growing along the path.

"We can wait at my house. I can't forget my car, though, it's still parked--"

"Hey." Alex grabbed my arm, stopping me. "That was way more excitement than Edna or I normally dump on you at once. How are you feeling?"

Feeling? *Guilty.*

For living quietly in my own world for the last six months. For minding my own business. For having no idea everyone else was reeling from a loss and the person most affected by that death had disappeared without anyone noticing. Because I didn't ask. Because I didn't care enough to ask.

Oh, and angry about feeling guilty about minding my own business. I hesitated. *How do I explain that?*

Alex grinned knowingly. "Sensory overload?"

He let me dodge the question. "Understatement."

Looking away, Alex nodded. "There he is."

At the edge of the lawn Jorge nestled in the grass, beak buried back between tightly folded grey wings. Eyes closed, napping. I went over and climbed down quietly beside my bird, grass blades crunching under my weight. Yes, the grass creeped me out, but blades of grass couldn't actually stab me so I figured I was safe.

Alex remained on the path, hissing, "Don't wake him up!"

The bird stirred. He unfurled its neck to look at me more

directly as Alex, stepping gingerly on the lawn, appeared over my shoulder.

“You always wake him up,” said Alex.

I sat cross-legged and rested elbows on knees. “Pelicans are social animals. I feel bad that he doesn’t have a group so I can’t bring myself to ignore him just because he’s sleeping.”

“He’s out here because he wants to be, though. He has to be. Why else? It’s not like he’s waiting for his flock and they forgot about--.” Alex twitched.

The yellowish feathers on the back of Jorge’s head were messed up again. An easy fix.

Alex tapped my shoulder. “Hey, David.”

Smoothing the feathers would only take a moment. “Just a second.”

Alex tapped harder. “David.”

“Hang on.”

Painfully. “DAVID.”

“Ow! What?”

Alex said to the bird, “What’s your name?”

I twisted to scowl up at him. *It’s Jorge, obviously.*

The pelican blinked. “Teddy. What’s yours?”

My guilt slashed me through the gut.

Also dismissing the grass, Alex collapsed on the other side of the pelican. “I’m Alex.”

“I’m David,” I said eventually.

Alex leaned back on his arms. “Your neighbors are worried about you.” He glanced aside at the pelican kindly.

“Are they?” Teddy’s neck stretched a little taller as he shook off his nap. “Why? I’m the one who’s worried about them. They don’t come out anymore.”

I stared down at the seams of my pant legs. *Is it okay for an outsider like me to be a part of conversations like this?* Regardless, I wanted to be a part of it.

“Everyone seems unsure,” I said carefully, “about what to do without Lydia.”

Silence lingered heavily. Teddy was tougher to read than the therapist.

“May I tell you a story?” he said finally.

When we assented, he began:

“I was born believing life lived in one place, without experiencing the world, was a life unlived. Once I could fly, nothing stood in my way. Crashes, shipwrecks, sickness, nearly starving a few times, it was all a part of the journey and I don’t regret any of it. I discovered that people around the world are different but alike, and there were more good ones than bad ones. I remember once I was fishing from a jetty with some villagers, telling them a story from my travels, when a little boy asked ‘is that when you went home?’”

“It made me realize I had no sense of home. For weeks afterward that simple question tortured me ‘What is home?’ Where is it? Why don’t I have one? Is it a place to roost? In that case, a sturdy tree limb could be home. So could a hostel, or a pillow. Is it a place where I’m welcome? Bah, that could be anywhere!

“On a bright August day, I was flying over the Pacific when a gray whale hailed me for help. A boat had wrecked on a reef in rough seas and the whale was distraught because she couldn’t help the stranded sailor without risking being injured or killed. I went with her to find a 35ft sailboat teetering on a jagged reef, the hull gouged open beyond repair. A human woman sat on the deck, drenched and laughing. I rescued the woman and escorted her and the whale to the nearest beach.

“When I learned the boat we abandoned had been the women’s first sea-home, I asked if she was okay. She replied, ‘A house is a place, home is a person. I’m okay because it was a house.’ She pointed to her whale friend. If I had lost

Belinda, that would've been another story.”

“That changed my thinking. Inspired, I joined Lydia and Belinda for a few joint ventures and, soon, Lydia and I fell in love. She introduced me to her land house and intriguing life on Mira Lane. They were a large noisy family bursting with character, compassion, and interests. Just when I thought the best of my life and wildest adventures were behind me, everything in front of me seemed thrilling. I swore to Lydia that this new life was where I was meant to be, that these beautiful people were my home, and I would never leave.

“Lydia and I became engaged, Mr. Perera agreed to marry us once the Mira Lane group completed the next stage of our biggest environmental project yet. Lydia died suddenly, before we finished. A stroke. I wanted to be selfish but I’m not the only one who lost a piece of their home that day.

“I turned my focus to my family, which is Mira Lane. Everyone struggled. To my horror, I realized grasping the concept of her talents and methods was not enough to embody the effect she had. In her absence, her connectivity effect was, poof, gone. Mira Lane is so diverse and complex.

“I’ve thought and thought. Here I am a year after her death, and I still don’t know what to do. Despite my promise and living here, my home feels so far away.” The pelican’s sky blue eyes shifted toward me. “Did I let her legacy die, too?”

CHAPTER 15

“It’s a rhetorical question,” said the handsome seabird. “If I can’t answer it, I don’t expect anyone else to be able to answer it either. Are you two alright? You look unwell.”

Alex shifted to his knees. “Teddy,” he said seriously, “would it be okay if we hugged you?”

I looked at Alex. “Me?”

“You want to hug him, too.”

It was true. I did.

Teddy rose on sturdy legs and webbed feet. “Only if it’ll make your day happier.”

I’ve never hugged a bird before.

Alex grabbed the back of my shirt in a fist and, scooping the pelican in his other arm gently, pulled us into a delicate group hug.

The pit in my stomach worsened.

The sound of running feet lifted my face. Edna and the entire Perera clan--who were impeccably dressed, by the way--hustled toward us, waving and shouting gaily. I felt foolish for thinking Edna was ever in danger and, if no one asked about it, I didn’t plan on bringing it up.

She waved. “Oh my gosh Alex!” Her face contorted when she spotted me. “David?!”

“TEDDYYYYYY!” The Perera family roared with joy and joined the hugging, fairly tackling us. Edna joined in, too.

We made quite a scene on the lawn but, since everyone present was involved, it didn’t matter. The Pereras smelled like yeast bread, cinnamon, and roasted walnuts. We were so close, it was difficult not to notice.

As the hugging broke into lounging around on the

therapist's healthy lawn, I found Edna studying me.

She grinned. "You left the house."

"You made more friends," I quipped. "Did you give them a choice?"

She leaned toward me, on an elbow. "Tell me about your adventure."

I'm still processing. "You first."

"Okay then." Edna sprawled on her back and looked up at the sky. "Me first."

When the Pereras caught her and Alex peeking in their front window, Edna waited on the welcome mat to introduce herself to those inside as Alex sprinted away down the middle of the lane by himself. An apology was made, introductions swapped, all very formal, until a mixed media painting hanging in the front hall ignited a conversation about everything art.

Discovering kindred spirits in each other, they all took off on foot to The Perera Gallery and Art Supply Shop where they gushed over celebrity artists, new paint brands, and color wheels. The pottery shop next door convened for a class with several extra seats; thus it was decided the opportunity couldn't be passed up to show off their clay modeling skills.

Next they stopped for something to eat at a cafe and bakery where they talked about the neighborhood, the people, and its past. Edna heard about the island, the botanists and their specimens, the fish therapist, and a beloved, though recently neglected, Mira Lane fixture named Teddy. When Edna said none of her friends knew anybody by that name, the bunch ran back to search for the pelican.

Edna clasped hands behind her head. "What about you? Did you go for a walk? Hug a stranger? I saw you hugging the stranger, you can't deny that one."

What about me? "I met the island, met the botanists, don't

like the plants, met the fish therapist, and realized I've been calling Teddy the wrong name this whole time."

Edna rolled to her belly. "Without me?!"

"You can still meet everyone," said Alex, seated beside me. "I mean, they're David's neighbors."

"That's right!" gasped Edna. "I hear everyone's long overdue for some reunion festivities at the island. How about it?"

The Pereras and Teddy sobered.

Edna looked from me to Alex. "Everybody's acting like they need an invitation that's impossible to get."

"We do..." moaned everyone.

"To a degree." Alex rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "We could ask Dawa if Mr. Whitney is up for guests later today. What's the worst that could happen? He says no?"

True. I looked at Alex. "Can't hurt to ask."

"Wait," said Edna. "Who's Dawa?"

"Mr. Whitney's housekeeper," muttered everyone.

Edna stared at me blankly. "All we have to do is ask, right?"

"Mr. Whitney is pretty introverted," I said, "He may need some time to recharge after social interaction so it might be best if we don't ask right away."

Edna had already bolted.

I resisted wiping my face. "Does she even know which house is Whitney's?"

Alex grinned. "I've got it."

He ran after her, yelling; she yelled back at him; it turned into a race to Whitney's house complete with harmless name calling and immature shrieking.

CHAPTER 16

Later that same afternoon, Dawa waited for us on the front porch of the smog-gray house with the door standing wide open behind him.

How to describe Dawa... *Heh, I can't. Oh, help me, I can't.*

We followed him through the main hallway but the whole house was lit up brightly, the interior blazed white. Many doors rested ajar, and through them yawned perplexing, uncovered windows.

The ocean door was wide open, too.

A pedestrian bridge wide enough for one person at a time connected the threshold to the island. Without life preservers, we struck out across the bridge. Edna led loudly, Alex tread briskly on her heels, I used rope railing for guidance as I scanned the waves, hoping. Dawa brought up the rear.

Around the island, the menacing rocks had sunk below the waterline, visible only by looking straight down through the clear water. The near side of the island consisted of soft amber sand that stretched inland into rolling dunes, abounding with beach grass, tall and golden. Beyond that, palms loomed in close quarters, heavy with coconuts, crooked among boulders and at varying elevations.

Everyone else had already arrived. Edna, dragging Alex by the hand, wasted no time making him introduce her to them.

Dr. Hilmar Zwei came with his teen daughter, Bryony, and gardener, Mr. Sorley Glenn. When I shook Dr. Zwei's hand, a tiny potted aloe in his jacket pocket hissed; I gladly pretended to be disappointed when he told me his wife had a previous engagement.

The Pereras were unexpectedly genial toward me. I

suspected my attention to Teddy and status as Edna's friend earned me some goodwill. Several family members brought musical instruments, except one who forgot his trumpet and ran home to get it.

Bryony and one of the Perera kids, both carrying books, gravitated to where Dawa roasted food on five propane grills at once. Soon, he and most of the young people were engrossed in an impromptu discussion about literature and history.

Awkwardness dissipated as everyone remembered how to be together. Teddy was right at home with a warmly smiling Dr. Hill sitting on a log, with no lack of things to talk about; Mr. Glenn the gardener made the third man of a curious trio. Whitney was thrilled, also, to be in the background for a crowd he had so dearly missed. Soothing are the sounds and presence of a happy island.

We ate, everyone talked, musicians played. A well known ballad drew dancers into the open space and, those who didn't dance, sang.

The energetic sound of a whale's spout turned my head. Excusing myself from the group, I tromped over a dune and shuffled down to where two rowboats were moored to a coconut palm leaning over the water. Belinda surfaced nearby.

Climbing into a boat, I pushed out as far as the mooring line allowed and waited there while the Belinda came close.

She squealed. "Here you are twice in one day? And you brought Teddy, your friend, and everybody? How are you this amazing?"

I frowned. *I really didn't do anything except get dragged around by Alex while chasing after Edna.* "You should know, Dr. Zwei had the tea recipes. He gave a copy to Dawa for Mr. Whitney."

"Are you serious? Daviiiiid!" Nearly rolling over with joy,

Belinda righted herself. “That’s amazing, oh my gosh! But tell me more about it later, m’kay? You’re missing the music and fun!”

“I’d rather talk to you.” I withdrew a voice recorder from my coat pocket and held it up to show her, wagging it. “And I have everything I need if you want anything to be recorded.”

She fell silent, bobbing there by the rowboat, looking at me. “Can we talk about Lydia?”

I smiled.

“Lydiaaaa! Oh, wow, where do I start? Anywhere, right? HA! Here I go! She was my best friend her entire life even though she sailed and I swam. We were sisters.”

While the others danced and sang, I thought nothing of the document on my sunroom table, which could be translated easily at any time. I sat in the rowboat moored to the island where I talked with the whale until the sun touched the western horizon.

THE END