

O U T

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RACHEL REISS



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER

1

I AIM MY CAMERA at Isabel. The island's rugged cliffs loom behind her as she stands at the top of the two-story boat. She inches closer to the edge.

"The Salt Squad is going down under, Down Under!" Isabel shouts and shimmies at the camera. "Catch you on the flip side!"

She dives off the side of the boat. Her new top-of-the-line free-diving fins are attached to her feet, making her long body appear even longer as she sails through the air, arching until her hands break through the water. She slides below, disappearing into the endless blue.

I glance at my watch. Only ten minutes until our fourth and final dive of the day. We bottomed out at 90 feet on our last dive, exploring the wrecked carcass of a WWII naval bomber,

so now we're stuck on a surface interval, off-gassing nitrogen from our bloodstreams.

Isabel's head pops up and her face shimmers in the sunlight. As she treads water, the pink tips of her blond hair fan around her shoulders.

"Did you get it?" she calls.

"Yeah, it looked great." I give her a thumbs-up as my vision slides along the horizon. Nothing's there but an empty line. We're all alone out here. There are no boats, no signs of human life.

No one to hear us scream.

The boat rocks and I buckle, my body rigid.

Will eyes me as he sprays his mask with a mix of water and baby shampoo to keep it from fogging. "You look like you're about to start feeding the fish."

I toy with my motion sickness relief bracelet. The waves aren't what's making my stomach turn, but I won't bother trying to convince Will of that. He views my seasickness as a weakness, and if he hates anything, it's weakness.

I grab my water bottle and chuck it at him, aiming for his shins. Will jumps over it just in time and it sails to the stern, crashing into the neat row of scuba tanks.

"*Ohhh*, someone's sensitive." A wide grin splits his face as he leans against the railing, his defined abs on display. "It's just weird. A diver with seasickness. It's like a pilot who's afraid of heights."

Isabel hooks her hands around the ladder, hoisting herself onto the boat. "That's not the same *at all*. Phibs has no fear," she says, like it's a well-known fact.

Phibs is my nickname. Close enough to my real name—Phoebe—but comes from another word entirely. *Amphibian*. Because I'm always the coldest of the Salt Squad. When everyone dives bare skin, I'm in a 3-millimeter wetsuit. When everyone is in a 3-millimeter, I'm in an 8-millimeter and I'm probably wearing a hood, too.

Isabel slaps her wet rubber fins against my shoulder. "You gonna film us gearing up?"

I don't love shooting above water, but our social feeds are the reason we're here in the first place. Well, that and Lani's uncle, who lives on this island.

Marimont. A place I still probably can't find on a map. It was a beast of a trip getting here. A three-legged flight from Miami, stopping in Vancouver and Brisbane before finally landing in Perth, Western Australia. We then boarded a seaplane that took off over the ocean, rattling toward the Appelon Archipelago, full of submerged reefs, over two hundred small islands—many still unnamed and untouched by humans—and thousands of rocky outcrops swept bare by violent tides. We eventually landed in the shallow waters of Marimont, a ring-shaped atoll, and scrambled up the sloping beach, relieved to finally be here.

Lani's uncle says this archipelago is one of the world's last great wildernesses. Which suits us. We've always been drawn to the wildest of places.

"Why didn't someone wake me?"

I turn to find Gabe. His eyes are puffy, his hair tousled, and the seams of the boat's hammock crosshatch his cheek. The jet lag has been harder on him than the rest of us. He's still on

Florida time, so he's sleepy when the sun's up, wired when it's down.

"You got something there," I flick at his cheek, where the hammock left its mark.

Gabe grins, swatting my hand away.

Will and Gabe are fraternal twins but couldn't be more different. While Will's all about ambition and drive, Gabe's the opposite. Chill and easygoing, kind and soft-spoken. All the reasons he's my best friend.

Gabe sits, his feet dangling off the boat. Curls dip over his forehead while swirls of dried salt pattern his upper arms. His dark skin is already sun-kissed. He holds out his water bottle, offering me a drink. I shake my head as I join him.

The sun beats down, steady and strong, but the breeze chases the heat away. A couple of long-beaked birds—gannets, I think—nose-dive into the water in the distance. There's a bait ball out there. An underwater tornado of spiraling fish hidden beneath the whitecaps. Gabe sees it too, his eyes sparkling at all the possibilities that lie hidden. Incredible creatures, intricate coral. A place where the future and the past drift away in the currents, and all that exists is now.

"I'm glad you came." Gabe pauses and then adds, "On this trip."

"Of course." I can't hide the surprise in my voice. "Like I'd let you go without me."

His gaze is on the horizon where the ocean meets the sky—faintly different shades of the same color. He follows it until it hits the island's rugged coastline. A sandbar sits by the shore, transforming the water into dizzying shades of turquoise.

"I wasn't sure. That you'd come." Gabe's cadence is off. Choppy like the waves.

It's true, I almost didn't get on the plane. Gram's my only living family member, and while she's forgotten most of the world, she still remembers me. At least, she remembered me two days ago. Goose bumps prick at my skin. *What if she forgets me while I'm gone?*

But Gabe glances below my shoulder.

Oh. My face flushes. *He means that.*

My hand flies to the back of my left arm. I feel the smooth patch of skin, once red and weeks later a dark purple. Now all sign of the injury is gone. Well, mostly gone. Only a faint shimmer in certain lights, an almost invisible scar. My fingers run over the jagged line. It's still sensitive, but maybe that's just the memory I'm feeling.

Five months ago. We never talk about what happened that night, but it doesn't stop the memories. The curdling screams that wake me in the dead of night. The blood soaking the weathered plank floor. The lifeless body floating on the dark wave.

My stomach roils and I try to push the thoughts out of my head.

"You'd need more than that to keep me away," I say, as the rest of the sentence plays silently in my mind. *From the sea. From diving. From you.*

We all grew up in the Florida Keys, but while the rest of the Salt Squad live in the famed Key West, sunning themselves by infinity pools and hanging out on yachts, I live in a broken-down home on the military island next door. *Boca Chica Key.*

Nothing but a pit stop to the destination where everyone wants to be.

And despite how close we've been these past two years, a part of me has always felt separate. *Different*. It's not the money or my tiny tract home on an island that somehow shares a zip code with their channel estates. Or that they have families so big, it makes mine—just my gram and me—feel small.

It's the fact that they're going places. We just graduated high school, and in a matter of weeks, they'll be gone.

Maybe like my island, I'm just a pit stop, too.

"Come on." Gabe's standing now. "Time to suit up."

I place my hands in his and he pulls me up. Gently, until my stomach almost touches his. The exposed skin from my bikini just an inch from his bare abs. Unlike his twin's popcorn muscles cultivated for show, Gabe's are leaner. Tighter.

The thought throws me and I stumble. Gabe laughs, thinking it's the rocking boat setting me off-kilter, and he reaches out to steady me. His arms squeeze around me. My skin buzzes as it brushes against his, and when he gazes at me, the intensity in his eyes makes my throat tighten.

Gabe's hands shift to my waist, but his fingers don't move after the rocking of the boat calms. My pulse races as his fingertips press lightly against my hips. His shoulders glow in the hot sun and I want to wrap my arms around them and close the distance between us. Kiss him until my lips hurt.

These feelings are so strong, I don't know what to do with them. *Do I want him because I can't have him? Because he'll soon be gone?*

It's our last summer and I'm trying to hold on to all of it.

To this feeling of freedom and adventure, to this little found family adrift in a world of unknowns. To us. *The Salt Squad*.

But it's like holding a fistful of water. No matter how hard I try, it just doesn't work.

I take a step back from Gabe and I'm moving. Starboard, to the back deck.

Already the boat is a mess of diver-ness. Empty Cheetos bags, six-packs of soda, assorted gear littering every spare surface. Fins and cables, soaking tubs and wetsuits. Fish ID books that no one ever looks at but are essential to have around for absolutely no reason at all.

Lani meets us at the back deck, her dark shoulder-length hair tucked into a baseball cap. We're all here now. The five of us.

"Land shots!" I hold up my camera, and there's a medley of moans.

"You heard the girl," Isabel says, sticking up for me as usual while she channels her best drill sergeant voice. "Move your asses!"

They begrudgingly line up with the ocean to their backs, arms slung over shoulders in a tight knot of sunscreen and sweat.

I hold my camera lightly in my hands. It's my most prized possession, a Nikon Z full-frame mirrorless camera. It's by far the most expensive thing I own, but that's not why it's so special. It was the last gift my grandfather gave me before he died three years ago.

As I press the camera's shutter button, my heart squeezes with it. I can't help but wonder if I'll spend the rest of my life trying to remember what this moment felt like. When our lives were woven together so tightly.

This ten-day trip was a high school graduation present from Isabel's parents, courtesy of the Triangle of Trust, as Will calls it. Lani's uncle trusts her, her parents trust her uncle, and our families trust Lani's parents. It's flimsy logic, something Gram would've never allowed if she had her faculties straight. A pang of guilt hits me, knowing I'm going against her wishes, even if she doesn't remember her wishes anymore. But there's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be.

"Come on, Phibs!" Gabe calls, coaxing me into the shot.

I position my camera at the edge of the foldout table and set the timer. I rush toward them, and Gabe pulls me close. As I cling to them, memories from the last two years flash through my mind. The time Lani dared Will to eat a ghost pepper. When Isabel buzzed Gabe's hair and accidentally left a bald spot. The weekend we camped on the beach under the stars, nestled together like a litter of puppies. We're so much more than friends. I can't imagine my life without them.

The camera clicks and everyone breaks apart. I stand in place, frozen with the knowledge that once we return home in a few days, everything will change.



"DIVE BRIEFING, GATHER 'ROUND!"

Lani calls as she sits on an overturned bucket. Her dark eyes sparkle as she holds a map in her good hand. She'd be pissed if she knew I thought of it that way. *They're both my good hands*, she'd say.

She glances at the map, which has been folded so many

times it's ready to split at the seams. "We're at Point Hasting. There's a descent line at the bow if you need it, lowering to a sandy bottom. It's a gentle drift dive southwest, where you'll find the reef. Keep an eye out for moray eels and anemonefish. Reef sharks—grays and blacktips—are common. You can spot sea turtles, and an occasional . . ." She squints at the map. "I think it says *cuttlefish*."

Will wags his eyebrows. He loves cuttlefish.

"At the end of the dive is a wall," Lani continues. "It's too rocky to dock, so I'll pick you up over there in the tender." I glance at the inflatable boat towed off the back, needed so we don't accidentally crash into the shallow reef.

"You're not coming?" Isabel's voice is soft. She doesn't want us to hear, but that's the thing about boats: everyone hears everything. "I thought maybe this time . . ."

Lani's gaze falls to her hand. Since that night five months ago, she hasn't gotten back in the water. She tells people that a shark took her last three fingers, its sharp teeth slicing them off. But it's just a story. An easier one to tell.

"Okay, it's settled, I *have* to become a pirate. There's no other path for me," Lani joked the first time she sensed pity from us. When we didn't respond, she grew annoyed. "It's not a big deal. They're *filler fingers*. If the hand is a hamburger, the last three fingers are the lettuce, onion, and tomato. Only filler. Without them—with just the meat and the bun—it's still a hamburger."

Although Lani knew her way around most boats, she didn't know much about catamarans. Like how one could careen on its edges. Or how the sails could snap with a sudden gale-force

wind and the lines could loosen, whipping against her fingers so fast she never saw them coming. Slicing them off with the precision of an assassin's knife.

It's the only time I've heard Lani scream. A full-throated howl. One I still hear sometimes.

I grab my wetsuit. It's crispy from the sun and smells faintly of mildew. I start at my ankles, maneuvering the neoprene over my heels. It resists, fighting back, like a dog wrestling for a bone. I pull, jerking it over my calves and up my hips. A sense of calm spills over me as I mold it around my shoulders and grip the long strap attached to the back zipper, securing myself inside. It's like my coat of armor. My superhero costume. My second layer of skin.

"I'll stay up here with you." Isabel wraps her arms around Lani, officially her girlfriend for eight months. Unofficially it's been way longer.

Lani shakes her head. "You should go."

Isabel nuzzles her chin into the curve of Lani's neck. "No, it's okay, I *want* to stay on the boat," she murmurs. But it's not okay, and she doesn't want to stay on the boat.

Lani knows it, too. But it's either agree or fight, and no one has time for a fight. So Lani just shrugs. "Whatever you want."

Isabel nods and chews her lip. "I'll go down for a bit with my free-diving fins," she offers. A compromise of sorts, for no one but herself.

As the rest of us secure our vest-style buoyancy control devices, or BCDs, around our chests, I see how Lani's smile doesn't reach her eyes anymore, and she doesn't laugh, at least not like she used to. She won't admit it, but she's different now. We all are.

But it didn't have to happen.

Someone defied the group and set into motion everything that happened that night.

Gabe. Lani. Will. Isabel. One of them caused it. The blood. The fight. The dead body. I thought I knew who it was. In fact, I was convinced of it. But in the last few days, doubt has begun to creep in.

I drag an aluminum tank toward me. I check the O-ring, a small plastic loop that prevents air from leaking out of the tank. Seems wrong that something so flimsy could be responsible for keeping me alive. But sometimes the smallest things make the biggest difference. I learned that the hard way.

I strap the tank on and it weighs me back. I grab free weights and place them in my pockets to counteract the air in my tank so I can sink. I'm eager to be in the water, to be buoyant again. To leave all this oppressive gravity behind.

I place my camera inside its underwater housing and check the seals. Then I attach spiderlike strobes to the housing that act as a double-headed flash. The left one's been sporadic, but I'm hoping it behaves this trip. It's dark at depth. I need both flashes working to show all the colors.

"The pool is open!" Lani swings the rear hatch open and motions to the endless sea.

Will takes a large step off the boat. I watch him fall, his fins slapping the water below.

A chill curls through me as Will vanishes into another world. A place where beautiful creatures mix with critters so hideous they could be spawned from a child's nightmare.

Gabe watches me, his piercing eyes framed by his black-rimmed mask. “Ready?”

I lick my dry lips and salt coats my tongue. I nod, shoving my regulator in my mouth and biting the rubber mouthpiece. I press one hand against both the regulator and mask to keep them in place and make my way to the edge of the boat. Although the waves are choppy, it could be completely calm underneath. But it isn’t always.

I take a giant stride and fall.

My feet hit the surface and the warm water rushes over me, covering me on all sides as if it’s claiming me as its own.

CHAPTER

2

WATER SLIPS THROUGH THE seals and creeps over my face. I tip my mask, purging it, but a small puddle lingers under each eye.

Will's already on the bottom. Probably 20 feet below.

Gabe motions with his index finger. He's pointing. *Down.*

I watch him sink, leaving nothing but a trail of bubbles.

A shiver runs up my spine, but I brush it off. I've been on hundreds of dives, and this one isn't any different. It's just an intermediate drift dive where we'll follow the current. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Long, thin needlefish hover below the surface. They swim by, their bodies white and nearly transparent, their immense dark eyes rotating in their heads. It's a reminder that I'm entering an alien world.

I release all the air from my vest, exhale until my lungs are

empty, and sink toward the seafloor. I glance up one last time as the surface slips out of reach.

Pressure builds as I descend. I shift my jaw so my inner ear can equalize. But the heaviness grows. It intensifies along my brows, pain pressing at my temples. I swallow and finally there's a shift in my ears. Relief washes over me as I fall deeper into the blue.

My breath hisses through the hoses, cascading in bubbles. I pump my BCD with air, little by little, as I near the sandy bottom. When I rise, I release a burst of air until I'm buoyant. *Floating.*

Gabe adjusts his fin, while Will does flips. I point the camera at Will, catching a couple. When he sees I'm filming, he pulls the regulator out of his mouth and flashes me his pearly whites. I can't help but grin. Will's a goof, but he's also the most reckless of us all. He's often the last to surface, the one to dive deepest, the least cautious on his safety stops. But I know he'd never be too reckless. Out of all of us, he's got the most to lose.

The water is clear, with great visibility. It's a good dive for photography.

We each have specific roles. I'm in charge of shooting the underwater content, and Isabel's the wildlife expert since she has encyclopedic knowledge of marine life. Will's the navigator. He's got a great sense of direction and keeps us on track. Gabe handles the equipment, can fix or replace nearly everything, and makes sure the tanks are full. And Lani's our fearless captain. She's in charge of the boat and is the glue that keeps us together.

In the distance, Isabel's bathed in a pale bluish-green glow. Her long hair flows behind her as she swims, her fins trailing gracefully. Unlike the rest of us, she isn't burdened by gear, other than her fins and mask. She's the best free diver of the Salt Squad. Relying on only the air from the surface, Isabel holds it in her lungs as she gently kicks, her long fins propelling her.

I watch her, entranced. Her mom jokes that she was born in the sea. She glides like she's a fish herself, entirely at home in a world of water.

The water. It's what bonds the five of us more than anything else.

After Gabe hired me at the local dive shop two years ago, he introduced me to Lani, Isabel, and Will. I'd never before met anyone as obsessed with the sea as I was, but the four of them were just like me. Every Sunday that summer we went snorkeling, and as we threw our bodies off the most far-flung coral cay and into the warm waters of the gulf, something unbreakable bloomed between us.

There are two kinds of people in this world, Lani's uncle had told us earlier that morning as we scarfed down scrambled eggs on the patio of his restaurant. There are those who are tethered to the land, with deep roots to the earth. To the trees and the mountains. Then there are those like us. Drawn to the ocean. Pulled by an innate need to see the waves, to smell the sea air, to be caught in its grip. We don't just need it. We can't survive without it.

He's right and we know it.

Will's moving. My body lengthens until my stomach faces

the white sand bottom. I kick, my fins pushing me forward. Before long, the sand transforms into black rock, volcanic and porous. As we descend, the bright colors dull and soon vanish. First reds at about 25 feet. Then oranges and yellows darken into emeralds and purples. Before long they transform into even deeper shades, until they're all different hues of the same color. *Bluish black. Bluish gray. Bluish blue.* Nothing but a monotony of inescapable blue.

A lionfish faces us, hovering like a neon stop sign. White bands stripe its head and body, while its fin rays ripple like a worm. It's beautiful but dangerous. As Isabel loves to remind us, poison runs deep in its dorsal spines, similar in toxicity to a cobra's venom.

It's a reminder that danger lurks everywhere. In the creatures, the invisible current, the powerful surges. But it's also inside me. If I breathe too fast, sink too low, lose track of my depth. I have to stay alert.

We trail the bottom rocks until they turn into coral. Even here, the effects of global warming are visible. Sections of reef are sun bombed—bleached of color—the heat forcing the coral to expel algae, leaving nothing behind but bony white skeletons. But the reef hangs on, trying its hardest to survive.

I slip into my slow, steady breath as water rushes around me. It whistles in my ears and slides through my curls. We pass thick ledges of pineapple coral and giant sea fans woven in a delicate lattice.

Gabe points to a large school of jacks huddled in a dark cloud. Their flat, rounded bodies blend together, crowded so

tightly it becomes impossible to tell them apart. They swim in unison like they've become one, sharing a single heartbeat.

The swell increases and soon I'm not kicking anymore. The ocean's doing the work for me. I'm flying underwater, letting the water be my guide as the reef comes alive beneath me.

Clown fish dart between the venom-filled strands of an anemone swaying in the surge, the orange of their bodies popping under the flash of my camera. Big-eyed soldierfish stare cautiously from behind wavy patches of cabbage coral. I catch the smooth serpentine head of a moray eel creeping out from a rock, its mouth open, revealing rows of tiny razor-sharp teeth. I point my camera at it but the current is stronger now, and I pass, unable to get a shot. I need gloves to hold on to the reef, to steady myself, but I left them on the boat.

I aim my camera toward Isabel and shoot a quick video as she heads toward the sunlight. Without her scuba gear she's so silent that the animals aren't afraid of her. I once recorded a dolphin approaching her curiously, as if it were about to start a conversation. The video went viral.

Droplets form inside my mask and a foggy patch creeps into my eyesight. But I ignore it. There's too much else to focus on.

A gray reef shark wriggles toward us, shaking its curvy tail, water pumping out the vertical gills striping its side. It watches us, its face hard and pointed, but I know reef sharks are harmless. It scans the crevasses for dinner as I fire off a dozen shots.

I clear my ears as we descend deeper. The sun must've disappeared behind a cloud because a shadow falls over us, darkening the depths. The surge suddenly grows stronger. And colder.

A wall appears on our left, a rocky vertical plunge that descends until it's out of sight. It's dizzying, plummeting to unfathomable depths as the blue sea opens up to the right, wide and endless. The sheer size of the wall is disorienting, and I check my gauges. I'm at 70 feet already.

But then I hear it. No, feel it.

No, that's not right, either.

I sense it.

It's faint, like a whisper I can't quite hear. A gentle pull in the current. An allure, a plea, a strange murmur from somewhere deep in the blue. It's barely there, but I can't ignore it.

My skin prickles and a chilling realization overcomes me. In the hundreds of dives I've logged, this is something I've experienced only once before, six months ago.

We were diving on a sandy flat in the Keys, filming sting-rays, when I sensed something. A primal, unquestioning compulsion—a *need*—to swim toward a cluster of dark stones. As I approached the rocks, I noticed two of them were slanting toward each other. I stretched my stomach over them and fanned my hand to clear the sand wedged in the middle.

Then I saw it.

Caught between the rocks, half-covered in the hard-packed sand, was the edge of a rusted tin. My fingers circled the rim and I pulled at it, unearthing it from the seafloor. And when it rested in my hands, I realized it wasn't empty.

I tipped it over and sand, small rocks, and shards of sea-shells fell out. Then when I shook it, I heard a rattling. I peered inside, as something caught the light and shimmered.

My heart hammered in my chest. My inhales quickened

as I flipped the tin over, cupping my fingers under the narrow mouth. Breathless, I watched as a handful of sparkling coins tumbled into my palm.

Five of them.

The edges were rough and uneven, and markings I couldn't recognize circled the perimeters. A large cross with even proportions and slatted ends stamped one side of each coin. My skin tingled as the realization set in.

Gold.

The word plunged through my mind in free fall. I gasped, my breath dissolving in bubbles.

Resting in my hand, five coins of various sizes shined in the rays of sunlight piercing the water. I knew that gold never oxidizes, even if it's been on the seafloor hundreds of years, and the coins gleamed as brightly as the day they were minted.

Stories of ancient coins are not uncommon in the Keys. Pirates are said to have used the whole atoll in a hiding game. A shell game of treasures.

And on that day I found five extremely rare Spanish coins over four hundred years old with a Jerusalem cross on one side and the Philip II coat of arms on the other.

Five coins. One for each of us.

What was most thrilling—even more exhilarating than the moment I discovered the gold—was the second right before it. The moment I tipped the tin in my hand *knowing* something would be inside. Something significant. And I was the one lucky enough to find it.

It gave me an importance I'd never felt before.

The discovery of the coins shot us to local fame, and then

national outlets started to reach out for interviews. Influencers picked up our story and our Salt Squad social media numbers skyrocketed within weeks.

But what I didn't realize was the ocean had given me a gift I'd never recover from. A lost treasure that would cost me nearly everything.

And now, on a dive six months later and thousands of miles away, I feel the same urge I did that day in the Florida Keys. The same compulsion that lured me to the slanted rocks, straight to the buried coins.

I hover in place, floating alongside the wall.

I should ignore it. I know what happened last time. If I could go back in time, I would've let that feeling drift away, let the ocean keep its secrets, and let the relics of the past stay where they belong. Buried and forgotten.

But despite my best intentions, I can't resist it. I find myself being pulled in a new direction. The thrill of the discovery beckons, gripping me like a tenacious vine and yanking me from Gabe and Will. I can't ignore it. Can't turn away. Anticipation pumps through my body as I'm drawn to the sheer wall.

The swell grows rougher, pushing against me. My mask shifts, seawater slipping through the seals. It fills up along my cheeks, blinding me. I take a deep breath, clear out the water, and press my mask firmly against my face until it suctions. I blink, my vision sharpening.

I study the vertical reef, not knowing what I'm looking for. Soft coral moves in the current, and hard coral hangs static like immovable barnacles on the volcanic stone. Decorator crabs line up on a ledge and peek out, their claws poised in

front of them, ready to strike. Flat-bodied nudibranchs with bright stripes and dizzying dots cling to the rough stones.

As I glide alongside the wall, a couple of Christmas tree worms protrude from the reef in a spiraling crown of spikes. My fingers hover near and they snap back, retracting into their burrows and out of sight.

Adrenaline pulses through my limbs. That strange pull I felt months ago, and now just seconds ago, brought me to this exact place. But nothing's here. I exhale, ready to put it behind me and join the boys ahead, but then I pause.

I grip my camera in one hand as I brush aside some sediment stuck to the side of the wall. A wild burst of energy races up my spine, chilling my fingertips.

I see something.

There's the thinnest of cracks running sideways along the wall.

It's nothing more than a faint ridge, a jagged hairline fracture barely penetrating the dark rock. Even staring straight at it, it's easy to overlook.

But now it's all I can see.

I've always had an unexplained knack, a strange sixth sense when it comes to the ocean. I often spot what appears invisible, like a camouflaged salmon-colored pygmy seahorse no bigger than a lentil bean. Or a flat snow-white flounder buried beneath a faint layer of light sand.

But today is different. Just like that day months ago, I'm filled with the strange sensation that the sea is calling to me. That there's something it needs to show me.

My body buzzes as my free hand traces the tiny gap in

the stone. I run my fingers along the wall, trailing it as I kick against the drift.

An invisible force shoves me to the side. There's a *whoosh* in my ears and my equilibrium falters. The surge increases and slams against me again, as if with the sole desire to push me against the unforgiving wall. But I don't let it. I kick, my thighs tensing against the water, my calves straining as I follow the ridge.

I'm descending deeper, losing track of my depth. I'm fixated on the fissure. The urging inside me intensifies as the crack widens from the width of a hair to a fingernail, and continues growing.

There's a sharp, sudden rattling.

My gaze snaps from the wall out into the blue where Isabel hovers over 40 feet above me. Her long fins face down, her hair spread out in all directions. She's shaking a bottle with pennies to get my attention. Her eyes are wide. *Frightened*.

She whips her head wildly back and forth, her hair still suspended around her face, writhing like strands of seaweed. Then she crosses her arms in a giant X across her chest with her fists closed.

It's the sign for danger.