

“I’m just surprised they’re not here. The yacht should be guarded twenty-four-seven.” He looks around, as if to try to locate the guards, and then he spots something on the floor. He picks it up and examines it between his thumb and forefinger. “I think I’ve found what you slipped on.”

I’m now doing a pathetic breaststroke back to the pontoon and he’s watching me all the way. I’m a good sailor, but I swim like a drowning rat.

“What is it?” I ask him, if only to stop him from watching me.

“I don’t know. Could be a bone . . .” Blades holds up this little brown cylinder. “It looks really old.”

“What’s it doing here?”

“Good question. Here, let me give you a hand — I’m fresh out of legs . . .”

That makes me laugh, despite myself.

He holds out a warm, dry hand, which I take, and he hauls me out of the water until I can flop facedown onto the pontoon and attempt to get my breath back. While I try to control my gag reflex, Blades retrieves my bag. When he gets back, he helps me up.

“I’m Ash,” he says.

It’s a moment before I notice he hasn’t let go of my hand. I pull away to pick my bag up and that’s when I see that someone else is there, watching us.

A tall, skinny black girl has arrived at the end of the pontoon. She’s like some kind of undiscovered supermodel and her makeup looks like it’s been put on by laser. Her shiny black

hair is pinned up with delicate cherry blossom flowers at the back. The difference between us couldn't be more obvious. I can feel my wet hair twisting itself into some embarrassing modern-art installation as she stares at it.

There's an elastic in my bag somewhere — and a towel. I fumble for the zipper on it and can't get the freaking thing open, of course. When I look back up, the girl is letting out a long, exasperated sigh.

Ash waves her over. "Jen! Come and meet Rio."

She doesn't move. Instead her eyes widen and she points. "Ash! There's a huge scratch on *Spirit's* hull."

"I know." The way his eyes flick at me as he says it gives the game away.

"You *know*?" Jen glares at us.

Ash doesn't answer her, so she turns on me. "Have you any idea how much it will cost —"

"It was an accident. I'm sorry. *Really* sorry. Excuse me," I mumble as I make my way past her and back toward the clubhouse.

"Ugh! Do you mind?"

Somehow I've managed to drip all over her sandals when I pass. My cheeks flush with heat.

"Sorry again! For everything . . ." This is *so* not the start I wanted to have.

"Don't be too long!" Ash calls after me. "The press are coming and we need to get underway."

I don't answer. All I can think about is getting as far from the yacht as I can. Back home would be good, but that's

impossible now. So I slip quietly back into the clubhouse, find the toilets, strip off, and towel myself dry before the air-conditioning gives me hypothermia. Shivering, I wring my wet things out over a sink, wrap them in the towel, and shove them back in the bag — right now I don't care if the other stuff gets wet. I change my tank top for a white cotton shirt that just happens to be at the top of my bag. When I'm done I lock myself in a stall, throw the toilet lid down, and squat on it, burying my nose between my knees.

I don't know if I even want to be here anymore. Not if it means having to *interact*. I'm terrible at it, always have been. Next time I go online I'm going to change my Facebook relationship status from *Single* to *Total Screw-Up, Avoid Me*. I should be sailing around the world on my own — just me and the elements. And I just know that girl Jen is going to be everything I don't need. I'm *so* looking forward to developing my inferiority complex — it's just my luck that the only other able body on the expedition looks like a freaking movie star. With minty breath — mustn't forget the minty breath. I can't help letting another groan escape — we're going to be working together for months. Oh, and did I mention that the crew leader already thinks I'm an idiot? But I can't hang on to these thoughts, however bad I feel. Just thinking about being on the ocean — about sailing on that fantastic boat — lifts my spirits.

When I make my way back outside, the sun is up and the pontoon is full of people. I fight the urge to run. Ash is standing behind a navigation console on the command deck of the *Spirit of Freedom*, wearing an orange life jacket with his hand

on one of two huge wheels while a bunch of press people shout directions at him. I try not to think about the long white scratch, or the fact that all the cameras are pointing at it. I focus on Ash. His blades have gone — he’s changed them for some gleaming aluminum legs that have electronics and little black buttons on the front. With his high-tech prostheses planted firmly on the deck, he looks almost superhuman.

Jen hasn’t boarded yet; she’s waiting by the ladder for me. “Well? Ready to go?” she asks. I nod, grateful that she seems to have thawed a little, and she introduces me to the support team, who are gathered around the boarding ladder.

Ash’s mum — Mrs. Carter — is trying to avoid the cameras and get off the boat. She gives Ash a last hug and clammers down the boarding ladder to reach me. It’s nice to see a familiar face. Mrs. Carter came to the UK scouting for potential helpers, which is how I ended up here. I remember that very gentle Australian accent I first heard back in the UK.

“Rio! I’m so sorry I couldn’t come and get you from the airport myself — and for all the rush. You must be exhausted! Thank you for agreeing to help out on such short notice.”

“It’s no problem, really. I can’t wait.”

“Ash will take good care of you.” She tries to get his attention, but he’s too busy to respond. “Just be yourself. You’re here because you are a great sailor, not just because the insurers insisted on another able body. I’ve seen what you can do. You’ll be a perfect addition to the team.”

We don’t have time to talk any longer. It’s a shame, because she was starting to make me feel better about myself. Ash waves at us and Jen tugs my arm: I have to go.