

WHERE

SHE

FELL

Kaitlin Ward



SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK

Copyright © 2018 by Kaitlin Ward
All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.,
Publishers since 1920. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are
trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume
any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,
recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information
regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department,
557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the
product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual
persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN 978-1-338-23007-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, November 2018

Book design by Maeve Norton

Photography © 2018 by Michael Frost

Life is just a series of moments that you frame to make yourself look like the hero. That's something my friend Sherri likes to say. *It's not fun if it's not a little bit stupid* is another thing she says.

Sherri is excellent at being both the hero and fun. I am excellent at neither.

It's an unreasonably warm spring day, and my parents consider AC a waste of money, so I'm already sweating at 8:30 in the morning. My backpack lies empty on my bed, looking deflated. I leave it and stand in front of my window fan, gazing out over the driveway like that'll make Sherri and my other best friend, Meg, magically appear, even though it'll be at least another half hour before they do.

Lately, I haven't been that excited when they come over. Meg and I have been best friends since grade school. Sherri joined us at the beginning of ninth. I never expected how this would change things, but here we are.

Today I *am* excited, though. Yesterday, even as it made my

entire body go numb, I texted them both that I wanted us to go cave exploring, and they actually agreed.

I turn back to my bed and my empty bag. If we're going into a cave, I need to fill it with supplies, but I've put it off. Part of me keeps expecting Sherri to text and say she's found something better for us to do today. Something social. Something that'll make me come home feeling like a wrung-out sponge.

After a light knock, my partially open door widens and my younger sister Mara's face pokes through. Mara's fifteen; our birthdays are almost exactly a year apart. She's loud and pretty and extroverted. The sort of person who can take a hundred selfies in a row and look perfect in all of them. Who came out of the womb knowing how to use makeup. People want to hate her, but not as much as they want to befriend her.

"I can't find my mascara," Mara says. "Can I borrow yours?" I asked Claire and she said she doesn't want my eye germs."

"Borrow whatever you want." I gesture to my dresser, which has a semi-organized array of jewelry and beauty products sitting atop it. Mara always asks Claire for things before she asks me and I don't know why she bothers. Claire is the oldest, and very protective of her stuff.

"Thanks." Mara starts pawing through the stuff on my dresser. She turns back to me with her fist clenched around a mascara tube and an eye shadow palette. "What are you up to today?"

"Gonna take Sherri and Meg to that cave Claire and I found last weekend."

Mara wrinkles her nose. “How are we related?”

I laugh, because she says it with affection. My sisters and I are very different people, but we get along pretty well anyway. Most of the time. “If one of us is adopted, it’s definitely you.”

She sticks out her tongue but doesn’t contradict me. “Well, don’t die out there.”

“I’ll try not to.”

She whisks out the door, and I watch her retreating back. Sometimes I envy Mara. The easy way she interacts with people. How she’s always wrapped up in the kind of Teenage Experience that Sherri thinks I should be more interested in, and it’s just her nature. School may not come as easily for her as it does for me, but school’s going to end someday. Interacting with other people is forever. Which is why I force myself to practice even when it turns my heart into a hummingbird.

With a sigh, I start filling up my backpack. Sherri and Meg are absolutely *not* going to come prepared, so I need to bring plenty—at least when it comes to snacks and lights. I start with a tiny observation journal. I have journals strewn all over the place in here, but I don’t like people to see what I’ve written, so I pack a blank one in case we see something neat. I fold a spare outfit on top of that, in case I get dirty, and a light jacket in case it gets cold. A flashlight, cheap headlamp, and pocket-knife on top of that. The small first-aid kit my mom insists upon goes on top. Several snacks in the front pocket, and a water bottle in each side pocket. As an afterthought, I throw in a few spare batteries, even though with two lights plus my fully

charged phone and my friends' phones, we should be perfectly fine.

"Eliza!" Claire calls up the stairs. "Your friends are here!"

"Coming!"

I put on my backpack, pocket my phone, and hurry down the stairs. Claire likes Meg just fine but she and Sherri do *not* get along. Claire's an introvert like me, but she's more . . . okay with it. She's been playing the piano since her fingers could fit on the keys, and she's going to University of North Texas on a full scholarship next year. She's a loner and it doesn't bother her and I admire it. The way she just goes for her goals and doesn't worry if she's missing part of the Teenage Experience because, as she told me once, *You don't miss something you don't want, Eliza.*

Sherri finds Claire's attitude *unhelpful*. She's always telling me I don't want to regret missing out on something, and the something I'll miss out on is not sitting in my room organizing rocks, apparently.

Claire gives me a thin-lipped smile. It's almost like looking at my own face. All three of us are red-haired and freckled—which is funny, since neither of our parents are—but Claire and I share the same shade of green eyes, the same long noses and oval faces.

"Be careful," she says, glancing at my friends, standing in the doorway. "You know what is and isn't a good idea. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

I heave an extremely large sigh.

“Yeah, got it, I know, I’m not Mom,” Claire says. “But Mom’s not home right now so I’m filling in.”

I roll my eyes but smile because I know she means well. Claire’s always taken it upon herself as oldest child to look after the rest of us. And Mara’s taken it upon herself as youngest to test boundaries. I’ve never quite figured out what my own role is, to be honest.

“I’ll be home by dinner,” I tell her, and then I’m out the door with Sherri and Meg.

“What’s the backpack for?” Sherri asks as the three of us get into her car. I’m in back, as usual, because Meg gets carsick.

“It’s good to bring some stuff when you’re going into an unfamiliar cave,” I answer, buckling my seat belt and hugging the backpack protectively.

Meg and Sherri exchange a glance and I get a pit in my stomach. “What?”

“So we’re definitely still going to the cave,” Sherri answers quickly. “*Definitely*, because we promised. But we have to go somewhere else first.”

“And where is that?” The pit grows.

“Drowners Swamp,” says Meg.

“What? No *way*. Why would we do that?” I lean forward, gripping the back of Sherri’s seat.

Sherri swats half-heartedly at my hand. “Don’t distract me while I’m driving. We’ll do your thing after! But Elijah Henlan said he’d pay fifty bucks if we take a selfie at the swamp.”

“Where? Like, at the sign?”

“No.” She rolls her eyes. “Next to the water.”

She pulls off onto a dusty trailhead, less than half a mile from my house. We didn’t need to make this drive; we could have walked. But I’m guessing Sherri didn’t want to have this conversation within earshot of Claire.

“Sherri, this is beyond dumb. I thought—”

“Eliza, *please* can you not?” Meg interrupts. “I absolutely cannot handle the two of you fighting today. No one else in my life is allowed to be fighting right now.”

I close my mouth at once. Meg gets upset pretty easily by arguing, and I can’t blame her. She lives with her mom and her brother, both of whom are extremely manipulative. Her house is constant drama, and I can only imagine how exhausting it must be to live there. I try to always remember and respect that, and make her life easier where I can.

“You promise we’re going to the cave after?” I say, breaking a very long silence.

Sherri twists around in her seat. “I promise.”

“Then . . . I guess we can do this.”

Sherri and Meg open their car doors in unison, and my fingertips start tingling unpleasantly. My gut tells me I was just played, but I don’t know how to get out of this. My friendship with Meg has had its ups and downs over the years, but it’s always felt comfortable. Until Sherri came into the picture, replacing comfort with adventure, and leaving me wondering where I fit. Middle sister, middle friend. Wherever I go, I’m kind of stuck.

I hop out of the car, shouldering my backpack. I almost

leave it behind, but honestly, I'm more likely to need a first-aid kit here than in a cave. By the time I shut my door, they're already walking well ahead of me. Easy and comfortable, like *they're* the ones who've been friends since grade school. I rush to catch up, feeling sick.

Living within walking distance to a swamp, there's one thing my parents impressed upon my sisters and me more than anything else: *Don't* go near it.

The ominously named Drowners Swamp isn't particularly huge. And we don't have the same dangerous swamp creatures here in Upstate New York that you might find in, say, Florida. No alligator will pop out and chew off my arm. But the ground's unstable and there are snakes. Reason enough, in my opinion, to stay far, far away.

The walk isn't too long, and mostly it follows the hiking trail we parked at the base of. But once we veer off into less traveled territory, I can hear my mom's voice echoing in my head with every step: *Do not go to that swamp, Eliza. People die there.*

"How sure are we about the fifty dollars?" I ask. "And why does he even want you to do this?"

Sherri shrugs. She's ahead of me, so I can't see her face when she says, "Elijah's weird. And we're sure he will pay because I will *make* him."

She won't, is the thing. Sherri can say that Elijah's weird all she wants, but she will do pretty much anything he suggests. Or, at least, she'll *appear* to do it.

I don't like the bitter edge to all my thoughts about my two best friends right now. I love them both, but as our sophomore year has gone on, they've gotten closer and I've started to feel like I'm trying to hold water in clenched fists every time I'm with them.

Meg's quiet, which means she's brooding about something, which means she wants me to ask. So I do.

Her response is a twist of her hair around a finger, and a slow-moving frown. "Everything's fine," she says. "Mom's just commenting on my eating habits again."

Immediately, I'm aglow with rage. "Seriously? You eat fine."

"I know." She folds her arms tight. "But you know how she is. I'm up two pounds and the world is ending, basically."

"I wish you could just come stay at my house," I say.

"Or mine," Sherri adds quickly. Then, with a glance and a small smile at me, she says, "We could trade you."

Meg laughs. "Well, just over two more years until you guys can fight over who gets to room with me at college."

"Be warned," Sherri says to me, "I plan to win that fight."

"Yeah, you wish," I say, even though we both know that if it comes down to it, she *will* win. She always does.

"So tell me about this cave we're gonna go to," says Sherri.

I narrow my eyes at the back of her head. Whenever she shows a slight interest in anything geology-related and I take the bait, it always seems to find a way of coming back to haunt me.

"Claire and I found it last weekend when we were hiking. We didn't really go in, but we went far enough to tell that no

bears or anything live there, and that it goes on for a little ways. I'm hoping it has some interesting formations."

"Um, bears?" Meg says delicately.

"Bears live in caves sometimes. I feel like you already know that."

"I guess I never really thought about it."

"Don't worry." I pick at a nail. "There definitely weren't any around."

Sherri edges carefully around a very overgrown raspberry bush. I follow her, and then stop. Here we are. Drowners Swamp.

It doesn't look like much. Just a bunch of grasses and flowers and scraggly trees leading up to a narrow body of water. The water has some grass clumps sticking out here and there, too, and scattered dead trees. Next to me stands a big sign that reads *DANGER!!!*—an excellent reminder of exactly why I didn't want to be here. Mom's disapproving voice no longer echoes quietly in my head; now it's practically a scream. I picture the newspaper articles she's been forcing in front of our noses since birth, every time something bad happens here.

"We shouldn't do this," I say. "We're gonna get eaten by something."

Sherri scoffs. "No, we aren't. When was the last time anything bad happened here? What even lives here that could hurt us?"

I don't have a good answer. People don't come to this swamp unless they're idiots like us. The ground is prone to sinkholes. Deep ones.

And it's nice that Sherri's able to forget poisonous snakes exist, but I'm all too aware. As much as I like nature, I could do without the snakes.

My eyes sweep over the ground before me. The center of the swamp, with its crystal clear, still water and dead tree trunks. The rim of bright green algae around the water's edges, and the lumpy, grass-tufted area extending between there and here. We shouldn't even be this close. It's not like wild animals respect boundary signs and leave you alone till you pass one.

"I don't know when the last time anyone got bit by a snake here was," I say carefully. Sherri asked the question, but I keep my eyes on Meg, who's my better bet if I want this called off. "But someone did supposedly get pulled into a sinkhole, like, three years ago."

Meg's mouth is a thin, silent line, but Sherri rolls her eyes. "Well, you wanted to see a cave. Aren't you the one who believes that ridiculous urban legend about this place?"

I should have known she would throw that in my face. I love that urban legend because it's weird and it's cave-themed, not because I actually *believe* it. If I did, I would run.

The myth is kind of a *Journey to the Center of the Earth*-type situation. The reality is that a lot of people have disappeared over the years, usually under mysterious circumstances. According to legend, when you disappear, you find some tunnel that leads deep into the earth. Like, all the way in.

Being a total geology nerd, I know how ridiculous that is.