

Heart OF A Dolphin

Catherine Hapka

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ISBN 978-0-545-91763-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

First printing 2016

Book design by Mary Claire Cruz

Annie's Town

	PINE WOODS
	TRAIL TO LITTLE TWIN
	ROAD TO TOWN
	TOWN



LONG ISLAND
SOUND

1



It was my little brother Will's birthday, which meant the official start of summer. Oh, school had been out for two or three weeks already, and sunscreen-smearing tourists had been snarling traffic in our coastal Connecticut town even longer than that. But by Will's birthday, the water had warmed up enough that my toes didn't turn numb when I swam, and blackfish season was open again.

We were celebrating with a party and cookout on the half-sand, half-stone beach of Little Twin, the smaller of Twin Coves Point's coves. Mom was taking the whole day off for a change, and Jacob had

torn himself away from his college-prep stuff, and two kids from Will's class had actually showed up. Emma was there, too, of course. She always came to our family parties—she was pretty much an honorary Reed after being my best friend for as many of our eleven and a half years as either of us could remember.

“Where's Daddy? Where's Daddy? Where's Daddy?” Will chanted, sounding closer to three years old than to just-turning-eight. His blue eyes were wide and a little crazy-looking, probably because his birthday was the one day he was allowed to eat all the junk food he wanted.

Mom glanced up from her book, sweeping a strand of auburn hair off her forehead where the breeze had blown it. Her hair used to be the exact same color as mine and Will's—bright strawberry blond—but one day a few months ago, I'd noticed hers was starting to look different. When I'd grabbed a handful to take a closer look, I could see strands of silvery-gray all through it. A few days

after that, Mom came home with a bag from the drugstore, and the next morning, her hair was darker all over.

“Daddy will be here in a little while, honey,” Mom told Will now. Her eyes were tired and I could tell she was trying to sound patient, but it was hard to be patient when Will asked the same question a million times. I knew that better than anyone.

“Come here, Will,” Jacob called from over near the tidal pool at the rocky end of the crescent-shaped beach. “I’m showing the guys how to skip stones. Don’t you want to try?”

The other kids barely glanced at the birthday boy. They were arguing over a flat stone. Finally one of them, a pale kid with a turned-up nose, grabbed the stone and tossed it toward the water, where it landed with a plop and disappeared.

“Rats!” The kid sounded frustrated. “I can’t get it.”

The other kid grinned. “Maybe you need to chop off a couple fingers and you’ll be better.” His

eyes wandered to my older brother's left hand, which was missing the pinky and ring fingers almost all the way to the lower knuckles. Jacob had lost those fingers in a boating accident when he was five, which was the year before I was born. He hardly seemed to miss them, and I'd never known him any other way, so I didn't notice it much either until someone started staring.

"Check it out, Annie." Emma poked me in the back.

I rolled over toward her, wiggling my hip to avoid a sharp stone that was poking me through my towel. "What?"

She pointed at the fashion magazine she'd been flipping through. "Do you think I could pull off this outfit?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Why would you want to? It looks like she's wearing a giant paper towel."

"Stop." Emma giggled and pointed to the opposite page. "Okay, what about this one?"

I sat up, tired of lying around. “Let’s go body-surfing or something. Oh! Or we could snorkel—I found a really cool moon snail out there last week.”

“Nah.” Emma licked her finger and turned the page. “I want to work on my tan.”

I stared at her, wondering if she was joking. She never used to care about stuff like tanning and fashion magazines. This was a different Emma, one I didn’t understand.

She even *looked* different. I’d noticed it the first time I saw her in a swimsuit that summer. Over the winter, beneath all those layers of clothes, she’d changed. Parts of her had slimmed down, and other parts had filled out, and she was at least two inches taller than me now—not that that was saying much.

Anyway, I didn’t like it. Things weren’t supposed to change when I wasn’t paying attention. Especially not best friends.

Trying not to think about that, I grabbed the magazine out of her hands. “Quit reading and talk

to me, or I'll throw this in the water!" I warned playfully.

She squealed, trying to grab it back. "You better not—I spent the last of my allowance on that!"

I didn't answer. Emma's family was rich—*really* rich. Her mom was a famous painter, and her dad had been born into one of the richest families in New York City and then became a zillionaire all over again on his own. Their house was called the Cottage, but it was actually the largest of the four houses on Twin Coves Point. Of the remaining three houses, two of them were almost as big and fancy as the Cottage, only newer. The last house was where my family lived. It used to be a caretaker's cottage for one of the bigger houses until my mom's grandfather bought it a long time ago. We'd been there forever, which was the only reason we could afford to live anywhere near the Point, let alone on it.

Anyway, Emma could afford all the fashion magazines in Connecticut if she really wanted them. But her parents said they didn't want to spoil

her, so they made her stick to an allowance, at least most of the time.

Emma leaned back on her elbows, her long, wavy brown hair brushing against her towel. It was almost as long as mine now, and I was surprised she hadn't made me measure it lately. We used to do that all the time back when we both first started growing it out.

"When's your dad getting here, anyway? I'm starving," Emma said.

"He promised to come as soon as the lunch rush was over." I could only hope he actually made it, or Will was going to freak out.

My dad was a chef. Up until the previous fall, he'd worked at this famous restaurant right by the harbor called the Dockview, which had been in business for over a hundred years. Then his uncle died and left him some money, and Dad decided to open his own restaurant, Mike's Seafood. Apparently it was his lifelong dream, even though he'd never said a peep to me about it.

Ever since, he worked all the time. I mean, *all* the time. Every summer before this one, Dad and Jacob and I had gone fishing at least two or three times a week from the start of blue crab season until it got too cold in the fall. This year? We'd only been out on the boat a total of three times so far. And even those times weren't the same, since Dad had traded in our nice old fishing boat for a smaller, much less fancy one. He'd sold our sailboat, too. Raising capital, he'd called it, which sounded like something Emma's father would say.

"So when do you think the new people will move in?" Emma asked.

I was used to her sudden changes of subject. Her attention span was almost as short as Will's, though most people didn't seem to mind it as much coming from her.

"You mean Brooke's house?" I asked, though I already knew the answer. Brooke was a year older than us. Her family had lived on the Point until

they'd moved to Los Angeles at the end of the school year.

"Yeah." Emma's gaze wandered up the steep wall of the cove, though all we could see from the beach was the schooner-shaped copper weather vane on the very tip-top of her own house. "Morgan heard the new family has a kid our age."

"Really?" I wanted to ask why she'd been talking to Morgan—again—but I bit my tongue. "Wow, it's kind of crazy that there always ends up being a girl around our age living in each house on the Point," I said instead.

"I know, right?" Emma squinted up at me. "But we don't know if it's a girl or a boy this time." She giggled. "Morgan hopes it's a boy."

"Yeah, she would," I muttered. Morgan Pierce had lived in the house between Emma's and Brooke's for years, but up until that summer, she'd thought she was too good to hang out with Emma and me. Maybe it was because her mom was on TV, or because her dad was a retired navy admiral

from an old New England family that owned half of Connecticut. Or maybe she was just a natural-born snob.

Either way, Brooke moving away had left Morgan without a best friend, or anyone on the Point to hang out with at all. She was still totally ignoring me, but she'd started being a little friendlier to Emma. That was weird enough, but the even weirder thing? Emma didn't seem to mind all that much.

Over by the tidal pool, Will's friends were getting tired of skipping stones. "Let's go swimming," one of them said.

"Yeah!" Will charged toward the water.

"Will, wait," my mom's voice rang out, echoing off the high, rocky walls of the cove. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Huh? Oh." Will glanced at the bright red life jacket in Mom's hand, and his face fell. He slunk over and slipped it on.

One of the other boys laughed. "What're you doing?"

“Just in case,” Will told him. That was what my parents always said: Just in case.

Will couldn’t swim—not very well, anyway. Whenever his head went underwater, even in the pool-calm water of our little cove, he panicked and started flailing around and eventually sank. Which was weird, since the whole rest of the family was practically part fish. I learned to swim before I could really even walk—we had home movies that proved it. And I’d made the varsity swim team at my middle school right away, even though most people stayed on JV for at least a year.

“Come on, let’s go in, too.” I poked Emma on the shoulder.

“Ow.” She swatted my finger away. “You go. It’s still too cold for me.”

“Fine.” Her eyes were closed now, so she didn’t see my frown. The old Emma loved to swim. I quickly wrapped my waist-length braid into a messy bun and secured it with an elastic. Then I headed for the water.

The younger boys were already splashing around in the shallows, throwing sand and trying to scare one another by pretending to see jellyfish and sharks every five seconds. It was a still day and the waves weren't big enough for bodysurfing, so I waded to the drop-off thirty feet out, where the water suddenly gets deep.

I'd forgotten my snorkeling mask and didn't feel like going back to get it. So I just dove down and skimmed along with my eyes closed, enjoying the feel of the cool water on my skin. When I came up for air, I heard splashing behind me and opened my eyes quickly, wondering if Emma had changed her mind about swimming.

It wasn't Emma, though. Jacob was bobbing in the water, grinning at me. His hair, dark and curly like Dad's, was plastered to his forehead.

"Want to race?" he asked. "Out to the spit and back."

"You're on."

I let myself sink under and did a strong whip kick, gliding forward before he had a chance to get moving. Then I surfaced and went straight into a front crawl, my arms windmilling steadily as if I was in the finals at a swim meet.

Suddenly I felt a hand grab my ankle. A sharp yank pulled me under, and I came up sputtering. “Cheater!” I yelled as my brother swam past me with a laugh.

I was about to lunge forward and dunk him, but he’d paused and shaded his face to stare at something. “What’s that?” he said.

I followed his gaze and saw movement on the rocky spit at the edge of the cove. For a second, I panicked, thinking Will must have walked out there again. A lot of trash washed up on the spit, carried in from the harbor by the tides and trapped by the jagged rocks. One day last summer, Will had spotted a cool-looking bottle or something through Dad’s binoculars and decided he wanted

to retrieve it. So he'd waited until Jacob wasn't looking and sneaked off, picking his way along the precarious wall of stone and barnacles and algae. It was a miracle he hadn't slipped and fallen in and been swept all the way out to Long Island Sound. He'd ended up with a big gash on his foot from a piece of broken glass, though, and Jacob had been in big trouble for not paying enough attention when he was supposed to be watching him.

But a quick glance over my shoulder told me that Will was still splashing around safely in the shallows. I swam past Jacob, squinting against the sunlight glinting off the water. Blinking moisture out of my eyes, I saw a silvery shape huddled against the rocks.

"I think—I think it's a dolphin!" I exclaimed. "A bottlenose."

I stared in wonder. The sleek gray creature was pressed up against the rocks, half-submerged in the frothy little waves breaking against the spit. He looked just like the dolphins I'd seen many times

at the aquarium over in Mystic. Or from the boat, where we occasionally spotted them swimming along in the distance, especially out toward the eastern end of the Sound.

Except this one was right here, less than ten feet in front of me. “Careful.” Jacob was still treading water behind me. “It may look cute, but it’s a wild animal. Don’t get too close.”

“I won’t.” I kicked forward a little more. “Why isn’t he swimming away?”

“Annie, stop.” Jacob sounded worried.

I ignored him, my gaze fixed on the dolphin. He wiggled and his tail slapped against the rock, but he stayed where he was.

“Easy, buddy,” I said soothingly. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise. I just want to see . . .”

My voice trailed off as the dolphin thrashed again, giving me a better look at the rest of his body.

“Oh gosh!” I glanced back at Jacob. “He’s all tangled up in fishing line!” My heart pounded as I swam even closer, trying to get a better look. A

tangle of what looked like heavy-duty braided line was wrapped around the dolphin's midsection and part of his tail, pretty much lashing him to the rocks behind him.

The dolphin stopped struggling for a moment, staring at me with dark eyes that were wise, gentle, and curious. There was a large, half-healed wound zigzagging across his face, starting in front of one eye and ending just short of the blowhole atop his head.

"Easy, easy," I murmured, using an eggbeater kick to steady myself as the current carried me toward the dolphin. "I'm your friend, okay?"

The dolphin let out a funny little chirping sound, but he stayed still as I tentatively reached toward him. I was vaguely aware of Jacob calling out to me again, but I barely heard him. I couldn't take my eyes off the dolphin. I'd never seen one up so close like this, not without a thick pane of glass between us, anyway. The dolphin seemed bigger than I would have expected, and maybe a little

wilder, too. Somehow, though, I didn't really feel afraid, just weirdly shy. Holding my breath, I leaned forward and touched the dolphin's side.

His skin felt rubbery and smooth. I stroked it gently, and the dolphin chirped again, his gaze never leaving my face. I couldn't believe he was letting me pet him; it made me feel honored and sort of breathless, like the first time Emma's mom asked my opinion on one of her paintings. As I ran my hand up toward his dorsal fin, an extra-large wave washed past me, splashing up and making the dolphin thrash once more. I winced as the line dug deeper into that smooth gray skin.

I turned to see Jacob still bobbing in the water twenty yards back. "He's really stuck," I called. "The tide's coming in, and soon he won't be able to keep his blowhole above the surface. He'll die if we don't help him!"