

Dear Reader,

Sometimes I find the story, and sometimes the story finds me.

This time around, the story grabbed on with teeth and claws—refusing to let go until it had been spilled across the page in the exact way it demanded to be told. I have heard authors talk about the once-in-a-lifetime book, and I have no doubt that this is mine.

It all fell into place during a family trip to the Carolina coast. Although my first love is ocean beaches, nothing compares to an October sunset amid the quiet beauty of the saltmarsh. It is a place of extremes coming together. Sometimes the water is fresh and sometimes it's salty. Sometimes the land is dry and sometimes it's flooded. Neither river nor ocean, it somehow manages to be both together, all at once.

As the sun sank and the sky around me turned pink, I began to consider other times of in-between.

Everyone has a summer that marks the shift between childhood and growing up, and that's exactly where Bex is when we meet her. With crooked bangs, mosquito-bitten knees, and a frustratingly empty composition book, she loves nothing more than spending hours with her brother Davey in their favorite spot in the marsh—named “The Thumb” for the way it curves back toward shore.

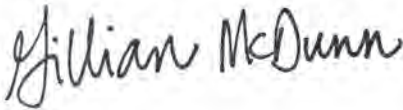
It hasn't rained for ages, and each day the water level lowers. One afternoon, something from long ago is visible above the surface—a statue that no one seems to know anything about. Finally, their summer has a purpose . . . a real live mystery to solve. But when The Thumb is threatened by the development of a new bridge, Bex and Davey must find a way to preserve their special place before it is destroyed forever, along with the mysterious statue. If they can't stop progress, will they be able to hold onto the spot where dragonflies buzz and otters frolic,

that point on the horizon where the blues blur together and sea becomes sky?

This is a story of love and siblinghood, of secret statues and island life, of holding on and letting go. It is an intensely personal story that contains themes and emotions I've grappled with for the better part of my life. Like Bex, when I was on the water I felt like life made sense. Like Bex, I had a summer that changed my life forever. Like Bex, I had a younger brother I adored with all my heart.

When Sea Becomes Sky is the kind of book that will rely on word of mouth. So if you are inclined to do so, please post on social media, recommend it to a friend, review on Edelweiss and Goodreads, and nominate for Indie Next.

I do hope you enjoy your time in the saltmarsh with Bex and Davey, and their unforgettable adventure. May your trees be climbable, your popcorn extra-buttery, and your otters mischievous and joyful.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gillian McDunn". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Gillian" and "McDunn" being capitalized and prominent.

Gillian

WHEN SEA BECOMES SKY

Gillian McDunn

Praise for the Book:

★“A moving portrait of grief and growing up. . . The narrative is gentle and compassionate. . . . McDunn offers a bittersweet ode to the heartbreakingly ephemeral periods in life, and this novel provides a possible path forward after loss, even if it cannot offer easy answers.” —**BCCB, starred review**

★“Written with immediacy and grace...[a] fully engaging novel.” —**Booklist, starred review**

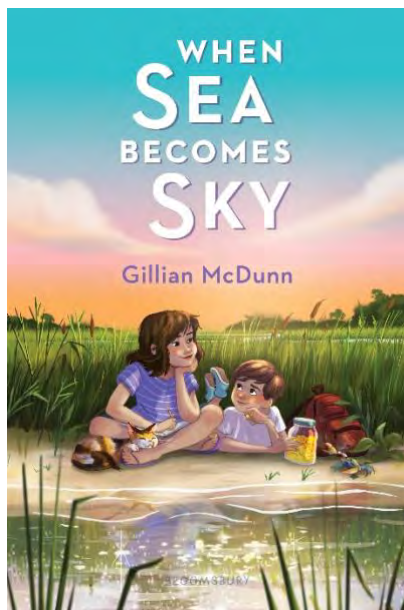
“An expansive mystery starring two closely bonded siblings.” —**Publishers Weekly**

“An undeniably beautiful story made for pondering and revisiting . . . Considers big questions and appreciates quiet moments with mastery, compassion and care.” —**BookPage**

“The pages shine with love, loss, and a sense of place. . . . A mystery that, as it is uncovered, becomes something much more profound.” —**Kirkus Reviews**

“A beauty of a story.” —**Rajani LaRocca, Newbery Honor-winning author of RED, WHITE, AND WHOLE**

About the Book:



In this heartfelt summer story, acclaimed author Gillian McDunn paints a stunning portrait of the bond of siblings and the love we'll always carry with us.

Bex and Davey's summer in the saltmarsh is different this year, thanks to the record-breaking drought. Even the fish seem listless--and each day the water level lowers farther. When they discover a mysterious underwater statue, they're thrilled at the chance to solve the puzzle of its origin. This is the summer adventure they've been waiting for.

When they learn of a development plan that will destroy their special spot, they'll need to act quickly. Unfortunately, sometimes progress happens whether you're ready or not. What will it mean if Bex and Davey lose their corner of the marsh where otters frolic and dragonflies buzz--their favorite place to be siblings together?

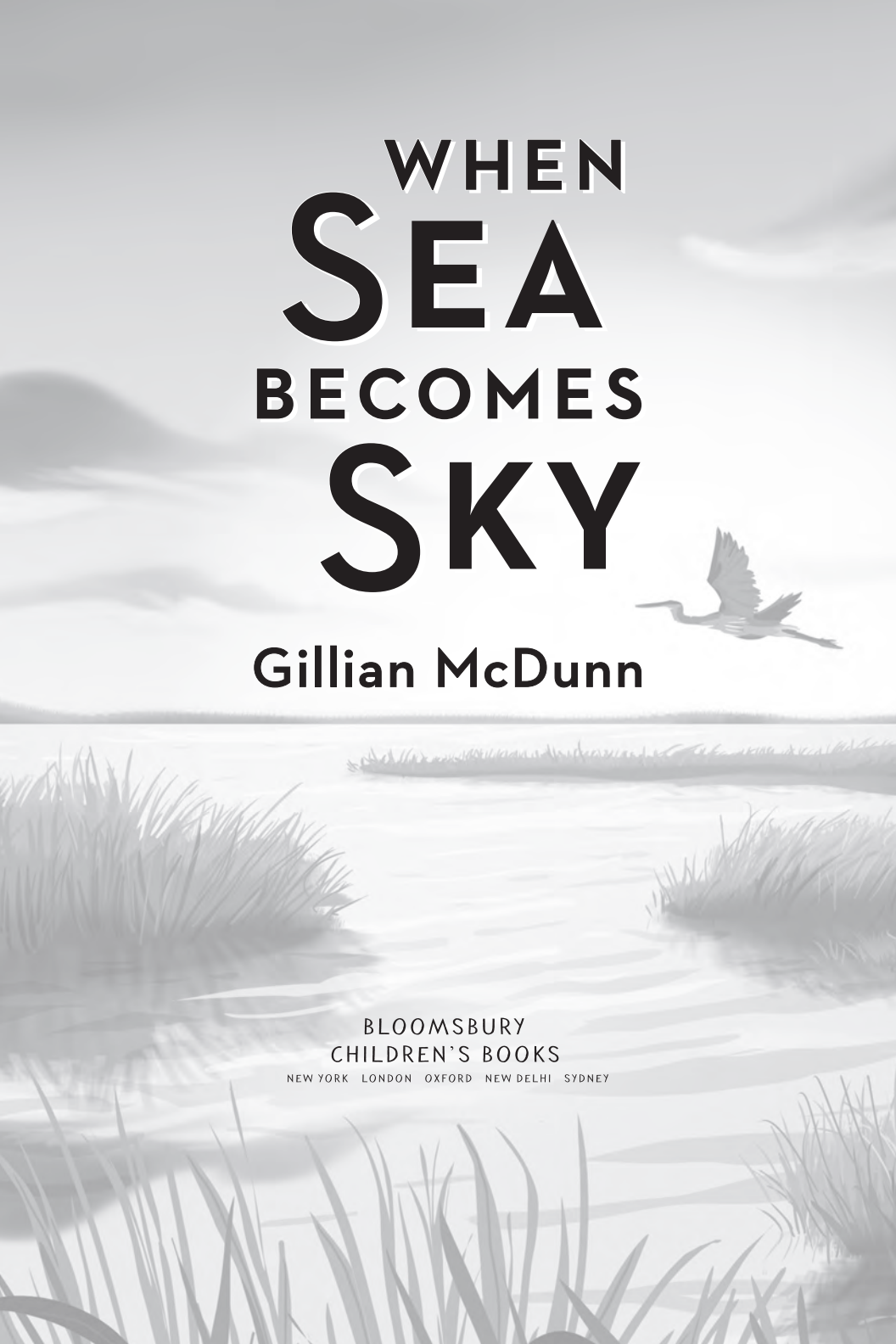
As Bex and Davey attempt to save the statue and their beloved marsh, they come to see that the truth is not as simple as it seems . . . ultimately discovering so much more about life, permanence, love, and loss than they ever expected.

Award-winning author Gillian McDunn crafts a gorgeous story of love and siblinghood, of secret statues and island life, of holding on and letting go.

WHEN
SEA
BECOMES
SKY

Also by Gillian McDunn

Caterpillar Summer
The Queen Bee and Me
These Unlucky Stars
Honestly Elliott



WHEN
SEA
BECOMES
SKY

Gillian McDunn

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For Andy and Jared,
forever my brothers

WHEN
SEA
BECOMES
SKY

PART ONE
313 days without rain





CHAPTER 1

Some summers are the funnest and some summers are the longest but last summer was perfectly ordinary until the day we found the hand.

Well, not *exactly* ordinary. Let me back up and start again.

On the day we found the hand, it hadn't rained for almost an entire year. It wasn't a dry spell—it was a real, official drought that showed no signs of stopping.

I'd never thought twice about the rain until it disappeared on us, but that summer I had a constant crick in my neck from staring upward, wondering what might come next.

I wasn't the only one.

"Bex," my usually patient little brother, Davey, would say, sighing deeply. "Is it *ever* going to rain?"

I didn't know how to answer. For everyone on our island, weather had become a never-ending topic of conversation. Once in a while we'd get our hopes up, if a breeze was cool or if the air had a certain heaviness. But day after day passed without a single drop.

There was an itchiness we felt, like we were waiting for something big to happen. On Pelican Island, June clouds should be fat cotton balls, bursting with afternoon thunderstorms that rattle your teeth. But that summer, the sky was pale and eerily still. The grass was dry and crunchy. Even the dirt looked thirsty.

Besides the weather, a few other things made the summer unusual. Dad pulled double shifts on the ferryboat, Mom seemed tired all the time, and Davey had stopped speaking to anyone but me. But except for that, you could say it was a regular kind of summer. At least, it *was*—until the day I saw something poking up above the water and decided to investigate. That was when it officially became the Summer of the Hand.

Officially, anyway, to Davey and me, which was really all that mattered.

So I guess that's where I'll start.



CHAPTER 2

Over the worn edges of my black composition book, I peeked at Davey. He was reading, propped up on his skinny elbows and sprawled across an especially wide branch of the big live oak we climbed most afternoons.

We were in our special place, which was called The Thumb—named for the way the far corner of our island curved back toward the mainland, like it was trying to hitch a ride to shore. When we were there, time slipped away and Davey spoke most freely. As always, his incorrigible cat, Squish, had tagged along. She napped on a nearby V-shaped limb.

“Davey.” My voice was barely a murmur.

He didn’t budge, a look of concentration on his freckled nine-year-old face.

I swung my feet impatiently, breathing in the damp air. It had been a just-us kind of summer, our schedule set only by the sun. As long as we were home by supper, Mom and Dad let us explore far and wide. It helped that Dad had grown up on Pelican Island himself and knew the way that the streams of the Carolina salt marsh could call out to a kid, begging to be discovered.

Mom was generally supportive of adventure as well—she was the one who had given me a rowboat two years ago, for my tenth birthday. She was a high school biology teacher, so her preference was for adventures with an educational angle. When we were younger, Davey and I helped collect samples for her research projects. But that summer, I had my own secret mission: to get Davey talking again.

My brother had always been quiet, but he'd changed over the last year. With each passing day, his words faded, like something left out in the sun too long. There were times Davey refused to talk to anyone at all.

But that summer, I realized that our special place had its own magic. Out at The Thumb, we sat for hours up in the tree—reading, talking, and listening to the wind. Life was softer there, the edges gently blurred. When I looked out on the horizon, it was impossible to tell the exact place where the sea became sky.

“Davey,” I repeated, more firmly this time. “Come on.”

I could tell by the way his eyebrow twitched that he

had heard me. He scratched idly at a mosquito bite behind his ear, but his eyes never left the page.

Davey was the type of person who gobbled up words. As a writer myself, I considered him the perfect reader. But writers have jealous hearts, and it burned me to see him devouring words written by another.

Quickly, I plucked a twig and launched it in his direction. It grazed his nose and fell onto the page in front of him.

He brushed it aside without looking up. "Yes, Bex?"

When Davey was a toddler, he couldn't make the sounds for Rebecca. He shortened my name to Bex, and that's what everyone on our island has called me ever since.

"I want to read you something," I said.

Davey squinted, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. He understood how much I'd struggled with my stories. Up until recently, writing had been as natural to me as breathing. But lately, I'd been stuck—instead of filling pages, I was wearing out erasers.

He used his finger to mark his place and then peered at me. "Go on."

Once I had his attention, my mouth turned into a desert. I swallowed hard. I only had a couple of sentences, but maybe they were the start of something good. Something real.

"The sunshine was a bully. The ground dry and parched."

I let the words hang in the air. I checked for his reaction but couldn't read his expression.

"Well?" I asked.

Davey blinked. If he was surprised that I didn't have more written down, he had the decency to hide it.

"The sunshine was a bully—I like that." Davey rolled the words around in his mouth like he was tasting them. "But why say *dry* and *parched* when they mean the same thing?"

The words, which had seemed so glorious a moment ago, felt clunky and wrong. I groaned. "I'll never get it right."

I flipped my pencil over and scrubbed at the page. I'd erased so many times that the paper had worn thin in spots.

Davey leaned forward, eyes wide and earnest. "Listen, Bex. What's that thing you always say about writers?"

I scowled, flicking away eraser crumbs.

"They can't ever lie," I muttered.

Davey nodded. "Writers must tell the truth thoroughly, constantly, and recklessly. Do that and the words will come."

I held up the page, smudged gray from the erasing. "Not likely."

"I know you can do it," Davey said. "Who was the only one brave enough to tell Principal Trout when she had a long piece of toilet paper stuck to her shoe?"

I shrugged. "Me."

Davey smiled in that very specific way he had, where

the left side of his mouth lifted up first and then the right side curled, like it was afraid to be left behind.

He scratched behind his ear again, thinking. “And who was the only one who let Aunt Louise know she’d made her famous blueberry pie with salt instead of sugar?”

My tongue puckered at the memory. “Also me.”

He grinned. “See what I mean? You’re the best truth-teller I know.”

His words loosened the knot that had been forming in my chest all afternoon. “Thanks, Davey.”

“Anytime, Bex.” He returned to his book.

A breeze rustled the leaves and I settled back against my branch, gazing at a patch of sky.

As far as telling the truth goes, this is a big one: in life, we all need someone to remind us of who we really are. I was lucky enough to have that person as my brother. He always managed to see the best parts of me, even when I couldn’t.



CHAPTER 3

The live oak tree grew according to its own logic. More outward than upward, its branches swooped low before spiraling into crisscrossed webs around us, the perfect framing for a view of water or sky.

Davey rummaged in his red backpack, which held a rotation of items, such as favorite rocks or leaves, a beat-up water bottle, and, once, an unusually placid and forgiving frog. But no matter what Davey collected, there were two items that stayed the same: a copy of whatever book he was currently reading and a plastic jar full to the top with yellow M&M's.

Why that color in particular? Davey was convinced they tasted best and wouldn't touch the other ones. It never made much sense to me—because color isn't a flavor. But

every time Mom filled the glass bowl on her desk, Davey picked out all the yellows.

He unscrewed the lid and carefully took out two. He tossed one to me, and I caught it, popping it into my mouth. The sweetness spread across my tongue just as sure as sunshine. During times like these, I had to admit that Davey was onto something.

I aimed at his book with my chin. “What are you reading, anyway?”

Davey raised it so I could see the tattered cover, which any kid would recognize immediately. It was a *crying* book—my least favorite. It was the kind where one of the characters dies at the end, which is the worst kind of crying book there is.

I shook my head. “Again? What’s the point of getting to know a character only to have them killed off?”

Over the years, my parents and teachers have labeled me as “contentious,” which means that I was born to argue. My brother was naturally easygoing—but because he knew how much I loved a good squabble, he’d never dream of letting me win without a fight. This was one of the things I loved best about him.

Davey’s skinny shoulders heaved in a dramatic sigh. “You wouldn’t understand, Bex.”

“Try me,” I said, blowing at the strands of hair plastered to my forehead—the irregular line of bangs I’d trimmed last week. Meanwhile, Davey scratched his forehead like

he was thinking deep. He didn't seem anywhere near as hot and miserable as I was. His dark hair was freshly combed. Sprays of freckles stood out against his fair skin.

"I like books that make me feel things," Davey said finally. "I think that's the entire point of a book."

I waved my arms in wide circles. "But why in the world would anyone ever choose sadness when there are so many other things to be? I'd rather feel happy because someone is winning a gazillion dollars. Or scared because someone is fighting a monster. Or *curious* because of a puzzle or a surprising twist."

"The *whole* book isn't sad," Davey said stubbornly. "It's mostly happy, except the part at the end."

"But looking back at it, it messes up the whole story," I told him. "How can you read the whole thing again knowing something bad is about to happen?"

Davey loosened the jar lid. He lobbed another candy in my direction before placing one in his mouth.

"If a book is sad and stays that way, then it *would* be depressing," Davey said slowly. "But this book starts happy, gets sad, and then at the end, it's happy and sad mixed up together. That's what makes it special, that it has both."

"But it'll break your heart." This time, *my* voice sounded stubborn.

"Worth it," Davey said, opening his book again.

I turned over the M&M in my mouth, considering his words. My brother was a bit of a genius—not the boring

kind who always knew the answer. The good kind, who asked questions that my own brain could never think up. The kind who helped me see the world differently. Sometimes I thought that was why he'd always been on the quiet side—it was as if he needed to conserve energy to power the enormous gears in his brain.

I shifted on the branch, the deep furrows of the tree pressing their pattern against my back. Even on a hot day, the marsh was full of life. Thick thatches of smooth cordgrass rose up like islands among the deep-blue streams. Fiddler crabs scuttled along the shore's sandy edges. Terapins clambered onto logs, soaking up sunbeams for the energy they'd need when hunting their supper. Even the mussels had their own quiet purpose, holding their shells wide enough to filter food particles into their tiny mouths.

Sunshine dappled the water and made me squint. I searched for the clownish pair of otters we'd spotted earlier. Davey had wasted no time in naming them Fritz and Opal, after the brother and sister from the *Binky Bunnies* cartoon we'd loved when we were small. We decided that Fritz and Opal must be young because they were so playful, splashing and rolling as much as they searched for food. And when they were successful with the crawdad or turtle or shrimp they pursued, their chattering celebration echoed throughout the marsh.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I noticed something strange.

I studied it for a moment, puzzled. Too firm for an animal. Too unyielding for a plant.

My heart pounded. I scrunched my eyes up tight and counted slowly to thirty. I didn't want to alert Davey and get his hopes up only to realize that I'd been taken in by a shadow or floating stick.

But when I looked again, it was still there. One, two, three, four, *five* shapes poked above the surface of the water. They were completely still.

I scooted way out to the end of my branch. Then I hooked my legs and flipped upside down to get a better look. That was when I saw it.



CHAPTER 4

If you read the first page, I told you exactly what to expect: a hand. That's the truth.

But even when the same word is used, people imagine different things. For example—if I said “hand,” Mom would automatically think about muscles and bones and veins and tendons and all the biology stuff. Dad loves poetry, so he would probably consider how a hand can be soft like flower petals or something goofy like that.

Some people might picture a disgusting chopped-off object floating in the water, even though I already told you I don't like books about dead things.

It wasn't that kind of hand at all. It was made of metal. It was part of a statue.

The thing about writing is this: if you go a few lines

and realize the story isn't right, you can take the words back. It's easy to erase—to zip them back just as I would with the line on a fishing reel.

It's not always that way. Sometimes things can't go back to exactly how they were before—like if you say unkind words to someone. Our neighbor Mrs. Ochoa would say that's like toothpaste. Once it comes out of the tube, you can't replace it.

That's why writing is so great. If you don't like something, you can try again—squeezing and shaping the words like modeling clay until they make sense. You can back up and start again until you're happy.



CHAPTER 5

“Davey,” I said. “You have to see this.”

Davey glanced in my direction. Then he looked back sharply. When he realized that I was hanging from my knees, he slammed his book shut and sat up straight.

“Bex! What are you doing? You’ll break your neck!” His voice was stern, which only made me giggle.

I swung back and forth, which made the branch shake. “Just *try*, Davey—it’s fun!”

“Absolutely not!” he answered. “You’re going to make this whole tree fall over.”

I opened my mouth, about to tease him for being afraid. But when I noticed how pale he’d turned under his freckles, I hoisted myself back onto the branch. “Sorry. Come see, okay? There’s something in the water.”

Davey nodded and I was forgiven. He inched over onto my branch. We lay flat on our bellies and craned our necks to the side.

I pointed. "Over there."

Davey's eyebrows wrinkled in a frown. "What is it?"

"I have no idea. But I'm going to find out."

Before Davey could stop me, I'd already jumped onto the next bough, sidestepped Squish (who twitched her tail judgmentally), and slid down the tree.

I kicked off my sneakers and waded into the marsh, treading carefully to avoid the wrack that lined the shore. Wrack was dried-out cordgrass, which turned pale after it died. It washed in and out with the tide, floating on top of the water. For some reason, it always seemed to collect around The Thumb. At some point, Davey had taken to calling this area the River Sticks, which I think was a reference to something in mythology. Davey had a lot of genius jokes like that.

By the time Davey made his cautious climb down from the tree, I was in past my ankles.

"Watch out for snakes!" he called. "Don't walk on any oyster shells!"

Not for the first time, I wondered how two people so different could have been born to the same parents. But when I glanced back and noticed him chewing his bottom lip and wiggling his nervous feet, my heart softened up real fast. I didn't have to see Davey to know what he would

think or say or do—when I closed my eyes, I could feel it in my heart. That’s how it was with Davey and me.

“I promise it’s fine,” I yell back. “It’s only the River Sticks, nothing to be afraid of!”

Davey plopped down, cross-legged. One hand clutched his red backpack to his chest. The other petted Squish, who must have scrambled down behind him.

As the water deepened, sticky mud sucked at my feet. Normally, the fish would dart away, but they seemed listless. There was nothing cool or refreshing about this water.

Then something skimmed across my hand. I drew back in time to see a blue crab swimming away. At the nearby shore, an audience of small fiddler crabs stood watching.

“There sure are a lot of crabs here,” I said over my shoulder. “Blues and fiddlers.”

“Please be careful, Bex,” Davey cried. “One wrong step and that mud will swallow you up!”

Marsh mud—called pluff mud—could be dangerous. But I knew how to walk carefully and which spots to avoid.

“Make sure you shuffle your feet,” Davey added.

I ignored him, holding my breath as I approached. Part of me wondered if the hand had been a trick of the light—or if the mysterious object would sink and I’d never know what it was. But as I moved closer, the thing in front of me only looked more real.

I reached out and touched metal, smooth and solid.

“They’re fingers, Davey!” I shouted, my voice cracking with glee. “It’s a hand!”

Under the surface were a wrist and the beginnings of an arm. The object was bigger than I was—maybe even bigger than Dad. It was made of metal with a greenish cast and it glistened in the water.

“I think it’s a statue,” I yelled. “But it’s too murky to see much.”

“Be careful!” Davey fussed.

The ground sloped downward. “The water gets deeper here! I’m going to go under.”

He gasped. “Don’t you dare, Bex! We aren’t supposed to swim without an adult!”

I took a deep breath and ducked my head under the surface. Although I couldn’t see clearly, I could feel it. Made of the same material as the hand, strangely cool in the warm water.

I stood up fast. “It is a statue! A whole person!”

Davey’s jaw dropped open, but I didn’t pause for conversation. I stuck my head underwater again. This time, I didn’t bother opening my eyes. Instead, I traced the statue with my hands. Under the water, I located a head, a torso, and a pair of legs. I pushed at it to see if it would move—but it didn’t budge.

Eventually, I had enough. As I returned to shore, I couldn’t stop grinning. Worry radiated off Davey. I don’t think he breathed deep until I was back on solid ground.

He didn't speak when I got there but simply handed me a candy. He usually measured them out carefully to make them last. Another M&M immediately after the ones in the tree meant he really *was* upset.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I said. "I'm okay, see?"

Davey pinched his nose. "You stink—and you're covered in slime."

Even though he wouldn't admit he was worried, I knew he was relieved to see me next to him once more. I looked down at my legs. Pluff mud was the stickiest, gooiest substance in the universe. Some people, like Davey, thought its odor was like rotten eggs. To me, the scent was strong but not unpleasant. It was interesting and rich, the smell of all the life that the marsh had ever contained—the result of thousands of years of river and ocean mingling with each passing of the tides.

I rubbed my left foot against my right shin. "It's not so bad."

Davey's eyes twinkled. "If Mom sees you, you are going to be in *so* much trouble."

Without answering, I scooped a handful of mud from my legs and launched it at him. It landed in a splatter, falling short of him by several inches.

He ran back, shrieking and laughing.

I shook my fist, pretending to be mad. "You better watch out or I'll turn you into a slime monster, too!"

He shuddered, grinning. "Better not!"

I wrung out the bottom of my T-shirt, releasing a cascade of water. "Let's go back so I can change clothes."

Davey placed Squish in the boat and then climbed in. I buckled my life jacket before launching us into the water. My mind spun with questions. I didn't know what the statue was or where it came from. But I knew that I had to find out.



CHAPTER 6

On Dad's truck, there was a bumper sticker that said, "You can't buy happiness, but you can buy a boat," and that's how I felt about the *True Blue*. She represented freedom and I loved every inch of her, from the high sides that Davey liked to rest against to the wooden seats to the oars that balanced perfectly in my hands as I pulled us through the water. Boats have their own personalities, and the *True Blue* was thoughtful and sturdy, the perfect friend to Davey and me.

My brother bubbled over with questions. "Who do you think put the statue there? What is it made of? How did it get out there in the marsh?"

It made me smile to see his excitement. Before answering, I rowed a few strokes, flexing the muscles in my back and arms as we traveled through the smooth water. The

feeling of happening upon a big mystery was absolutely delicious. I knew exactly how Davey and I would be spending our summer.

“I have no idea. It was solid, too. Heavy.”

Davey’s eyes squinched in a frown. “We didn’t see it yesterday. Do you think someone put it in the water last night?”

I navigated around a patchy island of cordgrass. “It’s stuck deep in the mud. I think it’s been there a long time—the water level finally lowered enough for us to see it.”

Davey’s eyes widened. “Bex! What if it’s from a pirate ship?”

Something told me that the statue wasn’t *that* old, but I didn’t want to discourage him. It had been so long since he’d talked like this. “Maybe. There weren’t any markings on it.”

“I bet it’s pirate treasure,” Davey said confidently. “We should ask Mom and Dad. They might know something about it.”

I hesitated. The discovery was important—*special*. Davey had been so quiet lately. I knew Mom and Dad were worried. I’d become used to their conversations suddenly halting the moment I entered the room, and I was sure they were talking about him.

When we were out at The Thumb, things were different. Davey and I always felt happier and freer when we were there. And the statue was the kind of project he’d get really

excited about. Maybe it was a way to help him. We should keep it to ourselves, for a little while anyway. If other people got involved, his spark of curiosity might flicker out.

But I didn't want to say that *directly*.

"Let's see what we can figure out on our own, without telling anyone else."

Davey tilted his head. "But why?"

"Remember two years ago, when you went through your detective novel phase?"

Davey sat up straighter. He took pride in the breadth and depth of his reading interests.

"Of course," he said happily. "I love surprise twists. Every good mystery has one."

I smiled to myself. "In any of those books, did the kids ever tell an adult about what they were doing? Even when the whole investigation could have been cleared up with one simple conversation?"

Davey frowned, prodding a mosquito bite on his knee.

I cleared my throat. "Besides, things change once adults stick their noses in. It will be their project, not ours."

Davey seemed to think that over. "How will we learn about the statue if we can't ask anyone?"

"Obviously, the Internet," I answered.

His eyebrows drew together. "No one ever uses the Internet in books."

I grinned. "*We* can, though, because this is real life."

Davey chewed his lip thoughtfully.

I squinted at the sun reflecting off the water. “We’ll tell them after we know a little more. Promise.”

He nodded. “All right, Bex. We’ll keep it to ourselves—for now.”

With his words, he leaned back and closed his eyes. He did this sometimes as I rowed, and I didn’t mind. He always trusted me to get us where we needed to go. Besides, he needed time to be quiet with his thoughts, so his giant brain could think.

My rowing found a rhythm as the oars cut through the water with a familiar *woosh-plop* sound. As we traveled, I wondered what other secrets the marsh might contain. It was a place of extremes coming together. Sometimes the water was fresh and sometimes it was salty. Sometimes it flooded and sometimes it drained. It was not a river and not an ocean, not one thing or another but somehow both.

“Ptooeey,” Davey spat, and I realized I’d steered us into a cloud of gnats.

“Sorry.” The marsh was home to all manner of bugs. Really, the place belonged to them and the rest of us just visited.

Soon enough, our dock came into view. Davey crouched, ready to leap onto the dock. My brother had practiced this jump enough that he always landed with a knee-wobbling *thunk*.

“Nicely done,” I said, tossing the line. When we got close enough, I placed Squish on the dock and she twisted

against Davey's legs like they'd been separated for hours. He scooped her up and she gazed at him, blinking. Davey once told me that was how cats said "I love you," and he would know. He's an expert.

Together, we looped the rope around the cleat, wrapping it around, up, and forward until it made an infinity symbol.

We scrambled up the short incline to our house. Slung low to the ground, it had white siding, a brick chimney, and flower boxes under the windows. Most of the house was on the first level, but at some point, a spiral staircase and a second story had been added—one small bedroom for Davey and one for me.

I was reaching for the screen door when Davey yanked at my sleeve. With his other hand, he pointed at the open kitchen window. I could just barely hear the faint strains of the music for Mom's favorite podcast. I froze. Usually, Mom left her kayak out to drain. When I hadn't seen it at the dock, I assumed she was gone. If Davey hadn't stopped me, I would have strolled inside slimy and goo-covered. Mom would ask how it happened and Davey always crumbled under direct questioning.

Before I could whisper "thank you," he turned and sprinted away. I followed, running quickly and quietly. That was the thing about having a brother like Davey. Even without words, we understood each other a lot better than most people do.



CHAPTER 7

With the garden hose, I rinsed off the worst of the muck.

Of course I couldn't resist spraying an arc of water toward Davey, who giggled and ducked under the stream. We played like that for a while—him dodging and me chasing him with the water.

“Hey, Bex! Hi!”

It was Millie Ochoa-Chen, waving wildly to us, a basket over one arm. My stomach tightened. There's nothing like a used-to-be friend to take a happy moment and turn it into marsh mud.

“Oh,” I said flatly. “Are you visiting again?”

Her grandma, Mrs. Ochoa, lived next door.

Millie squinted at me. “Every summer since I was six, remember?”

I remembered, all right. I used to look forward to those visits. Millie had many talents—besides speaking three languages, she was double-jointed in her thumbs and roasted perfect marshmallows. Her dad was Taiwanese-American and her mom was Mexican-American and Millie attended an immersion school in San Francisco. She was generous with her knowledge and had taught Davey and me how to say “fart,” “butt,” and “snot” in Mandarin, Spanish, and French. But at the end of last summer, something changed between Millie and me. I knew it would never be the same again.

I watched Davey sidle closer. He didn’t want to miss our discussion.

Millie followed my gaze. When she looked back at me, she was frowning faintly. “Why are you randomly getting water everywhere? It’s not good for the lawn.”

Millie had changed. Last summer, she would have joined in. She might have pulled out the water blasters that Mrs. Ochoa kept in her garage—she always saved the yellow one for Davey. But it seemed that Millie had become too mature for life in general.

“It wasn’t *random*,” I said. “I’m rinsing off.”

Millie rolled her eyes. “Ooookay,” she said, stretching the first syllable out long. “You were getting it on the grass, though. My grandma says it’s important not to overwater. Plus, didn’t you hear that there’s a drought?”

I switched off the spigot with a squeak. Davey leaned against the house casually, looking back and forth between

us. I could feel his ears straining to listen. Davey was curious by nature and I never told him why Millie and I stopped being friends.

Millie's hair had grown since last summer. She wore it in one long, glossy ponytail and with a clip that matched the pink flowers on her dress. Delicate gold jewelry swung from her ears. It was basically the outfit of a grown-up.

Millie pointed to my hair. "You got bangs."

I shrugged, pushing them to the side. "I did it myself. They're kind of uneven."

"I like it," she said.

I snorted. "My mom didn't."

Millie laughed. "I bet."

I grinned back for a moment—then I remembered that we weren't friends anymore.

Millie touched her earrings, which shone against her warm beige skin. "Bex, is everything okay? How come you never wrote back to my letters?"

Ugh. There was no good way to answer that, especially because I'd shoved them in my desk drawer, unread. It was easier to ignore Millie when she was thousands of miles away. Sometimes my whole life needed a desk drawer where I could stuff all the complicated and difficult things.

I decided to change the subject. "What do you have there?"

Millie's eyes widened, like she'd forgotten the basket

on her arm. “Grandma got these in the store. She’s collaborating with a jam maker and making all kinds of cool flavors.”

She handed it to me. Nestled inside a blue gingham cloth were several jewel-colored jars of jam, including blackberry habanero, cucumber mint, and guava fig. Mrs. Ochoa’s store was like a little farmers’ market, with lots of locally produced items. These had a label on them that said Gingerbread Island, which was several islands north of here.

“That’s nice—thanks.” Mrs. Ochoa was always making us an extra batch of soup or a casserole or cookies. It was nice to have a neighbor like that. It wasn’t Mrs. Ochoa’s fault that I was mad at Millie.

Millie paused. “We could hang out this summer. I’ll be around, you know. Unless you’re busy.”

Davey raised his eyebrows at me. I could tell he was wondering if Millie could help with the statue. Davey always wanted everyone to get along.

I shot him a look and then turned back to Millie. “I am pretty busy doing stuff for my mom. You know how it is.”

Millie nodded slowly. “Right, how is she doing?”

Fifteen years ago, Mom came to the island to do research in the marsh. My dad was the reason she stayed. After all this time, she says sometimes she feels like an outsider—as if people are wondering if she’ll stay. Islanders

can be funny like that. Dad, Davey, and I were born here. But even though Mom has lived here for a long time, sometimes she's still treated as new.

So it burned me a bit that Millie was asking after Mom. Millie wasn't an islander, of course, even though her grandma was. I didn't want Millie to think she could check on Mom like that.

"Great," I said, more sharply than I intended. "Fantastic, actually. She's never been better."

Millie gave me an odd look but then smoothed the front of her dress. "If you end up having time, you know where to find me."

She walked back to Mrs. Ochoa's and went inside. The screen door slammed shut behind her.

Davey waved goodbye, then turned back to me. "Millie's nice. How come we aren't friends with her anymore?"

I returned the hose to its reel, pretending not to hear him.

"Maybe she could help us investigate the statue," Davey added.

I scowled. "We said we weren't going to tell anyone."

Davey shook his head. "We said we wouldn't tell any *adults*."

I groaned. As much as I usually loved it when my brother argued with me, this was not the time or the place for it. I knew what I was doing. Back in the boat, he had been overflowing with questions. I'd heard him talk more

than I had in a long time. But as soon as Millie was around, he got quiet again.

“It’s *our* adventure, no one else’s. Okay?”

He chewed his bottom lip. Finally, he nodded. “Just us. Davey and Bex.”

That settled it. I breathed a sigh of relief. We had a plan for the summer, and it was going to fix everything I’d been worried about. The secret of the statue had to be kept to Davey and me.