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## PURPOSE COVE



"Cockles," Marnie told them. "Razorback. Scallop. Cat's paw. Coffee bean." Her grandchildren stood at attention as she held up each pale, salt-smoothed shape for them to study. Waves broke against the seawall and hissed back across the sand.

The children watched as she paused to peer into a shallow tide pool. Marnie was different from the groups of elderly shell-seekers who wandered the small stretch of beach at Porpoise Cove with plastic bags and buckets, scouring for washed-up treasure—she searched alone, her style meticulous and her eye ferocious. She walked fast and carried only a child's fishing net, more of a talisman than a tool. At sixty-one, she could still crouch on the slipperiest rocks, gripping green seaweed with her toes, agile enough to snatch up a promising find just before the surf came crashing over it.

The regulars on the beach recognized Marnie and addressed her shyly, usually to ask her opinion on some unusual object they'd discovered. After twenty-five years there, she was unofficially acknowledged as the shell expert of Hutchinson Island. She could spot a perfect white lady-slipper from ten feet. She could walk past a gleaming section of King conch that jutted out of the sand, knowing without needing a closer look that it was fragmented, worm-eaten, and not worth taking.

Addie and James were amazed at the scope of her knowledge. From the moment they arrived, pale and tired from a gray Boston winter, with their entire worldly belongings stuffed into two beaten-up suitcases, she began to teach them. Not the usual subjects one would expect children to be taught—though Marnie wasn't stupid; she had a shrewd mind for business, and kept strict finances. Instead, she taught them about the sky and the water, the right way to tie a lure on a fly pole, the types of creatures that lived nearby in the brackish Indian River. She taught them the cycle of the tides, the names of different birds that flocked along the jetty wall—the ones that ran across the sand, and the ones that dove beneath the waves. She wanted Addie and James to know Hutchinson Island, the world that was to become theirs, as well as she did—each rocky inlet, each moss-strung tree, the way the breezes sounded through the palms at different times of day.

On their first evening together, she took them walking along the beach at sunset. Addie was twelve, quiet and serious with dark, mournful eyes. James was only eight, still young enough to forget, in moments of temporary amusement, that his mother had died. He scurried across the

sand and his shadow followed, curling into itself when he paused to study the scattered ground.

"They're everywhere!" he shouted back to Marnie and Addie, who walked along the water's edge without speaking. Their shoes crunched over rows of pebbles and shell-pieces that stretched the length of the beach. Iridescent, pastel and bone-white shapes scattered in random piles, aglow in the pale evening light; smooth brown moon-snails and fishbone fragments rolling over each other in the retreating foam.

That was the first lesson Marnie taught them. Addie often thought of it in later years, during the loneliness of her adolescence, with the gradual dull acceptance that her life was now in Florida, in Hutchinson. Never again would she live in their old apartment in Boston, or hear her mother's slow, deep laughter, or eat take-out Thai food with her while they watched TV movies on rainy days. The knowledge was so sharp and real that for a while it seemed to choke her. She swallowed hard and it dissolved in her throat, finally, leaving a sour taste that never went away completely.

Hutchinson was a strange adjustment for her. It had a marina lined with sailboats and a Tiki restaurant looking out over the pier, but the sleepy streets, with their trinket-shops and old-lady boutiques, were mostly deserted. Few children lived on the island. Addie was overcome sometimes with longing for their old place on Commonwealth, its great long windows that looked over the intersection and the train tracks, the convenience store and the baseball field; she could stare out of them at any moment and see people moving in every direction.

She missed taking the T home on summer evenings and walking to their apartment, the gasoline-cigarettes-Chinese-kitchen smell of their neighborhood; she missed smiling hello to the homeless man outside 7-11 who insisted that Jesus loved her even when she had no money to give him. Now she and James drove an hour each morning on a bus down a flat, palm-lined highway to the Okeechobee School, and the few friends they made lived too far away to see very often.

They had moved into Marnie's apartment, above the Driftwood Oceanfront Motel's main office. A tiny, two-story stucco building wedged between the new rows of high-rise condominiums that lined the cove, the Driftwood appeared from a distance to be just that: a piece of something bigger, a remnant from the past that had washed up onshore. Marnie was not an unhappy woman, but years of working and living alone had made her hard. She considered herself an unsuccessful mother the first time around, and though she regarded Addie and James with maternal duty, she had to frequently remind herself that they were completely dependent on her. The one value she was determined to instill in her grandchildren was level-headedness, as their mother, Lola, had been a reckless and passionate woman; heedless of Marnie's disapproval, she had left Hutchinson and followed an

Australian surfer to the Northeast. Shortly after James was born, he went back to his native country and left his children and young wife scraping by in a small South-End-of-Boston apartment. Marnie often wondered, during the years' estrangement, what had become of the daughter she had raised. It wasn't until Lola's accident, though, that she was confronted with the reality of her remaining family, forced to be a part of it again.

They became a family, then—Marnie and Addie and James—in some sense of the word, though each member of their trinity functioned primarily as a solitary, independent being. Addie had her schoolwork, her sketchbooks filled with dark pictures. James had the ocean, and by the time he was twelve he grew his hair long and rode a skateboard to beaches where older boys taught him to surf. Marnie worked, as always, at the Driftwood, renovating the nine rooms every few years, giving the patrons information about the quickest way to get on A1A, and which was the fanciest restaurant on the beach. So time passed, and the tides washed over them, and they settled into their positions on the island, embedded there like clams buried in sand.

Marnie went walking everyday at low tide to search for shells, examining each with the same strict criteria: no wormholes, full noses, no discoloration. She filled her pockets with drills and snails. The morning that she met Dylan Maloney, she was bending to examine a pink-tinged cockle.

"Find anything good?"

Marnie straightened up and met eyes the color of cove water. A stocky, sun burnt man stood squinting at her.

"Not particularly," she replied, wiping her hands on her pant-legs. "Waiting for the full moon next week. Usually get the best assortment then."

The man looked impressed. "Is that right?" Marnie noted the tone of his voice, trying to place his accent. She waited for him to say something else, and after the silence and his smiling grew awkward, she blurted, "How about you? Anything good?"

"Eh," he shrugged. "Nothing much worth keeping. Just liked this one."

He stepped closer to her and held out his upturned palm, which cupped two still-connected halves of a dull, sun-bleached clam. Marnie studied it carefully.

"Not the most unusual," the man added. "I just liked it."

Marnie had similar conversations with local beachgoers and tourists more times than she could count, but they all seemed to have been practice for this one.

"It's a good find, actually," she informed him, suddenly self-conscious of the harshness of her voice, the tone of impatience behind it.

"Yeah?" he asked. "Think so?"

"Yes," she answered, too quickly. "It's complete, no chipping or discoloration, no wormholes. It's a nice shell."

He squinted at her again, and then laughed, though it sounded more like a cough. "Well, you seem to know what you're talking about, don't you? Let me ask you something else, if I may." Marnie nodded. "I was just standing here, wondering... Could a shell wash up here from some other shore, from all the way across the sea?"

Out on the jetty the morning fisherman were setting up rods and buckets, spacing themselves down the length of the rocky outcropping. Pelicans hung suspended over the surface of the water, their massive wings outstretched.

"From where, exactly?" Marnie asked.

"Why, Ireland." He sounded surprised, as though she should have known.

"I suppose," she replied. "I don't see why not..."

The man smiled at her again. "Well, I have, anyway—so it's surely possible!" He punctuated this with another high laugh. "Name's Dylan Maloney." He extended his hand. The lilt in his voice made everything he said sound plaintive, hesitant.

"Marnie. Marnie Lofting," she told him. Dylan explained that he was visiting Florida on holiday, staying with his brother and American sister-in-law in the nearby Sand Dollar Retirement Village Condominiums.

"Nice enough," he offered. "Very quiet."

Marnie told him that she lived in Hutchinson, had for her whole life, and that she owned the Driftwood Oceanfront Motel. After a few moments they had run the course of small talk, but neither made a motion to leave their positions in the sand. Marnie glanced at Dylan's face as he gazed out over the glassy cove, and felt an unsettling in her stomach, the stirrings of something long dormant. She reached up to tighten the loose bun she had pulled her hair into, quickly ran her hand down the front of her blouse, making sure each button was fastened.

"Well, there's one!" Dylan pointed toward the water, and Marnie glimpsed a dark, smooth shape disappearing back under the waves.

"Yes, they've arrived."

The porpoises came every spring. She often saw their sleek gray backs arching out of the water when she hung sheets on the clothesline. They usually stayed out by the boats, but occasionally a few would surface in the cloudy green water of the cove, leaping and chattering at captivated beachgoers who watched from the sand. Marnie advertised on the front of the Driftwood with a sign in black lettering that read "On Porpoise Cove," and for a while it had seemed that business was improving. When James first arrived he had pronounced it, "Purpose Cove," a name Marnie found ironic. It seemed that everyone lived

