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**Waddle I Do
without You?**

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For Rosa

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1 ADDIE

“Max! Where’d you go, my noble steed?”

Addie hurried down the beach, her sparkly jewel-studded leather riding boots sinking into the soft sand. To her right, the crystal clear waters of the Indian Ocean stretched on and on, the foamy tide lapping almost all the way to her feet. To her left, scraggly green bushes stretched all the way up to the woods in the distance. Addie slowed her pace and squinted, scanning the bushes for any sign of sprites—those clever little fairies with hypnotic eyes and translucent wings were always lurking around close to sunset, waiting for a chance to cause mischief. Maybe there were a few hiding in that rickety old rowboat?

Then she spotted a gray-and-white tail sticking out



of the bramble like an extremely fluffy shark fin. It wagged the moment she saw it, and Addie giggled.

The spell was broken.

“Okay, Max,” she called, making her way carefully through the brush. Tiny stickers clung to her dingy sneakers. They weren’t made of leather, and they weren’t boots, but Addie had sewn a couple of fake rhinestones on top, so they did sparkle a little. “We need to head back home. It’s going to get dark soon! Besides, we might run into a sprite out here.”

Max let out a little whine.

“I know, I know,” Addie said with a sigh. “There are no sprites. That we know of, anyway.”

Max lifted his shaggy head and gave a short, loud bark. Then he stuck his nose back into the brush.

“Did you find a stick?” Addie glanced at her phone. If they were even just a few minutes late, Dad would be super worried. “We don’t have time for fetch, Max!”

Max barked again. He didn’t budge, and Addie’s smile faded.

He hadn’t just found a particularly good stick. This was something important he wanted her to come take

a look at. Addie didn't hesitate. She stuffed her phone in her pocket and made her way through the brush.

When Addie reached Max, he lowered his head and sniffed at something. He looked up again, and Addie gasped.

"A sea turtle!" she said, kneeling down carefully and reaching out to stroke the tiny turtle's shell. "Oh, this is even cooler than a sprite. He's just a baby, Max," she said, smiling. The turtle was only a little bit bigger than the palm of Addie's hand, but she knew sea turtles could grow to be enormous. Even more enormous than Max, and he weighed over a hundred pounds!

The baby turtle lifted his head and gazed dolefully at Addie. "You've got a long way back to the water, little guy," Addie whispered, touching the top of the baby turtle's head. "Want some help getting home?"

The turtle didn't respond, obviously. But Addie often had conversations with all kinds of animals and sea creatures in her head. She imagined this baby turtle was saying, *Yes, please. I'd like to be back in the water before the sun sets or my mother will scold me.*

Addie carefully picked the baby turtle up with both hands. Max led the way out of the bushes, and the two of them strolled down the beach toward the water. The sun was already halfway below the horizon. Addie thought it looked like a glowing red orb that was gently warming the baby turtle's bathwater.

When the water crept up to her shoes, Addie stopped and crouched. "Here you go, little guy," she said, touching the turtle's head one last time before setting him gently in the shallow water. "Hope you don't get in trouble with your mom!"

The baby turtle crawled forward. A few seconds later, the water gently lifted him up. Addie couldn't help but laugh at the way his limbs flailed as the current carried him back out into the ocean.

But then a few seconds later, the water delivered him right back to Addie's feet.

"Uh-oh." Addie leaned over and scooped the turtle up again. She moved out a little farther, then tried to release him again. And again. And *again*.

Each time, the current just brought the baby turtle right back to land.

“He’s too light,” Addie told Max, picking up the turtle and looking around. “I need to get him farther out there. Hmm . . .”

Her gaze fell on the rickety old rowboat.

Never, ever go out in a boat alone! Addie had heard Dad say it at least a thousand times. It was his number one rule—and he had *lots* of rules. But Addie’s feet were already moving toward the rowboat, and then she was dragging it toward the water, and then she was climbing inside with the turtle.

Max barked sharply at her as the boat drifted away from the coast. “It’s fine, Max!” Addie called, picking up the oars. “I’ll be right back!”

It wasn’t like she was going out to sea. Not the way Dad did when he went fishing.

“Here’s a good spot,” Addie said, picking up the baby turtle. “Off you go!”

She lowered her hands into the water. The baby turtle wiggled his limbs, then took off swimming with a speed that surprised Addie. She laughed as he disappeared into the deep blue water.

Was it weird that she felt a little bit jealous of the

turtle? Imagine having the whole entire ocean as your home! Addie loved snorkeling. She was constantly amazed at the beautiful world that existed below the surface. The coast of Australia where she lived was home to a ton of unique wildlife, and she couldn't get enough of it. Every creature, from sea dragons to koalas, totally fascinated her.

And they were everywhere! Anytime Addie and Max took a walk, they met a new creature. The little house where they lived with Dad was right on the coast. Even though the city of Perth was only a fifteen-minute drive away, there were hardly any people out here.

“Arf! Arf!”

Max's distant bark startled Addie. How long had she been sitting here while the boat drifted farther out in the water? She grabbed the oars and began rowing back to shore. But every time the boat got close to the sand, the current would pull her back out a few feet.

Finally, Addie tossed down the oars and sighed. “Sorry, shoes,” she said, swinging one leg over the side of the boat and wincing at the chill of the water. It was almost waist-deep, and by the time Addie dragged the

boat back onto the beach, her jeans and shoes were soaked through.

Max nuzzled Addie's hand with his big wet nose, and she suddenly realized the sun was about to slip below the horizon. "Uh-oh. Dad!"

Together, Addie and Max began to run. Or rather, Addie jogged as fast as she could, with her sneakers squelching in the sand, while Max loped along easily at her side.

The coast curved gently up to the north, and Addie made sure to stay just close enough to the water so that Dad would be able to see her and Max coming from the kitchen window. Dad could be kind of a worrywart sometimes, especially when Addie lost track of time when she was outside exploring.

Last year, Addie had been at their neighbor Mrs. Miller's house while Dad was at his trivia night. She'd been in the yard playing with Mrs. Miller's chickens when she spotted a possum—*flying!* Addie had raced into the trees after the amazing creature, which she was pretty sure was called a sugar glider.

She hadn't found it. And okay, she'd ended up

getting a little bit lost for a few hours. But Max had found her, hadn't he? So really, Dad grounding her for a week had been an overreaction.

Max was twelve years old, just like she was. Dad had adopted Max right after Addie was born, and before her mom passed away. He had tons of photos of tiny baby Addie curled up in her crib next to the world's shaggiest gray-and-white puppy.

"This walk turned out to be a rescue mission!" Addie told Max cheerfully, huffing and puffing as she jogged. "Not that the baby turtle needed rescuing. I'm sure he would've made it to the water eventually. But boy, I bet his mom wouldn't have been happy if it was after dark!"

Max's tongue lolled out the side of his mouth.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Addie said, picking up speed. "Dad's not going to be happy either if we don't hurry!"

Addie could just make out their one-story house painted a cheery yellow, with a little boathouse not far behind it. Sometimes, when she was in the distance like this, Addie pretended she lived in a fairy-tale cottage, only instead of being in a mysterious forest that

might have witches who lurked in candy houses or trolls that hid under bridges, her cottage was surrounded by Australia's most magical wildlife. And as the hero of the fairy tale, Addie could speak all their languages.

Dad bought their house way before Addie was born. As a fisherman, he wanted a quiet little part of the beach where he could take his boat out and the fish wouldn't be disturbed by tourists or surfers. This was the only home she had ever had, and she loved it. The best part? There was a little island right off the coast that was the home of the littlest species of penguins in the world—blue penguins, also called fairy penguins.

So really, it wasn't hard for Addie to imagine she lived in a fairy tale!

Even so, she got lonely every once in a while, especially when Dad was out fishing. Addie was home-schooled, so she spent a lot of time with Max napping at her feet while she wrote essays and finished her math worksheets. Still, even fairy-tale heroes liked to hang out with actual kids sometimes.

A few months ago, Dad had signed her up for a

youth environmental group called Eco-Guardians. They met every Saturday to talk about local environmental causes and explore all the wildlife around Perth. It was definitely the best birthday gift ever!

“Did I tell you we’re going to the Leda Nature Reserve this weekend?” Addie told Max. He snorted once, which meant, *Yes, a hundred times*. “It’s going to be a pretty long hike, boy. You’re going to have to rest up!”

Max gave her what was decidedly a very derisive look. Addie grinned. When Max was a puppy, he had even more energy than she did! Walks like this were more like runs, with her struggling to keep up with his constant pouncing from one place to the next, stopping to sniff only for a few seconds before charging out into the waves, then tearing back toward her, sopping wet, with seaweed clinging to his thick fur.

Now Addie was the one sopping wet. She wished she could give herself a good shake the way Max did, but that probably wouldn’t dry off her jeans.

Addie’s phone buzzed in her pocket (thank goodness for waterproof phone cases), and she pulled it out eagerly. She usually lost reception on these walks, but

now that she was getting closer to the house a few notifications had popped up.

“It’s Bree!” she exclaimed, opening the messages app. Bree and Jake were Addie’s two best friends from Eco-Guardians.

Bree

You guys want to come over after the hike on Saturday? Movie night!

Addie slowed her pace a little, but Max kept going. As she was typing, Jake responded with three thumbs-up emojis. Addie bounced up and down a little as she hit send.

Addie

Yes please! Just let me check with my dad.

Bree

Cool!

Addie shoved her phone in her pocket and broke into a run, following Max all the way to the house. She waved at Dad, who stood at the kitchen window, and he waved back. Addie breathed a sigh of relief as

she slowed down a little. She'd made it home in time—barely.

But she still had to change out of her wet clothes before Dad saw. She didn't want to risk getting in trouble, especially when she had to ask Dad about movie night.

Addie knew that he would want to call Bree's parents first since he'd never met them before. But once he talked to them, he was bound to say yes. Right?

Addie tried not to feel impatient as she hurried up the porch steps after Max. Dad hadn't said no yet! But she couldn't help thinking about how Jake had responded right away. He probably hadn't even had to ask for permission. Meanwhile, Dad still asked Mrs. Miller to come over and babysit anytime he went out at night. Addie was pretty positive Bree and Jake didn't need babysitters anymore.

Inside, Addie breathed in a rich familiar aroma. She kicked off her soggy shoes by the door as Max trotted over to his water bowl and began to lap messily, splashing flicks all over the little rug under the bowl. When he was a puppy, Max would "dig" in his

water with his big paws, causing a mini tsunami every time. He hadn't done that in a long time, but they still kept the rug there just in case.

Taking a deep breath, Addie tried to tiptoe past the kitchen to her room.

“Addie?”

Dad poked his head out of the kitchen, and Addie froze. She spun around and smiled brightly. “Hi!”

“Dinner’s just about ready!”

Addie followed Dad into the kitchen, where a stockpot was bubbling merrily on the stove. Dad was fresh out of the shower and already wearing his pajamas, his brown hair wet and messy. Addie knew he’d be out like a light right after dinner, since he woke up when it was still dark to take the boat out on the water.

“Is that ham and pea soup?” Addie asked eagerly, peering into the pot.

“I had tons of peas left over from our last market trip,” Dad explained, taking out his earbuds and slipping them into his pocket. “I figure the weather is only going to get warmer from here, might as well have soup while we still can!”

“Yum!” Addie began to set the little table with two bowls, two spoons, and two napkins. She opened her mouth to tell Dad about Bree’s text, but then—

“How was the walk?” Dad asked. Then he frowned. “Why are your jeans so wet?”

“So . . . funny story!” Addie said lightly as Max ambled into the kitchen. “Max found a baby sea turtle.”

Max sat next to the pantry door where they kept his food and gave her an expectant look. *It’s dinner time for all of us, Addie.* That was what that look meant.

Dad was smiling. “A baby sea turtle, really?”

“Yeah! In the brush. We helped him get back to the water. It was so cute!”

Addie opened the pantry door and pulled out the plastic container, scooping two heaps of food into Max’s bowl. Once Max was chomping down happily, Addie turned back to find Dad looking at her expectantly.

“But how did you get so wet?”

Addie shrugged. “Oh, well, the current kept carrying the turtle back in, so I had to go out a little farther.”

Dad looked amused. “You waded out up to your waist?”

Yes, Addie tried to say. But she couldn’t. Addie sometimes thought maybe a witch had cursed her as a baby so that she could never tell a lie—at least not to Dad. She always ended up blurting out the truth.

“I took that old rowboat out just far enough to let the turtle go and I rowed back to the shore just fine but I couldn’t get close enough to the sand so I had to jump out and drag the boat back and everything turned out *fine!*”

Dad’s smile faded. “Addie. You took a boat out alone?”

Addie winced. “Barely! It wasn’t that far.”

“You know the rule.” Dad’s brow furrowed as he stirred the soup. “Being out on the water can be unpredictable. Even close to shore. Did you stop and think before you got in that boat?”

Stop and think. Dad was always encouraging Addie to do that. She chewed her lip nervously. “I *thought,*” she told him. “But I didn’t *stop.* The baby turtle needed help—it was an emergency!”

“And what’s the rule about emergencies?” Dad asked.

Addie hung her head. “Call you?”

“Right.”

“I’m sorry,” Addie said, and she meant it. Now that she thought about it, Dad could have helped her make sure the baby turtle got back home. But in the moment, Addie just wanted to fix the problem *now*.

“It’s okay,” Dad said, turning back to the soup. “Just remember for next time.”

“Okay.” Addie paused. “So you know how Eco-Guardians have that hike on Saturday?”

Dad chuckled. “At the reserve? Yes, honey. You’ve only mentioned it about a hundred times this week.”

“Well, Bree just texted and asked if maybe I could come watch a movie at her house after.”

“That sounds fun,” Dad said, turning off the stove. “Can you get her parents’ phone number for me so I can have a chat with them first?” He turned and caught her mouthing the words along with him. Addie winced, but Dad just chuckled. “I didn’t say no, honey.

I just want to get to know your new friend's parents first, okay?"

Addie nodded. "Yeah. No problem."

She pulled out what was left of the bread they'd gotten from the market last weekend and began to cut a few thick slices. As she did, her phone buzzed again, and she slipped it out of her pocket. This time, it was a TikTok notification.

Bree and Jake both loved TikTok and uploaded videos a few times a day. They convinced Addie to make an account, but hardly anyone had watched the few videos she'd posted of the beach. Jake's videos were usually a lot of goofy dances that he made up, or videos of the dogs at the animal shelter in Perth where he volunteered. Bree's videos were usually all about climate change and tips on how to be less wasteful—but she always delivered them in silly voices that made Addie laugh so hard she would have to watch the video five times just to catch all of it.

This notification was a new video Jake had shared, and Addie giggled as she watched him and Bree dancing while waiting in line at the corner store near

their school. Another kid joined in, then another, and even the shop owner joined in as he rang up Jake's bag of Cheezels!

Addie paused to hear the video, then got back to slicing the bread. The video made her smile, but it also made her feel kind of left out. Bree and Jake were in each other's videos a lot because they would film them during lunch or at recess. When they first found out that Addie was homeschooled, they thought it was awesome.

"You can sleep as late as you want!" Jake said, shaking his head in awe.

Bree had gestured to her green-and-blue checkered skirt. "Forget sleep. You don't have to wear a uniform! I'm so jealous."

And in a lot of ways, Addie agreed. She could take long breaks from schoolwork and go for a walk on the beach and explore. Plus, Dad was a really great teacher.

But she couldn't help feeling jealous, too. Jealous that Bree and Jake got to see each other and all their other friends every single day while Addie was always just counting down the hours until Saturday.

As if he'd read her mind, Max came up and nuzzled her hand again. Smiling, Addie tore off a tiny piece of bread and tossed it to him.

"You're right, boy. I get to hang out with you every day," she said softly, scratching Max behind the ears.

But she couldn't help wishing she could see her other friends more often, too. Watching her friends' videos made her feel like a lonely princess locked in a tower—only Addie's hair wasn't anywhere near long enough to climb down and escape.