

SWIMMING
with
DOLPHINS

JESSIE PADDOCK

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Chapter 1

For probably the first time ever, we're silent. Cady, Kaytee, and I sit at our usual yellow table at Jake's Freeze, our favorite ice cream shop. In front of Cady sits a dish of soft-serve swirl with hot fudge. It looks like a melting volcano. Kaytee stabs a spoon into her cup of strawberry ice cream. I resist the urge to pick up a crayon and doodle on the scrap paper scattered among our scoops, because our attention is focused on something else: the empty chair parked at the end of the table.

At least a minute goes by. I fiddle with my left earring, a small silver stud in the shape of a dolphin. I got it for my birthday almost a year ago. I never take it off.

"This is hard." I sigh.

"Harder than the last chair-naming ceremony, for sure," Kaytee agrees. "But we got this."

"What about Beatrice?" Cady suggests.

"That makes her sound old," I say.

"More like *vintage*, but fine." Cady rolls her eyes, pretending

to be annoyed. Cady and I often disagree, but we only love each other more for it.

I grin and take another lick of my cone: rocky road with chocolate sprinkles. Always rocky road with chocolate sprinkles. Jake's makes the best rocky road in all of Iowa City, and it's not just because his is the only ice cream shop with actual homemade ice cream. It sounds cheesy, but ice cream made with love . . . well, you get it.

"Sapphire?" Cady suggests.

"That wouldn't make sense. She's black and purple, not green," I say.

"Sapphires are blue," Kaytee reminds her gently.

"You both are so literal," Cady says.

"We're literal Libras," I joke.

We all chuckle. None of us knows much about astrology; just that our October birthdays make us all Libras.

"If we want to be accurate here, we need something that really implies 'girl-boss,'" Kaytee murmurs.

"Def," Cady and I agree in unison.

Again, we fall into silence. The one-day-out-of-the-box, good-as-new wheelchair practically sparkles in the early-afternoon light.

More silence.

Cady, Kaytee, and I have been BFFs for six years. C2K

Squad, we call ourselves, because Cady's name starts with a C, and Kaytee's and mine start with Ks. In addition to having the same name (despite different spellings), we all have October birthdays. We always have a joint birthday party. Not to brag, but our parties are the best. The. Best. Everyone knows it. Every year we pick a different theme, but the thing that makes them so fun is that everybody is invited. None of that nonsense where the "cool" kids exclude the "less cool" kids. The first year of our joint party we decided it was too stressful to even think about guest list politics. Come one, come all, and pretty much everyone comes. Afterward, the three of us always sleep over at my house, where my parents have a Rice Krispies Treat cake waiting.

We've been planning our upcoming thirteenth birthdays all summer long. It was going to be the most epic yet.

That was, until . . .

I try not to think about it. I grab a crayon. *Bluetiful*, the wrapper reads. I begin to sketch the only thing I ever really sketch. Mr. Jake equips every table in his shop with a jar of crayons and scrap paper. "Sketches and scoops go together like whipped cream and sundaes," he explained when I asked him about it years ago.

"She's really a beauty," I say, licking the few remaining sprinkles off the surface of my scoop.

"Hmm," Cady and Kaytee hum in agreement.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Mr. Jake wiping off a nearby table. After Cady and Kaytee, I think I will miss Mr. Jake the most. I've spent countless hours at Jake's Freeze. On Friday nights, it is *the* place to be. My ice cream order hasn't changed in years, but he always lets me come behind the counter to look at any new special flavors anyway. The ledge on the customer-facing side of the freezer is just a few inches too tall for me to see over, but around back, where the scoopers stand, the edge doesn't come up as high and I can peer inside, no problem. I've been a certified VIP at Jake's since I won the Name the Flavor contest when I was in second grade. Dolphin Leap, a delicious mix of blueberry and vanilla cream, stayed on the menu that whole year. I always thought I'd get a job scooping ice cream for Mr. Jake the summer I turned fourteen.

I push the thought out of my head.

This concentrated silence is starting to get to me. "We can talk about something else," I say. "I don't want to take up our final minutes together stressing about a name. We should be thinking about our outfits for the first day of school." *Not that they're going to see mine*, I think. I won't be going into seventh grade with Kaytee and Cady. Iowa City Middle for them, and Fernbank Middle School, all the way down in Florida, for me. That's right: No hope of being in the same English class, no chance at arriving at our first seventh-grade dance arm in arm,

definitely not going to Resurrect Summer . . . this list goes on.

“Don’t be silly!” Kaytee interjects. “This is important.”

“Yeah, team effort,” Cady confirms.

My heart smiles. I love my friends.

“It’s got to be the perfect name.” Cady furrows her brow; that’s her thinking face. “Show some Midwestern flair to those kids down in Florida.”

It took less convincing than I expected for my parents to get me this chair. Not like they would deny me a wheelchair. It’s how I get around, after all. Always have, always will. But this one is super fancy. Like, less than twenty pounds, state-of-the-art, and even comes in my favorite color. Major upgrade. A brand-new chair would have been out of the question (wheelchairs aren’t cheap). But Mom is a pro at finding great deals online.

My old chair, Wiggles, wasn’t necessarily ready to officially retire, though she was looking a little battered around the edges. I didn’t put it quite this way—I have manners, of course—but since Mom and Dad are moving us all the way to Fernbank, Florida, less than sixty days before my thirteenth birthday, with basically no warning, away from everything I know and love, I figured a spiffy new ride wasn’t too much to ask for. I was born and raised in Iowa City, so I don’t know a ton about being the new kid, but I’m pretty sure that showing up on the first day of seventh grade in a clunky, not-so-polished chair would be a major faux pas.

“I got it,” Cady begins. I tear my eyes from my drawing—not my best work, but not my worst, either—and focus on Cady. She looks determined. “Priscilla!”

“That sounds like a doily,” I say with a giggle. Kaytee shakes her head and laughs.

“Or a princess,” Cady insists. “But now that I think about it, my cousin Priscilla acts like a total princess, and not in the cute or vintage way, so scratch that.”

“This beautiful hunk of rubber and steel and glory deserves a name as beautiful and glorious and strong as KT herself,” Kaytee says.

“Yes, and as *Libra-y* as KT herself,” Cady agrees.

“And as rubbery and steely. I’m as rubbery and steely as they come.” I flex my arm muscles and growl. We all start giggling, and then full-on laughing because without even saying anything we know that I’m referencing the time Enrique gave me a Valentine that was actually a stick figure drawing of him flexing.

The cell phone in my lap buzzes. A text from Lucy, my big sister, pops up: **5 away.**

“I’m really going,” I say. I was hoping this was all a dream that would just evaporate before it was too late.

As if they’re reading my mind—because, let’s be honest, both Kaytee and Cady can basically read my mind—Cady

throws her arm over my shoulder and Kaytee reaches across the table and takes hold of my free hand.

“Nothing is going to change,” Kaytee assures me. “Well, okay, like literally everything is going to change, but that’s only on the outside. On the inside, we’re the same. C2K Squad for life.”

I nod, but I feel tears rushing from that place where they hide, deep behind my eyeballs. I blink them away quickly and pop the final bite of my cone into my mouth.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be dramatic,” I say, once I finish chewing.

Cady nearly cuts me off. “I don’t think shedding a tear at a time like this counts as dramatic.”

“Yeah,” Kaytee says softly. “You can cry. We promise we won’t watch.”

That makes me smile.

“I feel like I’m moving to a postcard. Is it even real down there?” I’ve only ever seen pictures of the ocean, never seen it in real life. “All those photos look fake. The palm trees and Kool Aid-colored water and sea animals jumping all over the place can’t actually exist, right?”

“Don’t act like you don’t want to see dolphins leaping out of that water. That’s, like, your dream,” Cady says.

“You’re not wrong,” I admit.

“There we go. Three points for Florida,” Kaytee says, always

the optimist. “Good one, by the way.” Kaytee points to the *bluetiful* dolphin I’ve absentmindedly drawn. The dorsal fin is a little off, if you ask me, but it’s definitely still a dolphin. It’s fitting that I am a genius at drawing my favorite animal.

“Look,” Cady begins, “sorry-not-sorry to brag, but I’m only like ten thousand subscribers away from becoming YouTube famous.”

Kaytee and I roll our eyes. Cady has been pushing hard for YouTube fame all summer. In June she was all about makeup tutorials, but then her mom caught her and said twelve is way too young to wear eyeliner. I helped her film a gazillion videos of her performing Shakespeare-inspired sonnets I had written from the perspective of her dog. This past month she decided to invent her own victory dance that will be so hilarious all college players will want to use it when they score, and then they’ll have to pay her a fee or something. I don’t totally follow the logic, but she’s convinced. I wish I were going to be here next month to see what ridiculous slash completely hilarious idea she comes up with next.

“Seriously!” Cady shouts. “The second I get my first sponsor, I’m buying Kaytee and me first-class tickets to come see you. We’ll all be teenagers by then and it will be great.”

I inhale, and a loose sprinkle falls onto the table. I resist the urge to eat it. I need to spit out what I’ve been thinking about

since the moment I knew I was leaving. I can't avoid it any longer.

"You should still have the party."

"Are you crazy?!" Kaytee says, almost spitting out a mouthful of strawberry ice cream.

Cady drops her spoon into a hunk of hot fudge, leans back, crosses her arms, and gives me her tough look. Kaytee is near tears and Cady appears ready to rumble. Typical. I can't help but crack a smile. I love how well I know my best friends.

"I'm serious," I insist. "Just because I won't be there doesn't mean you both won't be turning thirteen. Not celebrating a birthday is like a cardinal sin. Plus, Resurrect Summer is way too good of a theme to bail on."

The irony that I'm moving to a place where it's practically always summer is not lost on me.

"That is so not the point," Cady challenges.

"We could never do it without you," Kaytee continues, which is exactly what I need to hear.

"Besides, what would be the fun of throwing a big birthday party if you didn't argue with me about the decorations?" Cady adds.

"I still can't believe you wanted us to make forty mermaid tails by hand that time," I say with a laugh.

"Nothing beats homemade decor!" Cady claims.