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Transitions

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Chapter 1

Fog drifted through the pine branches, enveloping the house in a moist cocoon, muting sounds from the outside world.

It makes everything quiet.

Caroline's heart jumped, then flooded with warmth. Frank's voice had seemed so real, even after all these years. Almost as if he was sitting across the room from her again. Strange. Thoughts of him had been coming more and more since Grandma died. Caroline nestled deeper into the couch, pulling her feet up under her nightgown. Here in her grandmother's house, where she had passed much of her childhood, boundaries between past and present had a fluid quality.

Her eyes caressed the familiar room, its old, softly-carved furniture, fading family pictures, well-worn books. The piano in one corner, loom in another. Both quiet now. She felt the ache of her grandmother's absence. That strong, humorous woman who had lived so many rich years. And yet...a subtle energy remained. It was as if every breath her grandmother had taken in this house, all her thoughts and feelings and movements, had thrown off tiny sparks of consciousness, so that now everything was permeated with her essence. Some nights, when Caroline awoke, she felt a fullness to the darkness, a sense of lingering presence.

She reached for her tea mug and cradled it, inhaling the fragrant steam. The two years she had spent here while her grandmother's strength ebbed away had turned out to be some of the most rewarding time Caroline could remember. She originally visualized, when agreeing to come, a safe, neutral womb to rest in until she was somehow metamorphosed into her future life. She had forgotten what a remarkable person her grandmother was. Propped up on this same couch, snuggled into one of her hand woven afghans, Grandma had listened non-judgmentally, only making gentle comments as Caroline told her of her life with Don, her pervasive self-doubts. Remembering, Caroline's eyes filled with tears.

Besides the intimate relationship she had rebuilt with her grandmother, what really surprised Caroline were her own reactions

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to being back. Returning to the ocean after living most of her life inland, she felt regenerated. The ocean was an inescapable presence. Each breath she took was flavored by its moist fragrance. At night, when highway sounds diminished, she could hear faintly the distant thunder of breaking waves. The land that rose gently from shore to hills through lupine, pine, cypress and redwoods had also recaptured her emotions. Now, when she contemplated her future, it was hard to imagine a home anywhere else. But...even if she could stay, what would she do?

Giving herself an impatient shake, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve and set the cup down. *Time to get moving. There's a few other things to think about right now.*

Elizabeth and Joshua were coming today.

At the thought, Caroline was engulfed in a thrill of anticipation.

Dressing in front of the wall heater, she thought about her cousins. She had been so excited these last few days when, after endless phone calls, they had worked out a block of time when they both could be here. They might even be able to stretch it out to four or five days!

An amazing number of years had passed since the three of them had last been here together. Much longer than she wanted to think about. They had been kids! Of course, they had seen each other from time to time since then. Occasionally the three, usually just two, in other places, at family reunions or quick visits passing through each other's territory. But they were always immersed in their own lives and usually too hurried to have more than minimal conversations.

As Caroline finished getting dressed and started straightening the living room, she had to admit, she didn't know them anymore.

Dusting the windowsill, she noticed sun breaking through the fog, casting tiny rainbows through drops hanging from the tree. She stopped in mid-swipe, dust rag suspended. Why hadn't she made the connection before? The renewed closeness with her grandmother had triggered memories of those summers with her cousins. They had been held together not only by blood but by the ease and comfort they found in each other's company. Although unlike, the

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three had fit together smoothly, like different-shaped pieces of a puzzle joined in a meaningful pattern. At least in her memory.

Elizabeth laughed, wiggling her toes in the retreating surf. “Come on, Caroline!”

“Gramma told us not to go in the water.”

“It’s just my feet. Don’t be such a worry wart!” Grabbing Caroline’s hand, Elizabeth drew her closer to the ocean. “It’s fun when the sand scoops out under you.”

Caroline wanted to borrow her cousin’s joy but felt instead the lump of fear that tightened her stomach and dried out her mouth, despite the moisture-laden air. The breaking waves were frightening, higher than their heads, each one looking like it would sweep them away. Even though a shallow trough just offshore deflected most of the waves’ thrust, so that they diminished to liquid foam by the time they reached the girls’ toes, the possibility of inundation felt very real. But it wasn’t only the waves that worried her. It was second nature to her to follow parental directives and not even Elizabeth’s confidence could help her relax and enjoy herself.

They had left the house this morning as the fog was breaking up—adult cautions fresh in their ears—crossed the road and walked down the street that led to the ocean. Caroline had no trouble keeping up with her cousins’ eager pace. Though only seven and a half, she was the same height as Joshua, seven months older, and not too much shorter than Elizabeth, already nine. The three of them had carefully crossed the logging road and made their way down the short path onto the beach, spread out like a vast sandy playground, their hearts beating fast with anticipation. After they had pulled off their shoes and run around in the sand for a while, Elizabeth had headed for the water.

A new, determined wave exploded against the shore, traveling ten feet beyond the girls, climbing their legs and licking at the hem of their shorts. With a yell that was as much relief as panic, Caroline

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ran back towards dry land, and threw herself down near Joshua, who was searching the dark sand for unblemished shells.

“You come home with wet clothes and they won’t let us out alone again this year,” he said dryly.

Elizabeth came bounding up with a handful of ocean and mussed it in his hair, her laugh bubbling up like a mountain spring. “Take that, Mr. Perfect!”

Joshua pushed her off with a grin. No one could stay mad at Elizabeth. Good nature radiated from her like heat from a furnace, drawing everyone into her circle of warmth. Elizabeth gathered friends around her like a flower attracting bees. Dark curls, held off her round face with a pink plastic hair band, bounced in perpetual motion, following the rhythm of her tireless body. Her brown eyes glowed with fun. Never still for long, she only hesitated like a bird on a branch before taking off on her next adventure.

Elizabeth flopped down on her stomach in front of Joshua’s black collection box, legs swinging in the air, and ran her fingertips lightly over the shells, each carefully placed in a separate compartment. “You’re getting pretty fancy.”

“Yeah. I wanted to get them home in one piece this year.”

“Your room’s going to be filled up by the time you’re ten!” And with a sunny grin she jumped up and boosted herself onto one of the huge driftwood logs that lay in clusters along the beach like debris from a giant’s fortress, balancing lightly along one and then another.

Caroline watched her for a while then rolled over on her back with hands behind her head, body soaking up what little heat the sand had to offer. Her dreamy hazel eyes followed a seagull’s figure-eight flight over the ocean. With just a slight conscious shift, she joined him in weightless flight, and felt the ocean breeze rush by her.

Caroline’s usual companions were birds, trees, rocks, clouds, insects—privy to the guarded intensity of her thoughts and feelings. Around people, particularly ones her own age, she was shy, hesitant. Caroline’s cousins were the exception. Responding to Elizabeth and Joshua’s casual acceptance of her during their yearly

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visits, their teasing affection and inclusion of her in their games, she blossomed like a flower at first sun and basked in the unaccustomed glow of belonging.

“Caroline, look at this one!” She crashed back to earth as Joshua rushed up with a pretty little oval shell which had a dark, fluted edge and a center that reminded her of an old-fashioned picture or mirror. His eyes glowed as he held the shell up for inspection. He let Caroline hold it while he fumbled in his backpack for the tiny book he used to identify his finds. “I hope this one’s in here!” He thumbed through the book from cover to cover and back again with no luck. “Darn! I need a bigger book. Or one that just has shells for this coast. This must cover the whole world.”

“Maybe Gramma will know.” Bringing her head close to his, Caroline watched him add the shell to his growing collection. Sometimes she felt almost maternal towards Joshua. He was so...intense, so completely focused on what interested him. It made him seem vulnerable. Always curious, he looked out at the world with a quizzical expression: wide brow and little pointed chin, eyebrows like inverted v’s, dark, straight hair making a comma on his forehead, and amazing sapphire eyes that harbored pools of diamond light. His gaze was as direct as a laser beam, his lashes dark and curling. He nodded his agreement when Caroline told him how nice the shell was.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching spray explode into fountains as waves impaled themselves on jagged rocks. The ocean’s colors were as deep and changeable as its currents—dark teal spreading into gray through aquamarine and undertones of purple—rearranging themselves in endless variations like a kaleidoscope. Little scoops of foam drifted restlessly on the shifting water.

They saw Elizabeth come running up, cracking a long, tubular piece of seaweed over her head like a whip. “I’ll race you!” She galloped off again, Caroline close behind. Joshua put the lid on his box and carefully slid it next to a big log for protection, then followed after the two girls. He picked his own whip out of a tangled mass of seaweed and hurried to catch up.

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Caroline loved the scrunch of sand under her bare feet as she ran with her cousins, the breeze sweeping her clean. Fragments of morning fog lay in a gauzy mist against the far mountainous shore as it curved northwest towards the horizon. The faint scent of beach pine mingled pungently with the stronger essence of ocean. Sandpipers scooted along the beach, gulls wheeled overhead, waves crashed and hissed to nothingness. Caroline was filled with swelling emotions she could never put words to, a warmth and joy so sweet she wanted to cry out. She let loose with one long “whoop” as she ran, and her cousins joined her, laughing and whooping their way down the beach.

Fear gnawed at her stomach. She had to be honest and admit there was no way they were going to recapture that rapport. Too many years had passed. They had each accumulated other people and stronger memories. Probably the best they could hope for would be to get reacquainted and make some necessary decisions.

Nonetheless, Caroline was filled with a longing that refused to go away.

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