

II. WATER FALL

I woke up earlier than usual for two reasons. First of all, that was the plan, but mostly, it was because I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about the argument I'd had with Paulina. I was still mad at her, and I definitely didn't want to see her this morning. I showered the night before, so all I had left to do this morning was pull my hair back, apply a little mascara and lip gloss, and throw on my school uniform.

Since I split before Lily and Pauli got up, I had to feed myself. Luckily, I had over an hour to spare. I climbed in last year's birthday present, my car, an Audi TT convertible, plugged in my iPod, turned the volume up, and sped out of the parking lot. I was at The Pancake House in a matter of minutes. The service was extremely slow, which I'd counted on--and hoped for, but the food was utterly delicious. My timing couldn't have been better. I left for school with ten minutes to spare, and school was only five minutes away.

I was a little anxious about first period. It was my art class with Lily, and I wasn't sure how she would deal with me this morning. As I made my way down the hall, I noticed she was standing outside of her classroom.

She grabbed my wrist softly. "I need to talk with you."

"Don't you have a class to teach?" I reminded her.

She blew out an exhausted breath, "It'll just take a sec, Finley."

I walked around behind her, and leaned my back against the wall so she'd have to turn away from the door. I didn't want everyone in art class knowing our business.

"I sent you to apologize to Pauli last night, and this morning I wake up to find that you're gone *and* she's gone."

Shocked, I asked, "She was?"

Lily looked worried. "Yes, did you apologize?"

"That's why I went to her, initially," I explained, "but she started rambling on about how she was going to leave us, and how you and I would be fine on our own...so...I... kind of got mad at her, and it all ended in a fight."

"Finley," she scolded, "we have to find her!"

"Why?" I wondered apathetically, "If she wants to leave, let her leave."

"You stubborn little girl. She didn't really want to leave, but your attitude is becoming unbearable, and she thinks your behavior is a result of her failure as a disciplinarian."

"As far as I see it," I enlightened, "it was still *her* decision."

She looked away, and under her breath, Lily murmured, "I can see why."

"I heard that," I said just as the bell rang.

She ignored my comment. "We'll have to talk about this later, get inside." She followed me to my desk to get in one more chastising remark. "You'd better hope she's home this afternoon."

Lily wisely began speaking to the class, and left me no time to retaliate. "Good Morning, everyone! Hope you had a good vacation...."

I shared a table with Hayley, and she'd noticed the little dispute between Lily and me. Nathan sat behind us, but he didn't have an art partner. I turned around, and addressed the issue so both of them could hear me.

"Never a dull moment in our house."

"That's the truth," Hayley agreed. "What was that about?"

"It's nothing." I changed the subject, "Are you guys still up for this afternoon?"

Hayley reaffirmed, "Yeah, of course."

"About that," Nathan hesitated, a hint of reluctance in his voice, "did John tell you he might bring another friend?"

"Besides you?"

"Yeah."

"No," I told him, "but that's fine as long as we can keep our number under eight. That's the max."

He shrugged his shoulders, "I don't think that'll be a problem."

Class was starting and I knew Lily well enough to know if I didn't turn around, she would call me out. She passed around a stack of papers that detailed what our senior art project was to be about, and then she gave us the rest of the period to partner up and discuss what we were going to do.

We had to select a place. It could be anywhere in the world: a city, state, country, barn, cemetery, whatever, it didn't matter. Then, we had to research it, and by the end of the year, have an 8' x 4' canvass creatively decorated to represent our selection. The

handout went into more detail. Not surprisingly, Hayley and I teamed up. We chose a country, agreeing that we'd be able to find a lot more information to collage about.

"Let's do Spain," Hayley suggested.

"Okay," I concurred. "Any reason in particular?"

"Well, yeah, we're learning so much about it already in our Spanish class. We'll have a slight advantage."

"Whatever you say."

It was quiet enough, even though all the students were discussing their art projects, I could hear my phone vibrating in my backpack on the floor. I swiped it up discreetly, and checked who it was.

"Kelly says she won't be able to make it this afternoon."

"Why not?" Hayley asked.

I double checked the text message. "She didn't say."

Hayley shook her head, "Is it just me, or has she been acting strangely lately?"

"No," I griped, "she was weird all last week. I wonder what's going on."

She thought for a moment. "You know what I noticed?"

"What's that?"

"When I pulled into her driveway yesterday, there was a vehicle I didn't recognize, and she got pretty excited when she saw it. Honestly, I thought it belonged to the gardener...just figured he was pulling weekend duty." She crinkled her nose, "It was a crappy old pickup truck. Nothing to get *that* happy about, if you know what I mean."

I let out a childish giggle. “Oh, really?” I ridiculed. “So, you think she could be involved with the yard guy? Maybe she’s embarrassed!”

She started cracking up. “That’s what I was thinking!”

“What a scandal!” I joked.

The two of us were in tears from laughing so hard. We’d decided to let Kelly tell us in her own time. If she wasn’t comfortable sharing her situation with us, we wouldn’t hassle her about it. She’d come clean eventually, or at least I thought she would.

Usually, when I had something to look forward to after school, the day crept by, but today was different. Before I knew it, sixth period had come and gone, and the bell was sounding to dismiss me to my afternoon activities. Kelly was absent all day, so I sent her a text message to make sure everything was fine. Evidently, she bailed on our day of fun, because she had a high fever, and thought she might be coming down with the flu. Even if she was lying, she sure knew how to keep us from popping up at her house unannounced.

Hayley and I were tempted to drive by after school anyway, just out of curiosity. We wanted to see if the gardener also worked on Mondays, but we opted to obey her wishes, and leave her alone. Besides, we had to stop at the Smart-Mart to pick up some snacks and mixers before getting to my house. I knew John would be right behind us, and I wanted everything ready so we could be gone before Lily got home. Faculty let out after students, so I usually had a good thirty minute head-start.

When we pulled up to the front door, I noticed Paulina’s car was there...not sure how I missed its absence this morning, but I must not have been paying attention. I was a

little nervous to see her, but deep inside, I was glad she was there. I requested that Hayley come inside with me, in case we ran into Paulina. She was a good distraction, but as it turned out, her accompaniment was unnecessary. Paulina must have been up in her bedroom; I didn't see her anywhere else in the house when I ran up to get my boat keys.

Downstairs, the very first level of the townhouse primarily included the garage that Lily had turned into an art studio. There was also a small entry foyer, and a guest bathroom, which we now used as a dressing room to slip into our bathing suits. I heard a car pull up, so we threw on our cover-ups, shoved some towels and sunblock in my bag, and ran outside.

There were only two of them. "Hey, thought you guys were bringing another friend."

"We're gonna go pick him up later," John told me. His voice was well composed as always, but there was a sourness to it.

"In your car?" I guessed.

"No," he corrected me, "in *your* boat."

I was surprised by his audacity. "Um, aren't you forgetting something?"

John raised his brows, and cocked his neck out at me impatiently.

His arrogant display was all it took for me to fly off the handle. "Dude, what's your problem? It's *MY* boat, get it? Mine. If you wanna go pick up some random friend of yours, do it in your own boat! Oh wait, that's right, YOU DON'T HAVE ONE! So, if you want to start over by asking me *if* we can take my boat, that would be great, because I don't take well to demands."

He took a deep breath and started over. “Calm down, you’re right,” he surrendered, “I shouldn’t have assumed.”

“Is there something in the drinking water?” I griped to Hayley, “What’s up with everybody, and their dreadful behavior lately?”

“I don’t know, but let’s just all chill out and have a good time.”

“Yeah,” Nathan chimed in. “You got a cooler on that thing? We need to put the ice somewhere.”

I was going to have to let John’s comments roll off my back. This was supposed to be my day of fun, and anyway, he apologized...kind of.

“Come on,” I encouraged, “let’s get out of here. There’s a cooler in the boat.”

Everyone climbed aboard, and I drove to one of the few places I was familiar with--the lighthouse about a mile from my house. I’d been there many times; it was a well known place to hang out on the weekends, but during the week it was fairly quiet. Considering our plans, we didn’t want a crowd.

After we threw the anchor out, I turned the boat off, but kept the radio on. I twisted the dial to search for a good song. I found one: Granite by Pendulum, perfect. Hayley and I spread out our towels across the back of the boat, mixed a drink, and attempted to get some sun. One drink turned into another, then another, and another. It looked as though John was the only one pacing himself.

“Too good to join us?” I pestered him, “or are you still working on your attitude?”

“It’s about time to get my friend.” His voice was saturated with somber irritation. “Do you mind if I drive?” He pulled out his license, “I’ve got one of these, plus I haven’t drunk too much.”

I didn’t care what his mood swing was at the moment, I didn’t want to leave yet. “Can’t we wait a little longer?” I whined. “Where do you need to pick him up, anyway?” I wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to pull anchor.

“Yeah, John,” Hayley hiccuped, “we--we don’t want to go yet.”

His brown eyes turned black, and if he’d been a dog, his dark hair would have been standing up on the back of his neck. Where had my friend gone? Never in the years that I’d known him had I ever seen him so furious. He didn’t say a word to either of us as he stomped to the front of the boat, and began pulling in the chain.

I looked at Nathan to see if he could make sense of John’s temperamental behavior. He just shrugged. I should have expected as much from him, he was basically just the redheaded sidekick. Well, I wasn’t afraid of John Phillips.

“What are you doing!” I demanded. “What is your problem?”

He turned to me slowly and calmly, but when he spoke, it was deep and dangerous. “I...told...you...we’re...leaving.”

I was relentless. “And I asked you where we were going!”

“Finley,” John warned, “we’re going to pick up my friend. He’s at a pier a few miles from here.” He took my arm and squeezed it tightly. “You need to go sit down now.”

“Ouch!” I jerked my arm away. He got his point across, though. Now I *was* a little wary of him. I took my seat.

“I have to make a stop at my car,” John told us, “but I’ll dock the boat a few slips down, so your aunt won’t see us, and you guys can keep drinking if you want. I’ll only be a minute.”

I had already poured myself another one. If I had to endure this bipolar idiot, I was going to do it with a smile. The ride to my house took only a few minutes. Hayley and I didn’t have near enough time to fully discuss what had just happened. After John tied up, we reclaimed our sunning spots on the back of the boat, and resumed our conversation.

“I’m too tipsy to care about John anymore,” Hayley acknowledged with slurred words. “Let’s talk about something else...like your glasses! They’re adorable, where’d you get them?”

I took them off of my head to show them to her, “These are from one of those stores in the mall. I can’t remember the name right now. They’re Prada.”

She tried them on and posed for me, but our fun was short lived. John was on his way back.

When he got in, he immediately untied the boat and hollered back at us, “Get in the boat! Hurry up, ‘cause I’m not waiting.”

Hayley picked up her towel and climbed down. She turned back to hand me my sunglasses, and staggered up to get a seat on the bow. I slid my Pradas back on top of my head, and when I reached down for my towel, they tumbled onto the stern. I cautiously

scooted on my knees to the edge of the boat, and just as I stretched over the side to grab them, John shoved the throttle forward, and I didn't have time to react. My head slammed into the back of the boat before I went splashing into the dingy, salty water.

I couldn't move a single muscle in my body, so no chance I was swimming out of this mess. I figured most people would panic in a situation like this--I definitely thought *I* would, but oddly enough, I didn't. I kept waiting to lose consciousness, but it never happened. Instead, the calm serenity I'd been so proud of slowly gave way to terror, as my lungs began pleading for oxygen.

My brain begged my limbs to move. I could see the surface, and if I could just swim up, I could get air! Why couldn't I move! I wondered where my friends were-- why weren't they trying to help me? The burning desire in my chest was gradually consuming my every thought. I couldn't fight off the natural instinct to inhale much longer, but I knew the moment I surrendered to it, I'd be dead in a few short minutes.

I made myself fight for twenty more seconds. I counted backwards in my head, *Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen...sixteen*, it was getting harder, I had to keep trying. *Fifteen, fourteen...thirteen...twelve...e...le...ven...* I was losing it. I opened my mouth, and started to let the water rush in.

Suddenly, and without warning, I was being yanked out of the water. Immediately after breaking the surface, I drew in a large breath and filled my lungs to capacity. I inhaled a few more times before I realized that someone was swimming me to the boardwalk. I tried to help, but I still couldn't move.

"Just relax," a British voice told me. "I've got you. You're safe now."

Upon hearing his voice, I fainted.

“He said to meet him at Waterfront Tavern around four o’clock.” John answered.

Waterfront Tavern, or as the locals called it- the Tavern, was a restaurant – slash – bar on the water. Lily had taken Paulina Perry and me a few times. The food was delicious and Lily told me the nightlife there wasn’t too bad either, not that I could find out for myself- I was only eighteen. The important thing was that I knew where it was and that it wasn’t far from my house at all.

I made a decision to join Hayley while we waited. It was much better than watching Kelly humiliate herself. John was obviously not interested.

We sat on the back and chatted, unaware of how many beers we had consumed. When it was time to go and I finally stood up, I was so dizzy that I had to sit back down. Hayley started laughing at me, and then I chimed in.

Great. I was drunk.

“You probably shouldn’t drive, Finley.” John said, “I have my license with me, why don’t you let me take us to the Tavern?”

I was still laughing, “Ohhh--kayyy,” was all I could manage and then I laughed some more.

John seemed to know the waterways well. When we got to an open stretch, he was going faster than I would have gone. I could see the Tavern so I knew we were getting close. There was a lot more traffic here than there had been at the lighthouse.

Hayley and I were still on the back of the boat. She went to take a seat up front because of how choppy the water had become. It was bouncing us all over the place. When I sat up to join her, we came down on a huge wave and it knocked me off the back side of the boat. No one saw me fall. Everyone was looking straight ahead at Waterfront Tavern.

The water felt like concrete underneath me and I hit it hard. I thought it knocked the breath out of me, but luckily it hadn’t. I went under, but kept my bearings. I knew where the surface was. When I swam to the top, I looked for my boat but couldn’t find it. There were so many boats in the water now.

What a way to sober up, I thought.

I had nothing, not even a lifejacket- no way to alert other boats to my location and to make matters worse, the high wake was getting hard to manage. It was so far to either shore. I tried broadcasting my location by sloshing the water around with my hands, but I

was already tired and I was only treading water; I couldn't imagine trying to swim. Even if I did find the energy to do it, a boat would surely run me over. I was basically invisible to the larger boats and that's what dominated these waters.

Please come back, please come back!

That was all I could think. I had no idea what to do. Some of the boats were coming so close to me. I used all of my strength to dodge them, but I was feeling the onset of a leg cramp. It was then that I noticed the boat headed straight for me. I had to try harder to alert somebody. I knew no one could hear me, but I had to try anyway.

I started screaming at the top of my lungs, "HELP ME!! PLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEASE!!!! SOMEBODY HELP ME, PLEASE!!!"

I waved my hands frantically and started splashing the water up in the air. I needed to cause a scene and draw attention. I could barely see the people on these boats, so I knew they couldn't see me. I had to keep trying.

"HELP! PLEASE SOMEONE, HELP ME!! CAN'T ANYONE SEE ME!?!?! I'M DOWN HERE IN THE WATER!!!! HELP!!! THAT BOAT IS GOING TO HIT ME!!!"

The boat was so close. It was too late. I resigned to my fate. Even if someone heard me at this point, it was still too late. I started having flashbacks of that horrible night more than five years ago. At least that happened so fast I didn't have time to think about it. This was torture.

As I watched my impending doom approach, I had failed to notice that there was another boat coming straight for me as well.

Great, there's competition.

I guessed I was still a little tipsy or delirious or something. Otherwise, I doubted I would have been so casually sarcastic with myself.

Suddenly and without warning, one boat swerved towards the other and forced it to change course.

Seriously? I thought to myself.

It was as if one boat selfishly saved me so it could devour me itself. But as it approached, it slowed down and I recognized it- the 3350 Cuddy. What was Lily doing here, though? She was in meetings and they wouldn't be out by now. It was four o'clock, or close to it.

A white ring flew over the side of the boat and I grabbed it. I didn't care about being in trouble... I was just happy to be safe.

The voice that spoke to me was *NOT* Lily's.

"Are you mad? What were you thinking?" He asked me.

He wasn't actually asking if I was angry, but if I was crazy. He spoke with a British accent. I looked up at him and couldn't speak.

Holy sh--- Oh my Go---

I couldn't even finish a thought. So, I just kept staring at him. He pulled me into the boat and wrapped a towel around me. For someone who almost died, I calmed down rather quickly.

"Are you going to answer me?" He asked again, "What were you thinking?"

I took another breath and finally spoke. My voice was hoarse from all the screaming.

“Who are you?” was all I could manage. “What are you doing in my aunt’s boat?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. He was mesmerizing somehow. I just watched him- my eyes followed his lips as he spoke again.

“You were almost killed” he said with concern in his voice.

I must have looked like an idiot. I continued staring at him. I thought my mouth was probably hanging open but I couldn’t find the strength to close it. I was in some sort of shock, I guessed. Since I didn’t speak, he took my silence as an invitation to continue.

“I was down that passage over there,” he pointed, “walking the boardwalk”

I looked toward the direction he was pointing, and as if someone slapped me in the face, I snapped out of my trance.

“I live down that waterway,” I interrupted.

“Yes, well, I saw someone splashing around in the water out here and couldn’t stand by and do nothing. The boats couldn’t see you. Someone would have hit you.” He touched the side of Lily’s boat, “The keys were in the glove box. I was yelling for help and a nice woman came outside and told me I could use this boat. She told me where to find the keys.”

Paulina Perry... of course. No one else would know that.

The reality of the situation began to set in and this flood of emotion overtook me-- I started to cry. I forced myself to speak.

“I fell out of my boat. My friends didn’t see me and I bet when they noticed, I was nowhere to be found.” I desperately wanted to finish what I was saying, but I was sobbing at this point. What I was experiencing was more than just aftershock, but I couldn’t discern the other emotions.

He put his hand on my back to calm me.

“My name is Dari,” he said.

I couldn’t breathe; it took me a moment. Unsure of what was happening to me, I fought hard and gained control. I stopped crying and looked through my blurry eyes at the figure sitting next to me.

“Thank you for saving me... Dari. Thank you... for being in the right place... at the right time.” I replied, “And... my name is Finley.” I said it as calmly and controlled as I could manage.

What is wrong with you!? I screamed inside myself. I tried to suppress the emotions going on inside my head. Nothing made sense. *Get it together, get it together.*

Now I was coaching myself, calming myself. It wasn’t working. This was such a bizarre circumstance. The contrasting emotions I had experienced only seconds before he saved me gave way to new sensations. It felt amazing to simply *be* in his presence. I found myself overwhelmed by an intense magnetism to Dari. I swore it was a comfort as if I’d known him forever. I fought the sensation with every part of my being, but I was losing. I was acutely aware of his hand on my back as if it were burning a hole in me.

He’s touching me, he’s touching me!

That was all I could think of, like nothing else was important. He was speaking but I could only think of his hand on my back. It made my heart race and my blood boil. I must have been going insane. I knew it was peculiar to feel the way I did, but I couldn't control it.

He moved his hand from my back and it devastated me.

While I was battling for my sanity, Dari moved us to the side of the main waterway and I glanced back to see my boat. It was progressing slowly and there were four people frantically searching the water. I figured they noticed my absence and aborted the Cane pick-up. Hayley recognized Lily's boat and I saw her straining to make out the figures on board. I moved my towel so she could see my bright yellow bathing suit. She recognized it. She jumped with alarm and notified John. They were next to us in less than a minute.

At first, I could barely get in a word. Everyone had been freaking out; Hayley and Kelly were in tears. Even John and Nathan looked pretty worked up. When I finally got a moment to speak, I explained how I fell off the boat and Dari explained how he had come to help me. Everyone had been very frightened. An hour went by before everyone calmed down. We headed back to the boardwalk. It was almost five o'clock. Lily would be home soon- if she wasn't already. We all had a story planned, in case we needed it.

For all intents and purposes, I got back in my boat and drove my friends back to the dock. Lily wasn't home yet. Good. I asked everyone to go home as if nothing had happened and we could talk more about it later. I didn't want anything to look suspicious.

Dari pulled Lily's boat up after everyone had gone. I thought I had gotten a handle on myself, but when I saw him, I went crazy all over again. This time, however, I was able to control it enough that I could form sentences.

"I really don't know what to say or how to thank you."

He smiled a perfect smile. He was the most gorgeous person I had ever met and it seemed like he was getting better looking each time I saw him, as if he were morphing into perfection for me. He had flawless skin painted with a gorgeous tan. It had a bronze hue to it- at least it did now under the reflection of the late afternoon sky. His hair was shiny and golden, like it had been kissed by the sun, and it was longer- not to his shoulders long, but just below his ears. He had a faultless hairline that I stared at whenever he ran his hands through his hair, which was often. His eyes were blue, like mine, but much more fascinating. There was so much depth to them. I paid attention to every detail of him, as if I were critiquing him in slow motion. His hands, his arms, his teeth, his nose- it was all perfect and unspoiled.

He tied up the boat and walked closer to me. Either I still had a light buzz going, which I doubted, or his presence was making me lightheaded. I had a feeling he was about to say goodbye but I wanted him to stay a while. I tried to make small talk.

"So, which one's yours; where do you live?" I asked him.

He frowned, "I don't live here, Finley. I was visiting a friend today."

"Oh, like a *girl*friend-friend?"

Please say no, please say no...

“Something like that,” he answered.

Ouch.

I hoped I would be wrong. That wasn't the answer I wanted. What made me more angry was that he was a complete stranger to me... and he had this much control over my emotions! So what if he had a girlfriend. I shouldn't care. I had to get it together.

I spoke sternly, “Well, in that case, thank you again for today. I'll let you get back to your life now. I really owe you one.”

I grabbed my bag and started to head inside, but forgot Lily's boat keys. I turned around and tried not to look at him. I had more power over myself that way.

“You know, I should probably take those inside tonight.” I reached my hand out and nodded towards the keys in his hand.

He did not give me the keys. Instead, he grabbed my extended hand with his free hand and gently pulled me towards him.

Oh my God, I'm freaking out.

Normally, this would have freaked me out in a bad way, but this was good. I was eager for what would come next.

He took the keys and put them in my bag. He took the bag off my shoulder and placed it on the ground. He grabbed my other hand- he was holding both of my hands now. My heart was racing.

“I don't have a lot of time,” he said, “just a few minutes now.”

“What... before your girlfriend gets back?” I asked childishly.

He laughed.

“No. It's not like that. Really.”

He looked like he was searching for the right words, as if there were a battle going on inside of his head. He let go of my hands and finally came up with something to say.

“I wish I could stay with you a little longer,”

Yeah, me too, I thought.

“But I have to go now,” he said.

I started to speak, but he cut me off.

“Finley, I'm so glad I got to see you today. Regardless of the circumstances, it was worth it.”

What?

I was confused. Before I could say anything, he was running away... literally running.

“Wait, Dari,” I said as I started after him. He was close to the side of my building and I wasn't too far behind him. I knew he could hear me.

“Please, I'm confused. Why are you running?! Will you just slow down and talk to me?”

But still no response- he kept going.

When he turned the corner, I was only seven yards or so behind him. I saw him go into a neighbor's garage and as he walked in, I swore he disappeared. I even ran over to check the garage and sure enough, it was empty. I remembered exactly what it looked like. It was as if he faded out of being.