

California
July
27th day of camp

The others were mad at her again.

They clustered behind her on the sand, watching as she stepped onto the wet ledge of rocks.

“What is she doing?”

“What are you doing?”

Ignoring them, she picked her way across tide pools, careful not to hurt the creatures underfoot—quivering purple anemones that retracted under her shadow, barnacles like blisters of stone.

All she wanted was a few minutes away from them. A few minutes alone to breathe in the cold wind off the ocean before the van delivered them back to the airless cabins, the dark chapel.

There were only ten minutes left in the game, and it would take her almost that long to make her way back across the slippery outcropping. If they didn't return in time it'd be another mark against her.

She spotted something tangled in kelp, lodged between two flat rocks

near the drop-off. So close to the surf. As if it had been carried across the ocean and snugged there, at the jagged edge of the world, just for her.

Stepping closer, she crouched, then flattened herself onto her belly. Her shirt and jeans drenched, her elbow scraped, she reached out but got only a rubbery handful of kelp.

She shut her eyes. If she looked down at the sea she would fall in like the doomed man on the keep-off sign behind her, a stick figure tumbling into scalloped waves.

Salt spray stinging her face, she fumbled through the squelching mass of kelp. Until her fingers found what they wanted and it gave, escaping its wet nest with a gentle sucking sound.

She knelt on the wet rocks as she examined her prize, brushing away green muck. The driftwood was longer than her hand, curved into a C. One end was pointier than the other, and in the center the wood splintered and cracked. But imperfect as it was, the resemblance was unmistakable, miraculous: a crescent moon.

Cur-di-lune, he'd said. I grew up in a town called Curdilune.

A strange, pretty name.

He'd drawn it for her in the dusty ground behind the craft cabin that morning. His calloused finger had sketched rectangles for the buildings. Houses and a church, shops and a park, nestled together against the inner curve of a crescent-shaped lake.

Curdilune. Cur is heart in French, he'd explained. Lune is moon. So it means Heart of the Moon. Then, with a light touch on her wrist— You miss home, too?

The others had walked by then, before she could answer, and he'd erased his little map, swirling his palm over the shapes in the dirt so quickly she knew it was their secret.

If she ran back to her team now, her find might help them win—a piece of driftwood was Item 7 on the list stuffed into her back pocket.

She glanced over at them and slid the wet treasure down her pocket, untucking her shirt to hide it. She'd give it to him instead.

It was a thank-you, an offering, an invitation. A cry for help after the long, bewildering summer.

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Mermaid in the Mailbox

June 2016

The invitation came on a Saturday.

I was taking Jett for a walk, and she was frantic with anticipation, nails skittering on the lobby's tile floor, black fur spiking up so she looked more like a little dragon than a Lab.

"If you calm down I can do this faster, lady," I said as I high-stepped to free myself from the leash she'd wrapped around my ankles. "Off."

She retreated, settling under the bank of mailboxes. But right when I got my letters out, she sprang up and butted my wrist with her head. Perfect aim, perfect timing.

"Leave it, Joan Jett. Devious girl." I tried to maintain the stern voice we learned in Practical Skills Training but couldn't help laughing as I collected my mail from the floor. A typical assortment. White, business-sized bills. A Sushi Express menu. A slender donation form for Goodwill.

Then—not typical—a hot-pink envelope.

It had fallen facedown, revealing a sticker centered over the triangular flap: a mermaid. In pearls and sunglasses. Holding a sign saying *You're Invited!*

I assumed it was for the tween girl who lived in #1. I was #7, so there were sometimes mix-ups. I was halfway down the hall to her family's unit when I flipped the envelope over, preparing to slide it under their door.

It was for me.

Ms. Laura Christie, 7 Pacific View, San Francisco, CA 94115.

No return address.

But I knew who it was from.

I knew because of the mermaid sticker, which now made sense, and from the surge of something close to happiness in my chest.

I ripped the envelope open and pulled out a photo of two grinning 1950s girls in pajamas. Over their rolled heads, in black ballpoint, she had printed *Coeur-de-Lune*. My hometown.

Then dates—*Thurs. June 23–Sun. June 26*. Less than three weeks away.

Below that it said:

Scavenger hunt!

Crank calls!

Manicures!

Trio of cookie dough!

But seriously, please come. We're supposed to be older and wiser. (35—how did it happen?) I promise it will be ok.

No RSVP necessary.

Casey

Casey Katherine Shepherd. I hadn't seen her since we were eighteen.

When I ran into people from *Coeur-de-Lune* they inevitably

asked me about Casey, and I always said, “We drifted.” They would nod, as if this was the most natural thing in the world. People drifted.

In my case it’d be more accurate to say I’d swum away. As fast as I could, trying my hardest not to look back.

I slid the card into its torn pink envelope and turned it over again, my thumb smoothing the top edge of the sticker, where it had curled up slightly.

I promise it will be ok, she’d written.

(35—how did it happen?)

I held the invitation over the recycling basket, pausing a second before letting it flutter into the mess of junk mail. I waited for the soft rustle it made on landing before I let Jett tug me to the door.

It was cool and sunny, a rare reprieve from San Francisco’s usual June Gloom.

Jett headed right on the sidewalk out of habit. Saturdays we always strolled to Lafayette Park, hitting up her favorite leisurely sniff stops on the way. But today I pulled gently on the leash, and she turned, surprised, as I led her to a crosswalk in the opposite direction, charging uphill toward Lyon Street. I needed the steep climb, something to clear my head.

Why now, Casey? After seventeen years?

My childhood home in Coeur-de-Lune was now a vacation rental, managed by efficient strangers. I’d never gone back. But my mother kept a buzzing gossip line into her church women from town, and gave me sporadic updates on Casey’s life.

She always brought Casey up when I was lulled into complacency. When we’d had a surprisingly peaceful afternoon together. When we were outside on her balcony, or sharing a piece of her peach pie like other mothers and daughters did.

Only then would she jab, a master fencer going for the unprotected sliver of my heart.

The first update, when I was twenty—*Casey Shepherd dropped out of college. Back living with that mother in town.*

That must be nice for them, I'd said, not meeting her eyes.

A few years later—*Casey Shepherd bought the bookstore. Moronic. Might as well have thrown her money in the lake.*

I was in her kitchen that morning, unloading groceries into her retirement-sized pantry. Macaroni, crackers, mushroom soup. Hands moving smoothly from bag to shelf, making sure the labels faced out.

*That'll be interesting, I'd said. My eyes were trained on my mother's well-organized shelves, but they saw Casey's bookcase, crammed with her beloved trashy paperbacks. Fat, dog-eared copies of *Lace* and *Queenie* and *Princess Daisy*.*

After the bookstore news I didn't hear anything about Casey for a long time. I had men in my life, a few friends I met for glasses of wine. I was fine. Settled. Lucky. And able to keep my face blank when my mother said, three years ago:

Casey Shepherd has a child. A girl. Adopted, foster child, something. Hmph. Surprised anyone would let a child into that house. That mother's still there, you know.

I was thirty-two then, and after nearly a decade of blessed silence on the topic of the Shepherds, I could meet my mother's eyes and say evenly, *Casey always liked kids.*

It was the first time I'd said her name out loud since high school.

I began to run, an easy jog.

Was it because of our ages? Was thirty-five the number at which a goofy card could fix everything?

(35—*How did it happen?*), she'd written, in that familiar, nearly illegible penmanship. Her cursive had always been sloppy, with big capitals.

Casey's mother, Alex, had gotten into handwriting analysis one summer. According to Alex's book, Casey was energetic

and loyal, I was creative and romantic, and Alex was an aesthete with a passionate nature. If there had been something in how we looped our *Ls* or curved our *Cs* that hinted at what was to come, at less flattering traits, we'd overlooked it.

Alex would be there, if I went. Spinning around as if everything was the same, raving about her latest obsession. Celtic runes or cooking with grandfather grains. Whatever she happened to be into that week.

I sped up, though the grade was now more than forty-five degrees. One of those legendary San Francisco hills, perilous to skateboarders and parallel-parkers. Jett's leash was slack, not its usual taut water-skiing line dragging me forward. But she pushed on loyally at my side, the plastic bags tied to her leash flapping and whistling.

Why, Casey?

Wind-sprint pace now, sloppier with each stride.

Maybe she was bored and wanted to see what I'd do if she dared me to visit.

At the top of the hill I bent over, hands on my knees. Jett panted, her black coat shiny as obsidian.

Below, the wide grid of streets and houses swept down toward the Marina, to the bright blue bay flecked with white sails, all the way to the hills of Tiburon rising from the opposite shore. To my left, I could just make out the graceful, ruddy lines of the Golden Gate holding it all in, because without it such aching beauty would escape to sea.

The dark little crescent lake where I'd grown up was nothing compared to this.

The Bay could hold thousands of Coeur-de-Lunes.

I headed slowly back downhill toward my building. My back was soaked, my chest tight. I was lucky I hadn't rolled an ankle.

And I hadn't managed to cardio the invite from my head. Casey's words were still in there, burrowing deeper. I could hear

her voice now. The voice of an eighteen-year-old girl, plaintive beneath her irony.

But seriously, please come.

I was sure the mermaid would be safely buried by the time we got back.

But when I passed the mailboxes, there she was, staring up at me. Her tail was covered by a Restoration Hardware catalog, the top edge perfectly horizontal across her waistline. Or finline. Whatever it was called, it looked as if someone had tucked her in for the night, careful to leave her face uncovered so she could breathe.

I reached down and, in one quick gesture, plucked the pink envelope from the basket.

I couldn't go.

But I also couldn't leave her like that, all alone.

Coeur-de-Lune

Thursday, June 23

That was nineteen days ago. And now I was in Casey's driveway, trapped. Too nervous to get out of my car, too embarrassed to leave.

I blamed the mermaid.

Once she'd escaped the recycling bin, the pushy little thing had managed to secure a beachhead on my fridge.

For days, she'd perched there, peering over a black-and-white photo of a young 1970s surf god conquering an impossible wave: one of the magnets I'd designed for Sam, my favorite client and owner of Goofy Foot Surf & Coffee Shack out by Ocean Beach.

As the date grew closer, the mermaid started migrating around my apartment. She kept me company in the bathroom when I flossed in the morning, and as I ate lunch at my small kitchen table. When I couldn't sleep at night and passed the time brushing the frilled edges of the envelope back and forth under my

chin, rereading Casey's words. Trying to figure out why she'd written them now, after so long.

I still didn't understand.

The invitation had said *No RSVP necessary*, and I'd taken her up on that, so she didn't know I was coming. Until today, I hadn't been sure myself.

But here I was.

I tunneled my hands into the opposite sleeves of my coat, hugging myself. I'd rolled down my window a few inches, and chilly mountain air was starting to seep in. Jett was in her sheepskin bed in the back, curled into a black ball like a giant roly-poly. I was stalling. Rereading the invite as if I hadn't memorized it weeks before.

I leaned over the steering wheel and stared up at the house as if it could provide answers. From the front it resembled one of those skinny birdhouses kids made in camp out of hollow tree branches standing on end: a wooden rectangle with a crude, A-shaped cap.

But from the water it looked more like a boat, with rows of small, high windows—so much like portholes—and a long, skinny dock—pirate's gangplank—to complete the effect. When the place started falling apart in the '70s, some grumbly neighbor called it *The Shipwreck*, and the name had stuck.

It was a love-it-or-hate-it house, and the Shepherd women had loved it.

So had I. I'd once felt easier here, more myself, than in my own home. *The Shipwreck* hadn't changed, but today it offered me no welcome.

There was a silver Camry ahead of me in the driveway, so someone was probably home. They could be watching, counting how many minutes I sat inside my car. Trying to gather my courage, and failing. I didn't feel any more courageous than I had when the invitation first arrived.

"Wish me luck," I whispered toward Jett's snores as I got out.

I shut the door a little harder than necessary, hoping the *plunk* would draw Casey and Alex outside. Then they'd have to say something to hurdle us over the awkwardness. "You made it!" Or "Come in, it's getting cold!"

But the front door didn't budge.

I walked slowly toward the house, past the Camry. The section of lake I could see beyond the house was at its most stunning, framed in pines, streaked with red and pink from the sunset. It was so ridiculously beautiful it seemed almost a rebuke, a point made and underlined twice. *This* is how a sunset is done.

As I got closer I noticed something about the colors on the water; most of the red shapes were dancing, but one was still. And I realized why Casey hadn't come outside when I pulled up.

Of course. She was already outside.

I walked past the right side of the house, where the ground became a thick blanket of pine needles. I'd forgotten that spongy feeling, the way it made you bend your knees a little more than you did in the city, the tiny satisfying bounce of each step. There were places where the needles were so deep I had to brush my hand along the rough wood shingles for balance. I hoped the neighbors wouldn't see me and decide I was a prowler. I was even wearing all black. Tailored black pants and my black cowl-neck cashmere coat, but still. I could be a fashion-conscious burglar. It would be something to talk about, at least, showing up in handcuffs.

Casey sat cross-legged on the dock, her crown of sunlit red hair just visible above the red blanket on her shoulders.

It was the same scratchy wool plaid throw we'd used for picnics. The same one we'd sprawled on in our first bikinis as teenagers. In high school I'd hidden mine in my winter boots, one forbidden scrap of nylon stuffed down each toe.

A duck plunged into the water nearby, its flapping energy abruptly turning to calm, and she said something to it that I couldn't make out. Maybe we could do this all night. She'd

watch ducks, I'd watch her, and once an hour I'd take a few steps closer.

I walked down the sloping, sandy path in the grass and stepped onto the wooden dock. It was still long and narrow, the boards as old and misaligned as ever. *Cattywampus*, Alex used to call them. Casey's mom was young—sometimes she seemed even younger than us. But her speech was full of old-fashioned expressions like that. “Cattywampus” and “bless my soul” and “dang it all.”

The feeling of the uneven boards beneath my feet was so familiar I froze again.

The last time I'd been here I'd been running. Pounding the boards, racing away from the feet pounding behind me.

It was not too late to slip away. Take big, quiet steps backward. I could retreat along the side of the house the way I'd come. Return to the city and let the Shepherds sink back into memory, along with everything else in this town.

But a subtle vibration had already traveled down the wooden planks, and Casey turned her head to the side, revealing a profile that was still strong, a chin that still jutted out in her defiant way. “Is it you?”

“Yes, Case.”

I walked slowly to the end of the dock until I stood over her left shoulder, so close I could see the messy part in her hair. It was a darker red now.

The greetings I'd rehearsed, the lines and alternate lines and backup-alternate lines, had abandoned me. They'd sailed away, carried off by the breeze when I wasn't paying attention.

But Casey spoke first, her eyes on the water. “You've been standing back there forever. I thought you were going to leave.”

“I almost did.”

She tilted her head up to look at me. Scanning, evaluating, and, finally, delivering her report—“You're still you.”

Her face was a little thinner, her skin less freckled. There

was something behind her eyes, a weariness or skepticism, that hadn't been there when we were girls.

I forced a smile. "And you're still you."

I got, in return, no smile. And silence.

Casey made no move to get up, so I fumbled on. "And the house is still..."

"Weird," she finished.

"I was going to say something like *charming*."

"*Charming*? Laura doesn't say *charming*. Tell me Laura has not grown up into someone who says *charming*."

She wasn't going to make this easy. I'd thought, from the cheerful humility of her invitation, that she'd at least try. When I didn't answer, Casey swiveled her body to look back at the house, as if to evaluate it through fresh eyes the way she'd examined me.

"We haven't done much. That tiny addition on the east side. And I managed to put in a full bath upstairs finally. It's yours this weekend, along with my old bedroom."

"I was going to say. I had to bring my dog. I thought it'd be crowded with all of us, Alex and your little girl and my dog. She's kind of big, and she's sweet with kids, but she could knock a little one down... I don't know how old your girl is but..."

Casey looked up at me but let me stumble on.

"Anyway there wasn't anybody renting our old place this weekend, so I'll sleep there..."

The truth was my place had been booked solid all summer, so I'd bumped out this weekend's renters. Some sweet family that had reserved months ago. Other property owners kicked people out all the time when they wanted to use their houses instead, and my property manager grumbled about it, but I'd never done it before. I'd felt so guilty I'd spent hours finding them another place and paid the \$230 difference.

Bullshit, Casey's eyes said.

She knew the truth: I couldn't bear staying with her. Tiptoe-

ing around politely in the familiar rooms where we'd once been careless and easy as sisters. But I went on, elaborating on my story—the sure sign of a lie. “Of course I couldn't put you out...”

“Put you out,” she said. “Grown-up Laura says ‘put you out?’”

I didn't understand it, the utter disconnect between her warm, silly, lovable letter, the Casey I'd first met, and the person who was sitting here next to me, making everything a hundred times harder than it had to be.

Would the running commentary last all weekend? *Laura eats with her fork and knife European-style, now. Grown-up Laura prefers red wine to white. Laura wears cuff bracelets now. Laura changed her perfume to L'eau D'Issey.* Every little gesture picked over and mocked.

It hit with awful certainty: I shouldn't have come.

Would it get better or worse when Alex joined us? I didn't hate her anymore. Enough time had passed. She couldn't help how she was.

With Alex to fill the silences, and Casey's daughter around as a buffer, and me sleeping at my place, I'd just make it through the weekend. Less than sixty hours if I left Sunday morning instead of Sunday night, blaming traffic and work.

“Where's your mom and your little girl? I'm sorry, I don't know her name.”

“Elle. Off on a trip together. Tahoe.”

So much for the buffer.

Casey nodded at my old house across the lake. “Now. That one *has* changed, I hear. Modern everything.”

“Only the kitchen, really,” I said. “The rental company insisted. I've just seen pictures.” From across the shining water, I could make out the dark line of the dock, a flash of sunset on a window.

I'd planned to drive there first. Drop off Jett, compose myself, drink a glass of wine (or three, or four) to loosen up for

the big reunion. If I had I could have kayaked over to Casey's instead of driving.

And paddled away again the second I realized how she was going to be.

"You haven't gone inside?" she said. "Not once?"

I shook my head. "I can do everything online. It's crazy."

"I thought maybe you were sneaking back at night. Hiding out in the house, staying off the lake, calling your groceries in. To avoid seeing me."

"I wouldn't do that."

She narrowed her eyes. "You didn't sell it, though."

The "why?" was there in her expression, daring me, but I didn't have an answer. I'd always planned to sell the house. My mother didn't care either way, and we got offers. Every year, I considered it. But I never went through with it.

I met her stare for a minute before I had to look away. My eyes landed on a spot in the lake about ten yards from the edge of the dock. I didn't mean to look there. Maybe there was a tiny ripple from a fish, or a point in the sunset's reflection that was a more burnished gold than the surrounding water.

She followed my gaze. And for the first time, her voice softened. "Strange to think it's still there. After so long."

"It's not. It's crumbled into a million pieces or floated away."

Casey shook her head. "No. It's still there."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. I feel it in my bones."

"That sounds like something your mom would say. Used to say."

She tilted her head, thinking. "God. It does."

She pulled her knees close to her body and rested her right cheek on them, then looked up at me with a funny little lop-sided smile.

There was enough of the Casey I remembered in that smile that I returned it.

I sat next to her, wrapping my coat tighter, my legs dangling off the edge of the dock. It felt strange, to sit like that with shoes and pants on. I should be in my old cargo shorts, dipping my bare feet in the water.

For a minute we watched the quivering red-and-gold shapes on the lake. Then I felt the gentle weight of her hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t mind my flails, grown-up Laura,” she said. “Grown-up Casey is doing her best. She’s missed you.”

The words stuck in my throat, and when they finally came out, they were rough. My eyes on the auburn lake, I reached up to clutch her hand—one quick, fumbling squeeze.

“I’ve missed you, too, Case.”