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WHEN WE BELIEVED IN MERMAIDS

a novel

BARBARA O'NEAL

Author of *The Art of Inheriting Secrets*

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WHEN
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For Neal, who holds the center no matter the storm

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Chapter One

Kit

My sister has been dead for nearly fifteen years when I see her on the TV news.

I'd been working the ER for six hours straight, triaging young humans from a beach party where a fight broke out. Two gunshot wounds, one that nicked a kidney; a broken cheekbone; a broken wrist; and multiple facial wounds of various levels of severity.

And that was just the girls.

By the time we made it through the triage, I'd stitched and soothed the lucky ones. The unlucky ones were sent to surgery or to the wards, and I dived into the break room fridge for a Mountain Dew, my favored way to mainline sugar and caffeine.

A television mounted to the wall broadcasts the news of a disaster somewhere. I stare at it sightlessly as I gulp the sticky-sweet soda. It's night. Flames are erupting in the background. People are running and screaming, while a news anchor with tousled hair and a vintage leather bomber jacket offers the news in properly grave tones.

And there, right over his left shoulder, is my sister.

Josie.

For one long second, she looks at the camera. Long enough that there is no mistaking her. That straight, straight blonde hair, cut now into a sleek bob that just grazes her shoulders, her tilted dark eyes and slashes of cheekbone, that fat Angelina Jolie mouth. Everyone always fussed over her

beauty, and it's that combination of dark and light, angles and softness that does it. She's an exact mix of our parents.

Josie.

I feel as if she's looking through the screen, right at me.

And then she's gone, and the disaster keeps going. I stare, openmouthed, at the empty spot she left, holding the Mountain Dew out in front of me like an offering or a toast.

To you, Josie, my sister.

Then I shake myself. This happens all the time. Anyone who has lost somebody they love has experienced it—the head in the crowd on a busy street, the person at the grocery store who moves just like her. The rush to catch up, so relieved that she is actually still alive . . .

Only to be crushed when the imposter turns around and the face is wrong. The eyes. The lips.

Not Josie.

It must have happened to me a hundred times in the first year, especially because we never found a body. Impossible, given the circumstances. Also impossible that she survived. Not for her the ordinary demise of a fiery car accident or a leap off a bridge, though she threatened those often enough.

No, Josie was vaporized on a European train blown up by terrorists. Gone, gone, gone.

This is why we have funerals. We desperately need to see the truth for ourselves, see that loved one's face, even if it's marred. Otherwise, it's just too hard to believe.

I lift the Mountain Dew all the way to my lips and take a long swallow of the thing we shared, this private reminder of all we were to each other, and tell myself it's just wishful thinking.



When I leave the hospital in the predawn stillness, I'm wound up, both exhausted and wired. If I want to get any sleep at all before my next shift, I have to work off the grimy night.

Stopping by my tiny Santa Cruz house, 1,350 square feet on the edge of an almost-not-great neighborhood, I scramble into my wet suit, feed the worst cat in the world his half can of wet food, and make sure to move my fingers around in his kibble. He purrs his thanks, and I pull his tail gently. "Try not to pee on anything too important, huh?"

Hobo blinks.

I load my board into my Jeep and drive south, not realizing that I'm headed for the cove until I get there. Pulling over into a makeshift space alongside the highway, I park and look down at the water. A few bodies out, not many at dawn. The water is northern Cali cold, fifty-three degrees in early March, but the waves are lined up all the way to the horizon. Perfect.

The trail starts where the sidewalk to the restaurant once was and veers down the steep slope in a zigzag carved out a few feet away from the cliff where there used to be stairs, our own private access to the isolated, hidden cove. The hillside is unstable, with a reputation for being haunted, and all the locals know it. I have the descent to myself. But then, I know the ghosts.

Midway down, I stop and look back up to the spot where our house stood, and the restaurant with its celebrated patio boasting the best view in the world. Both buildings lie in rotting planks and debris scattered down the hill, most of it washed away in storms over the years, the rest blackened by seawater and time.

In my imagination, the buildings stand in spectral beauty, the sprawling Eden with its magnificent patio, and above it our little house. Josie and I shared a room after Dylan came, and neither one of us ever minded. I see the ghosts of all of us when we were happy—my parents madly in love, my sister bright and full of boundless energy, Dylan with his hair pulled back in a leather string, racing us down the stairs so we could build a fire on the beach and make s'mores and sing. He loved singing, and he had a

good voice. We always thought he should be a rock star. He said he didn't want anything but Eden, and us, and the cove.

I see myself too, an urchin of seven with too much hair, whirling on the beach, the sky overhead blurring blue and white.

A million years ago.

Our family restaurant was called Eden, both exclusive and permissive, frequented by hippie movie stars and their drug dealers. Our parents were part of that world too—stars in their realm, each wielding power on their own terms, my father the jovial, welcoming chef with his hearty laugh and excessive habits, my mother on his arm, a charming coquette.

Josie and I ran around like puppies, sleeping on the beach of the cove when we got tired, underfoot and ignored. My mother was a great beauty who'd come for dinner with another man and fallen instantly in love with my father, or so the legend says. But if you'd known him, you would know it was entirely likely. My father was a massive personality, a charming, bigger-than-life chef from Italy, though people just said *cook* in those days. Or restaurateur, which was what he really was. My mother loved him to excess, far more than she loved us. His passion for her was intense, and sexual, and possessive, but is that love? I don't know.

I do know that it's hard to be the children of parents who are obsessed with each other.

Josie thrived on drama the way my parents did. She had both my father's enormous personality and my mother's beauty, though in Josie, the combination became something extraordinary. Unique. I can't count the number of times people drew and photographed and painted her, men and women, and how often they fell in love. I always thought she would be a movie star.

Instead, she made of her life a great ruinous drama, just like our parents, with a suitably catastrophic ending.

The cove is still there, of course, even if the stairs are gone. I pull on my booties and weave my heavy hair into a thick braid. Light is spilling peach over the horizon as I paddle around the rocks and out to the line. It's only

three others and me. A nasty shark attack a few weeks ago has thinned the ranks of the eager, no matter how badass the waves.

And they are badass. Solid nine feet, with a gorgeous glassy curl that's much rarer than people think. I paddle out and wait my turn, catch the line, and leap to my feet to ride right on the edge. This is the instant I live for, that moment when nothing else is in my head. Nothing can be. It's me and the water and the sky, the sound of the rippling surf. The sound of my breath. The edge of the board slipping along the water, cold over my ankles even in booties. Ice-cold. Perfect balance, shivering, hair slapping my cheek.

For an hour, maybe more, I'm lost in it. Sky and sea and dawn. I dissolve. No me, no body, no time, no history. Just the deck and toes and air and water and suspension—

Until it's not.

The wave rips unexpectedly and so fast, so hard that I'm slammed deep into the water, the washing machine of surging surf pounding my body, my head, the board, which tumbles too close, a dangerous power that could crack my head wide open.

I go limp, holding my breath, letting the water suds me. Resistance will break you. Kill you. The only way to survive is to let go. The world swirls, up and down, around, for endless moments.

I'm going to drown this time. The board yanks on my ankle, surges me another direction. Seaweed winds around my arms, swirls around my neck—

Josie's face swims up in front of me. The way it was fifteen years ago. The way it looked on television overnight.

She's alive.

I don't know how. I know only that it's true.

The ocean spits me up to the surface, and I drag a breath into my oxygen-starved lungs. By the time I make it back to the cove, I am exhausted and fall on my belly onto the sand of the protected space, resting for a minute. All around me are the voices of my childhood. Me and Josie and Dylan. Our dog, Cinder, a black retriever mix, romps around us, wet and smelly and happy. Smoke from the restaurant fires fills the air with a sense

of cozy possibility, and I hear faint music, weaving through long-ago laughter.

When I sit up, it all stops, and there is only the wreck of what once was.



One of my earliest memories is of my parents locked in a passionate embrace. I couldn't have been more than three or four. It's unclear where they were, exactly, but I remember my mother pressed up against a wall, her blouse shoved up and my father's hands over her breasts. I saw her skin. They kissed so hungrily that they looked like animals, and I watched in fascination for one second, two, three, until my mother made a sharp noise, and I screamed, "Stop it!"

The memory wafts around my mind as I sit down in my backyard an hour later, hair wet from a shower. I sip a mug of hot, sweet coffee and check the headlines on my iPad. Hobo sits on the table beside me, yellow eyes bright, black tail swishing. He's a feral, seven years old. I found him when he was five or six months, starving, battered, practically dead on my back doorstep. Now he'll go out only if I'm with him, and he's never missed a meal. Absently, I stroke his back as he keeps an eye on the shrubs along the fence. His fur is long and silky, all black. It's remarkable how much company he provides.

The disaster on the news was a nightclub fire in Auckland. Dozens of people were killed, some when the ceiling fell down on the revelers, some when fleeing partiers were trampled. There are no other details. With a rumbling sense of a train coming toward me, I click around the pictures, looking for the newscaster I saw last night. No luck.

I fall back in my chair and sip some more coffee. Bright Santa Cruz sunlight shines through the eucalyptus tree overhead and makes patterns over my thighs, too white because I'm always in the ER or a wet suit.

It's not Josie, I think with my rational mind.

I reach for the keyboard, about to type in another search term—and stop myself. For months after she died, I combed the internet for any possible clue that she could have survived the cataclysmic train crash. The explosion had been so severe that they couldn't identify all the individual remains, and as happens more often than first responders and law enforcement will admit, a lot of it was speculation. Your loved one was there; she has not surfaced. All indications are that she died.

After a year, my twitchy need to search for my sister calmed down, but I couldn't help that catch in my throat when I thought I saw her in a crowd. After two years, I finished my residency at San Francisco General and came home to Santa Cruz, where I took a spot in the ER and bought myself this house not far from the beach, where I could keep an eye on my mother and build an ordinary, quiet life for myself. The only things I'd ever really wanted—peace, calm, predictability. My childhood had been drama enough for one life.

My stomach growls. “C'mon, kid,” I say to Hobo, “let's get some breakfast.”

The house is a small two-bedroom Spanish style in a neighborhood that crouches on the edges of places you don't want to walk at night, but it's mine, and I can be at the beach in seven minutes on foot. I've updated the old appliances and crappy cupboards and repaired the splendid tile work. I'm thinking maybe pancakes for breakfast when my phone buzzes on the counter.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, opening the fridge. Hmm. No eggs. “What's up?”

“Kit,” she says. A faint pause, enough to make me lift my head. “Did you happen to see the news about that big nightclub fire in New Zealand?”

My stomach drops, down, down, down all the way through the earth. “What about it?”

“I know it's ridiculous, but I swear I saw your sister in one of the clips.”

Holding the phone to my ear, I look out the kitchen window to the waving fronds of eucalyptus, the flowers I planted painstakingly along the fence. My oasis.

If it were anyone but my mother, I'd blow it off, run away, avoid opening this particular door, but she's done the work. Every step of AA, over and over. She's present and real and sad. For her sake, I take a breath and say, "I saw it too."

"Could she really be alive?"

"It's probably not her, Mom. Let's keep our heads, not get our hopes up, okay?" My stomach growls. "Do you have anything to eat? I was at the ER until four, and there isn't a damn thing in this house."

"How strange," she says in her droll way.

"Ha. If you'll make me some eggs, I'll come over and talk about this in person."

"I've got to be to work at two, so make it quick."

"It's not even eleven."

"Mm-hmm."

"I am not putting on makeup," I say, which she always notices. Even now.

"I don't care," she says, but I know she does.



It's walkable, another reason I bought in the area I did, but I drive so she won't fret. I bought her the condo a couple of years back. It's a bit dated, the rooms on the small side, but she has a wide view of the Pacific from the windows of the front room. The sound of the ocean keeps her calm. It's the thing we share, that hunger, bone-deep, for the ocean. Nothing else will do.

I climb the outside stairs to her second-story condo, looking automatically over the waves to check conditions. It's calm now. No surfers, but lots of kids and families playing along the edges of the softly ruffling water.

My mom comes out to her plant-filled porch when she spies my car. She's wearing crisp cotton capris, yellow, with a white top striped the same

sunny color. Her hair—still thick and healthy, blonde and gray making it look streaked—is pulled into an updo like a young mom’s. It looks just right, even though her face shows the hard years she’s lived, all the sun worshipping she’s done. It doesn’t matter. She’s slim and long-legged and deep-busted, and the startling eyes have lost none of their jeweled brilliance. She’s sixty-three, but in the filtered light of her simple upstairs porch, she appears to be about forty.

“You look tired,” she says as she waves me inside.

Vigorous plants of many kinds fill the rooms. Orchids are her specialty. She’s the only person I know who makes orchids bloom over and over. Give her half a second and she’ll enumerate the various genus types—*Cattleya*; *Phalaenopsis*, her favorite; delicate and beautiful *Laelia*, all with their proper Latin names.

“Long night.” I smell coffee as I come in and gravitate to the drip pot. I pour coffee into the cup that’s waiting, the one she saves for me, a heavy green mug with HAWAII painted across the front. Eggs and chopped peppers await on the counter.

“Sit,” she says briskly, and ties an apron around her. “Omelet okay?”

“Better than okay. Thank you.”

“Open my laptop,” she says, dropping a pat of butter into a heavy cast-iron skillet. “I saved the clip.”

I follow orders, and there’s the piece I saw the night before. The chaotic scene, the screams and noise. The newscaster in his bomber jacket. The face behind his shoulder, looking right into the camera, for the solid beat of three seconds. *One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand*. I watch, then rewind and watch again, counting. Three seconds. If I stop the clip on her face, there’s just no mistaking it.

“No one could look that much like her,” my mom says, coming to peer over my shoulder. “And have the exact same scar.”

I close my eyes, as if that will get rid of this problem. When I open them again, there she is, frozen in time, that uneven scar that runs from her

hairline, straight through her eyebrow, and into her temple. It was a miracle she didn't lose her eye.

"No," I say. "You're right."

"You have to go find her, Kit."

"That's ridiculous," I say, even though I've been thinking the same thing. "How would I do that? Millions and millions of people live in Auckland."

"You would be able to find her. You know her."

"You know her too."

She shakes her head, straightening her back stiffly. "You know I don't travel."

I scowl. "You've been sober fifteen years, Mom. You'd be fine."

"No, I can't. You need to do this."

"I can't run away to New Zealand. I have a job, and I can't just leave them in the lurch." I shove my hair off my face. "And what will I do with Hobo?" My heart stings—the job I can navigate, since I haven't had time off in three years. But my cat will pine without me.

"I'll go stay at your house."

I look at her. "Stay there, or go in the morning and night and feed him?"

"I'll move there." She slides the omelet, steamy and beautifully studded with peppers, onto the table. "Come eat."

I stand up. "He'll probably hide the whole time."

"That's all right. He'll know he's not alone. And maybe after a day or two, he'll come sleep with me."

The smell of onions and peppers snares my body, and I dig in to the eggs like a sixteen-year-old boy, my mind flashing up images. Josie bending over me to see if I was awake yet, her long hair tickling my neck when we were little; her exuberant laugh; a flash of her throwing a stick for Cinder to chase. My heart literally aches, not metaphorically—a weight of memory and longing and anger press down hard on it until I have to pause, set down my fork, take a breath.

My mother sits quietly. I think of her voice when she told me Josie was dead. I see that her hand is trembling ever so slightly. As if to cover it, as if this is a normal morning with normal things in it, she lifts her cup to drink. “Did you surf?”

I nod. We both know it’s how I process things. How I make peace. How I live with everything.

“Yes. It was gorgeous.”

She sits in the second chair of the two at the table. Her gaze is fixed on the ocean. Light catches on her serious mouth, and I suddenly remember her laughing with my father, her lips red and wide, as they spun around in a dance on the patio of Eden. Suzanne sober is a far better creature than Suzanne drunk, but I sometimes miss the exuberance of her in those days.

“I’ll go,” I say, maybe hoping to see a whisper of that younger woman.

And for a single moment a flame leaps in her eyes. She reaches for me, and for once I let her take my hand, squeezing it in a fit of generosity.

“You promise you’ll actually live in my house?” I ask.

With her free hand, she draws an *X* across her heart and raises that same hand in a gesture of an oath. “Promise.”

“Okay. I’ll get out of here as soon as I can arrange it.” A wave of mingled anticipation and terror rolls through my chest, sloshes in my gut. “Holy shit. What if she’s really still alive?”

“I guess I’m going to have to kill her,” Suzanne says.