



THE THINGS WE WATER

MARIANA ZAPATA

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Book Cover Design by Sarah Hansen, Okay Creations

Editing by Hot Tree Editing

*To my love, my heart, my soul,
The most magical being I've ever known,
Kai
You will always be the best love story
I'll ever be a part of*

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CHAPTER ONE

Though most of the statements regarding The Night of the Meteor vary depending on geographical location, two claims remain undisputed: it happened on a night with a full moon, and the world was never the same again.

wasn't surprised they didn't know what to say. What had just come out of my mouth sounded like something I'd hallucinated—or an excerpt from a fantasy novel.

I But this was no fairy tale. No legend. Not even a bestselling novel being adapted into a movie.

It was reality.

My reality.

So, I wasn't exactly surprised either when my two best friends leaned forward, mouths slightly open, and said almost simultaneously, "Explain that again." The only part they differed on was that Sienna called me "Nina" at the end of her sentence, and Matti didn't.

I *almost* made fun of them for being that kind of married couple now. It was one thing to finish each other's sentences, but for them to choose almost all the same words and have nearly identical expressions? It made me want to bear hug them and tease them at the same time.

But we didn't have time for that. I could make fun of them later.

First, I needed them to understand. Needed them to help me. Help *us*.

The truth was, I couldn't blame my friends for struggling to comprehend what I'd just told them. *I* had a hard time accepting everything that had happened over the last month, and I'd watched it go down with my own two eyes. I had *lived* it. None of us were strangers to unbelievable things, but this pushed the limit.

Dipping my chin like I hadn't looked at the body sleeping in my arms at least ten thousand times in the past couple of years—a huge chunk of those peeks having taken place over the last few weeks—I focused down on Duncan for the ten-thousandth and one time. I smiled despite the uncertainty and near panic I'd been living on the verge of lately. Because he always cheered me up. Honestly, it was impossible not to be happy when the cutest thing I'd ever seen in my life snored in a way that reminded me of how my dad used to nap in his recliner after dinner.

In Duncan's case, it was a lot of work being adorable; it was a full-time job.

And maybe it was better just to show them why I was here instead of explaining with words one more time.

This whole situation was half miracle and half *Teen Wolf*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Ancient Aliens* combined, after all. It depended on how you looked at it and what you believed. But that wasn't important either. They needed to see the big picture first.

In our case, I guess you could say the puppy-sized picture.

Peeling back the blanket I had him wrapped in—to hide Duncan, not because he was cold—I angled my arms so Matti and Sienna could get a better look at the ball of black fur that had turned my life upside down—not once, but twice now. I wasn't mad about it. Overwhelmed and more scared than I wished, but not angry.

Unlike some people I knew, I didn't believe that Fate was working behind the scenes, smoking a cigarette and planning people's lives out before they were even born. For one, that was too much work with eight billion people

on the planet. I didn't have a second reason because I thought the first one was enough.

But sometimes things happened that made absolutely no sense in the moment but eventually turned out to be blessings. Maybe you cried before you saw the good in them, but that was hindsight.

I figured there were plenty of things in the world that weren't easily explained, but it didn't make them any less real.

Like countless beings in existence at that moment.

Like every person in this room, if you wanted to be specific, and especially like the small body tucked up against me, which was why I was here.

Without the blanket covering the majority of him, Duncan's black coat gave the initial impression that he was a short-haired black dog, and his long ears gave the idea he had some kind of hound in him, but as I tugged the blanket away inch by inch, the poofy tail that could have belonged on a fox peeked out.

And so did the star of this whole shit show.

The moment would have called for spirit fingers if our situation wasn't so dire.

"He has a flame on the tip of his tail now," I told them like they couldn't see it with their own eyes.

It was one of the two things on Duncan's body that were a dead giveaway that he was no baby basset or bloodhound or even any kind of household pet—not that he'd ever been, but it hadn't been so noticeable before. You had to have an excellent nose or be sensitive to magic to mistake him for anything else.

Six weeks ago, Duncan's tail had solely been fluffy, and his eyes had been a bright brown. We had *known* he wasn't what he looked to be—Matti and Sienna could smell it, and I could sense it—but now it was blatantly obvious, and they hadn't even seen his eyeballs yet. In the span of a single night, he had gone from a believable black puppy with a mixture of breeds and a hint of magic in him to something else. Something undeniable.

Unfortunately, from the shocked glint in Matti's dark brown eyes and the way Sienna's mouth was hanging open even wider than it had after my crappy explanation, it confirmed that any hopes I'd had of Duncan being normal-ish were long gone.

Because normal-ish was the most I could ask for.

I had crossed every finger and toe on my body in hopes they were going to tell me he was a werewolf. Any kind of mythological wolf creature would have been perfect. Even a Cerberus would have been great; there were a lot of tales about them out there. But a werewolf would have been my first choice, if I'd had one. Wolves were some of the most highly revered creatures throughout history.

Sometimes even my brain struggled to understand what kind of universe we lived in that Duncan being one would have made life so much easier.

I couldn't even begin to imagine explaining *that* to someone who didn't know the truth about the beings that roamed the planet in plain sight. People could barely tolerate others exactly like them. You tell them that magic crashed into Earth thousands of years ago and that all the mythology and folklore that had been written about was based on *reality*, and that would send almost anyone into a fit.

There were countless movies and stories—fiction and nonfiction, if you counted history books with mythology in them—about humans that could shapeshift. There were stories about wolf shapeshifters that dated back to Babylonian times. I was pretty sure cultures on every continent had tales of them. I could remember sitting through a class on Aztec history and having to keep a straight face while the professor went on about the symbolism regarding the Aztec believing that some of their warriors were *nahuales*, shapeshifters.

I'd gone through a phase as a teenager where I'd read every werewolf romance I could find, and *I* knew the truth. What normal people weren't aware of was that there wasn't just one type. Off the top of my head, I could name several types of werewolves. There were the Amarok, a line of massive wolves whose ancestors inspired the Inuit stories. An iron wolf, from those

found in Baltic tales. Someone had told me once that there was a rumor even Fenrir, from Norse mythology, had a sacred line still in existence. Most of the ones I'd known and grown up with had been descended from the Mexican wolves who traced their ancestry back to Mesoamerican myths.

It was easy now to look back and think all those ancient civilizations had nothing better to do than use their active imaginations to explain things like droughts and terrible storms as the work of beings with good and terrible gifts, but some people knew the truth.

They hadn't been making things up.

The fact was, in a world of mythological legends that weren't exactly fiction, being a person who could turn back and forth between a man and a wolf—it was their choice after all, and their size depended on their heritage—was a well-accepted concept by those aware of the magic that had permeated the world and its beings a very long time ago. The magical.

And if anyone knew what *wasn't* as easily accepted, it was me.

"Nina," Matti exhaled my name. He sounded like he was having trouble remembering how to breathe. His eyes were wider than I had ever seen, and we'd gotten into trouble together plenty of times as kids, so I'd seen them big. "How *the fuck* does he have a flame on his tail, and how the hell didn't that blanket catch on fire?"

I snorted at his deranged tone. Wasn't that the freaking question? "I was kind of hoping you two might know," I answered him with a tiny shrug so I didn't wake my donut up. "And the flame is magical. It only burns things when he's scared or mad. Neat, huh?"

I knew Matti was transfixed when he didn't respond; he always had something to say. Part of me was convinced he might not have even heard me. It was one thing to come across a man walking along the street, radiating magic that he carried in his cells and looking to the world like just a normal, tall guy when you knew in your gut—or through your nose—that he wasn't.

But *this* was different. And I had known it to some degree from the moment that Duncan had come into my life. Now? I definitely had a better

understanding of how unique he was.

So different that someone would try to hurt me to kidnap a puppy with red eyes and a blue flame on his tail.

Not once but *twice*.

But I was going to save telling these two about those incidents a little while longer. We had other things to get through first. I didn't need Matti or Sienna distracted when there was nothing anyone could do about the past.

With the arm I wasn't using to support his sleepy body against mine, I pinched the blue flame to show them. They gasped like kids on Christmas. I'd expected to get burned by it, too, the first time. That hadn't happened, fortunately, or else doing anything with him would have been impossible.

"It doesn't hurt?" Sienna asked in a voice I was pretty sure I'd only heard her use on the day she'd met Matti. Like she was in awe.

Me too, Sienna, I thought. There were magical beings—races that could trace their lineages back to ancient lore, who could look and act like normal people when they wanted to—and there were *magical beings that looked like puppies*. Specifically, a really, really cute puppy with big, innocent eyes and a sleek, soft coat.

"No." I pinched the flame again to show her.

Her wide, pale green eyes moved from me to Duncan and back. This was as close as she got to being speechless, which said a lot because she wasn't the quiet type either. It was part of the reason why we had become friends as teenagers and managed to stay such good friends for so long. We had never struggled to talk to each other.

Until now.

But I guess I could take responsibility for that. I had kind of blindsided them by showing up like this. There wasn't much I kept from them, but I'd hidden this until now since they'd been in Europe for most of the time since all this had gone down. I hadn't wanted to spoil their vacation.

"I don't understand," she whispered eventually, still stunned.

I bit the inside of my cheek, taking in her black hair and a shade of skin that was almost milky, no matter how much sun she got. She was the first

person to say she wasn't classically beautiful, but she was the cutest. Her round face and pink cheeks hid the fact she had super sharp teeth sometimes and an ultra-protective personality all the time. An hour ago, she'd opened the door wearing a fitted red blouse and black pants with her hair tied up in an elegant bun, and now, she'd swapped that outfit out for a sweater and pajama pants I would've bet my money she'd taken out of her husband's drawer. This was the version of her I knew the best, but I loved Sophisticated Sienna as much as I loved Sweatpants Sienna.

And she loved me even though 95 percent of my wardrobe consisted of T-shirts I'd picked up in towns Duncan and I had visited, paired up with jeans or jean shorts. My three nice blouses were hand-me-downs from Sienna herself. She and Matti both thought it was "so cute" I had four pairs of shoes total: hiking boots, beige sneakers that matched with everything—and if they didn't, too bad—Crocs, and one pair of sandals.

Then I looked at Matti, who I had known over a whole decade longer than I had her, since we had become neighbors at three years old. I took in the brown hair that used to be so long he'd had it in a ponytail for a while, but now he had a "real job," as he called it, and had to keep it professionally short. His skin was on the medium spectrum of tan, and those features that I'd seen grow from a toddler to a thirty-two-year-old had gotten sharper with high cheekbones and a defined jaw. Plus, he'd gained around two hundred pounds over that period. And gained a mustache at some point since I'd last seen him; one I wanted to give him crap about, but he somehow managed to pull it off. He might be into clothes now, but he hadn't lost the twinkle in his eye: the dead giveaway a mischievous little asshole still lived in his body.

They were such a beautiful couple. Such great friends. The best people I knew, other than my parents.

And you would never, ever know at first glance that they both came from old magic that allowed them to turn into something straight out of a folktale—a wolf, or a werewolf, as some chose to refer to themselves. And by werewolves, I meant the "real" kind: giant wolves, not some hybrid bipedal monster like in most movies.

To “normal” people, people born without magic—the word almost everyone threw around as an explanation to what gave certain folks the ability to become something out of a tale—Matti and Sienna didn’t look any different, other than the fact they were both considered taller than average in most cultures. But to those with sensitive noses or feelings—me included—who had been born with a magic-heavy bloodline, you could just tell there was something else in them. Some people liked to say they were “blessed” when they referred to their ancestries.

Like being different and having to lie about it your entire life was easy.

It wasn’t. Secrets were a burden no matter their size. For some people, it might be *easier*, but it was never *easy*.

“It doesn’t burn anything when he’s calm,” I went on about Duncan’s tail. “He caught a few things on fire at first, but we haven’t had an incident in almost two weeks.” I thought I could still smell burnt hair if I tried hard enough. It brought back memories of the time when Matti and I had tried to start a bonfire when we were eleven because our families hadn’t wanted to take us camping. We had gotten into so much trouble, especially when our parents had seen our eyebrows. Matti’s right one had never grown back in the same.

“When you said you had something you wanted to show us, I thought you’d gotten a tattoo or bought a new trailer, Nina,” Sienna admitted while staring at Duncan’s flame.

It wasn’t that I *wished* that were the case, but it would have made life a hell of a lot less complicated than it’d been lately.

Less dangerous too.

My sore neck silently agreed as I snorted, getting more comfortable on the couch we were sitting on in their living room. Unlike the small, rural town where I’d met them both, they now lived in Chicago. In an apartment. On the tenth floor.

They were the least werewolfy werewolves I’d ever met, I swear. But that was one of the many reasons how and why they had ended up together—

their own small pack of two, though Duncan and I were honorary members by default.

I pressed the little button that held his collar together and watched them both take deep inhales.

There was no recognition on either of their faces, but there was even more surprise on them. I clicked the snap back on. No way was I leaving it off.

“How?” Sienna leaned forward a little more. “You woke up, and he was....” She waved her hand up and down.

“I don’t know how,” I told them honestly with another shrug. “We went to bed, and the next morning, he was on my chest, his head right there, looking at me. His eyes were red, and then he started wagging, and I thought his butt was on fire.” I had tried to put it out with water, sand, and dirt, but nothing happened. It had been pure luck that we’d been at a mostly empty RV park, and that I hadn’t started yelling like I had the time he’d carried a rat into our travel trailer. “It hasn’t gone away. His flame changed when he got scared right after it appeared, and it got even brighter.” *That* was when he’d lit things on fire. I’d tested it out with my fingers first.

RIP to my favorite hoodie and some of my hair.

And then there’d been the times he’d experienced a different kind of fear, but I’d share that tidbit with them later. We had to focus on the big stuff before we could get there.

“I had really hoped he had a little wolf DNA in him to explain all of this, but you’re both looking at him like he’s an alien, so that’s not it, huh?” I kept going, still hung up on that dream.

They stared at me.

Matti and Sienna should have known about Duncan, of course. We had just figured that Duncan had been too young to express any of the noticeable traits that came with their kind of mythological being. They had both been five years old when they had gone from normal children to being able to turn into a puppy. On the other hand, my own nature... magic, whatever you wanted to call it... hadn’t made an appearance until I’d been a teenager. But

that was like comparing steak to chicken breast. They were both proteins, but not really the same at all.

In the end though, that was exactly what had happened. Duncan's true nature *had* revealed itself, at least in the form of his tail and eyes, right after his *second* birthday. Days later to be exact. Except his changes weren't of the werewolf-kind. But to be fair, my friends' lives, like mine, had started with us as normal, human babies.

My donut's had not.

"Yeah, yeah, *I know you said he wasn't*, but I still hoped," I grumbled. I was an optimist, and they knew it. I still held out hope that my favorite boyband would get back together, and the McRib would come back. "I thought maybe we were all wrong and he was some kind of werewolf hybrid."

The snicker that came out of Matti's nose.... "A werewolf hybrid?" He made a smug face.

He didn't need to make it sound like I was dumb. "You thought Santa was real until we were thirteen," I reminded him. "Maybe you aren't the best person to make fun of me for dreaming. Weirder crap has happened."

He gave me a look as Sienna snickered. She knew that story already, about me having to lie to him for two years after I'd found out the truth about ol' Saint Nick. "I'm not, but... have you been watching *Underworld* again?" he scoffed.

"Maybe, but only because I was looking for clues."

To be fair, I had already known the folklore in the movie was all off and there was no way anyone who had worked on the movie was one of their kind because they'd gotten it so wrong, but I had been desperate, couldn't sleep, and the storylines were entertaining. I regretted nothing.

And peeking down at the still-napping puppy on my lap reminded me of exactly why that was the case. I couldn't believe he'd slept through our trip up to Matti and Sienna's apartment. I couldn't believe he was *still* asleep now. He loved them. There was no reason he should have been so exhausted, but my gut said something was there. Something that had nothing to do with him being sick.

He was stressed, and I blamed myself.

“I don’t know what to do,” I told them, my childhood best friend and teenaged-Nina’s best friend. “I’ve done so much research, and I still don’t know what he is. But now, I can’t hide him anymore, during the day or at night. It’s too obvious he’s different.” Which was why I was in this predicament of panic and helplessness. Why I was considering doing what I was considering doing.

Why I was here.

The expressions on both their faces said exactly what they thought about me not telling them about this change in him until now, and I was positive they were going to give me shit over it later, which was fair enough. But you had to put out the fire before you figured out what started it.

Just like I could read their faces, they could do the same to mine. Plus, they could smell my feelings. I could count on one hand the number of things I’d ever been able to hide from them before this. The fact I’d made it this long was only because I hadn’t seen them in person or talked to them on the phone since they’d gone on their trip.

Now that they were back, I needed advice. We needed help. I had to be realistic about our situation. Duncan and I couldn’t keep going the way we’d been going before, that was a fact.

I knew in my heart that our time traveling around in my RV, just the two of us, while I worked remotely, was over.

I had spent the last couple of weeks thinking and thinking, then thinking a little more, trying to figure out what our options were and why 99 percent of them couldn’t work. What it all came down to was this final act of desperation. The only idea I could come up with that might work long-term.

Life hadn’t been the same since I had found my furry donut, and now it was changing again. And I could either ride this new reality out with him because he had attached himself to my life and my heart like a cherished barnacle that gave me the kind of love that I’d become addicted to or... I could do something that I would never be able to live with.

There wasn't even a choice to be made. The only thing I wanted to do was make sure they couldn't think of something I hadn't been able to first. Just in case.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do, but I have to figure something out," I told them, trying to stay neutral. "He's gained four pounds since his tail happened. He was eight pounds up until then. I can hide him in a blanket right *now*, but barely. What about in a month at the rate he's going? In six months? How big is he going to get? What else is going to change about him?" My voice got higher and higher with each sentence, and I had to clear my throat by the end.

There were too many variables, and Duncan wasn't the only one stressed out. I hadn't even gotten to the part about his telepathy. "He can't live out in the world anymore unless he pulls a Pinocchio and turns into a real boy." That was the best way to explain what Matti and Sienna, and every other nahual, or shapeshifter, like them could do: go back and forth between their fairy-tale body and their human one.

It was such a weird concept if you thought about it. To be human one second and something so totally different in the next, still fully aware of yourself—or so I'd been told. It was kind of a miracle, depending on how you looked at it.

And a curse, sometimes, in some ways, for some. For people who weren't likable werewolves. Or nine-tailed foxes revered in so many different mythologies. Or *unicorns*—everyone loved a unicorn. Or dozens of other beings like that, that were cute or honored or respected.

But there was a reason why civilization after civilization had equally worshipped and feared certain entities, as my mom used to tell me. There was the good, the bad, and the tales of beings who struck sheer terror into so many hearts, their stories continued being told throughout the centuries. I knew a lot about the latter.

"And he might not ever be able to, I don't know," I kept going, laying it all out there in a ramble. "The problem is that I don't have a safe place for him to be himself if he stays like this. He can't live his whole life not ever being

able to go outside. And what if he needs more people around him than just me?”

Some people and beings were fine being solitary, but so many weren't. There was a reason why werewolves, ogres, and centaurs raised their children in communities: for safety *and* for family ties. You had to learn to be a functioning magical being in a modern world from someone or *someones*. Kids were a handful under the best conditions, and add a magical chromosome with the potential of scaring the crap out of the majority of humanity?

Honestly, it was incredible the cat hadn't been let out of the bag after so long.

Magical beings had managed to remain a secret.

I had thought about moving back where I'd grown up, a small town in the middle of nowhere in New Mexico that had been rich with magical beings when I'd been young. It had mostly been the wolfy kind, but there had been some ogre families too, plus a couple of others who I had never known, *for sure*, the truth about; they'd been so secretive.

Or *maybe* they hadn't known what they were either. I'd never thought about that possibility before.

But things had changed over the last decade, and the town wasn't what it had once been. The population had dwindled as businesses closed, and the elderly, who had held the community together, passed on, leaving the younger population to move away. Matti's parents were gone. My parents weren't there either. Sienna's had moved after we'd graduated, and they lived in Wyoming now. There was no one left that was worth putting up with the heat for. Going there would only bring more attention to us at this point.

“Letting him out to pee and play has already given me a few grays,” I told them.

I was scared now every time we left my trailer. The entire way up to their apartment had me sweating bullets. What if I slipped on a recently mopped floor and he fell out of the blanket? What if I moved my hand too much and