

Sail Seeker



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She walked barefoot along the shoreline, stooping occasionally to pick up a shell, or an interesting pebble, inspecting each one before placing it carefully in the floppy tote bag she carried on her right shoulder.

She glanced back up the beach to the old house, barely visible through the early morning mist, and smiled contentedly. The mist allowed her to imagine the old place the way it used to be, before the town had spread out along the coast, covering the beautiful cliff top with concrete and skyscrapers.

She turned back to her beachcombing. The ocean was calm, steely in the monochrome light, duplicitously shielding its unspoken depths. Natalie wasn't fooled. She had lived by the ocean all her life and knew that it was a hungry, mischievous beast and to think of it any other way was folly.

Her bag was full enough now to weigh uncomfortably upon her shoulder, and in the distance she could hear the noise of traffic and too many people, so she turned and walked back to the old beach house, savouring the last quiet moments of the day before the trippers arrived.

She reached the house and climbed up the old wooden steps, dropping her bag on the verandah and allowing herself a short rest on the swing seat. The mist was already lifting, the light changing as she watched. Even the ocean seemed to be waking, little wavelets now lapping softly against the shore.

She gave herself a shake and trudged through to the kitchen. She stroked the polished wooden surface of the breakfast bar, smiling at the memory of Gramps rustling up sumptuous feasts from the simple kitchen. She felt a familiar pain at the thought.

She poured herself a mug of coffee, then carried it and her bag through to her studio on the other side of the house. She stood for a moment, breathing in the smells of paint and glue, seaweed and driftwood, then set her bag down on a large work bench and began sorting her morning's bounty.

By the time she had carefully stowed her treasures in the various boxes on the shelves lining the far wall, the trippers were beginning to make their presence felt. She walked to the window at the front of the studio and gazed out as she prepared her glue.

Henry, the seasonal lifeguard employed by the town, was just reaching over her fence to retrieve a frisbee for a group of shouting children. As he straightened up he caught sight of her and waved, smiling ruefully. She smiled and waved back, then turned her attention to work.

She ignored the beach and its visitors for the rest of the morning, focussing her attention on transforming a large piece of driftwood into a representation of the distant headland, using the shells and pebbles she had retrieved from the shore.

At lunchtime she heard the door open and Henry's shouted greeting. She stepped back from her work, casting a critical eye over it. She was satisfied with its progress, though she was unsure how to complete it.

Henry appeared in the doorway, leaning against the wall, two brown paper bags dangling from his hands. She eyed them hungrily, knowing they contained lunch made by his mother. He grinned.

"The trippers have been complaining about strange growling noises coming from the beach house," he said, stepping forwards to admire her work. "I thought I should come and feed you before your stomach caused a panic!"

She poked her tongue out at him and walked over to the sink to wash her hands. "I am hungry," she admitted. "I forgot breakfast this morning."

He climbed onto one of the stools at the work bench. "Mum said you weren't taking proper care of yourself," he admonished.

Natalie smiled to herself. Henry's mother had been watching over Natalie ever since that fateful night. "It was just so perfect out there first thing, so quiet, I didn't want to waste time."

They ate in companionable silence, Henry enjoying the cool of the old house and the peace

from the demands of the trippers, Natalie considering how best to complete her picture. She devoured three of Henry's mother's meat patties, washing them down with freshly squeezed juice, then sat back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Henry nodded to her work. "It's looking good, Nat. You should get good money for that at the gallery." He scrunched up the paper bags and lobbed them into the waste paper basket in the corner of the studio, smiling with satisfaction as they dropped in cleanly. Then he left, returning to injured trippers, lost children and over ambitious swimmers who always underestimated the rip tide.

Natalie sat at the work bench for some time, staring without seeing. Finally, abandoning hope of inspiration, she rose, grabbed her tote and left the sanctuary of the beach house. She walked down the steps, determinedly ignoring the envious glances of the trippers on the beach. The other day a rather pompous man had tried to buy the house from her, insisting that he would pay well over its market value. She had fled in tears. To sell the house would be to sell Gramps.

Today she hurried away from the house, head down, unapproachable. She picked her way through the towels and sandcastles, giving Henry a wave as she passed his lookout station, heading towards the quieter rocky end of the beach.

She breathed in deeply, allowing herself to relax once she was away from the tourists. The sun caressed her face as she walked, and a gentle breeze played through her long brown hair, a welcome antidote to the heat of the day.

She skipped and jumped over the rock pools, stopping sometimes for a closer look at a crab or fish stranded by the tide. An outcrop of rock, visible only when the tide was at its lowest, lay in wait, like a prehistoric creature, at the base of the cliff.

She cambered onto it, cautiously testing each step before committing her weight to it, knowing how slippery the normally submerged rock could be. She worked her way out to the end, then sat, cross legged, staring out at the ocean. The tide was fully out, in a brief state of inertia.

Natalie stared into the water, marvelling at the clarity of the sea, delighting in the clear view of the sea bed. She smiled at the tiny darting fish and the gently swaying seaweed. Then she turned back to the beach. The sight made her heart ache. Where there had once been a pristine bay, empty but for the beach house Gramps had built, was now just another over-sized, over-crowded city.

The beach was barely visible beneath the heaving masses of the trippers, the bay a veritable traffic jam of power boats, inflatable dinghies and jet skies. When Gramps had warned her the beach would not be their's much longer she had merely laughed, refusing to believe it. But it had happened, and now she was left to deal with it alone.

She picked her way back across the rocks, pausing on the sand to look out at the horizon, searching for the sail she knew would never return. Her breath caught as a small boat drifted into view, but then came the familiar crushing realisation that it was just one of the many day fishers.

The crowd had thinned somewhat by the time she returned to the beach house. She dropped her tote on the breakfast bar and went to the fridge for a cold drink, depressed that she still had not decided how to finish her picture. If she didn't get her act together soon she would have to look for employment in the city.

Henry appeared at the screen door and knocked nervously. She frowned. Henry never knocked. "Come in," she laughed. He fumbled with the catch for a second, then walked in, holding something behind his back.

He stood on the mat, looking miserably at the floor.

She set her drink down and stared at him. "What's happened?" He shrugged, still looking down, jaw muscles working as he struggled for control. "Henry, you have me suitably anxious, just tell me!"

He looked up and she realised with a start that his eyes were wet. He said nothing, simply taking a lump of wood from behind his back and placing it on the breakfast bar before her. He stepped back reverentially.

She looked at the sea-soaked wood, initially not understanding what she was looking at. Then she turned it, so the worn lettering on the underside was facing her. She gasped and stepped back involuntarily, shaking her head.

“No!” she whispered. “No, it can't be!”

“Natalie, you knew one day ...” he could not finish the sentence, could not say what everybody had known.

She stared at the name, Polaris, sick to her stomach, head spinning. “Where?”

“Some divers found it, three miles out,” said Henry, watching her sadly. “On the Turn Ridge.”

She glared at him. “No! No way! Henry, he would not have gone down on the ridge! He knows these waters too well! He would never have made such a stupid mistake!”

Henry shook his head. “Natalie, there was a storm that night. It was wild out there. If he had engine trouble ...”

She swiped furiously at the tears rolling down her cheeks. “What else?” she snapped. “Henry, what else did they find?”

He watched her for a moment, then stepped outside briefly, returning with a sodden book. She closed her eyes at the sight of it. He waited on the mat, not wanting to drip water onto the polished wooden floor.

“His log,” whispered Natalie, stepping around the bar. “Have you looked inside?”

Henry shook his head, handing her the book, stepping aside as she knelt down to study it. She stroked the front cover lovingly, then took a deep breath and opened it. Although the pages were sodden, much of the writing was still legible. “Chinagraph,” she said, with the saddest of smiles. “He always used Chinagraph.”

“What does the last entry say?” asked Henry, not wanting to rush her, desperate to know.

She paused, then carefully prised the pages apart, fearful of ripping them. At last she found the final entry. “I can't ...” her voice broke. “Henry, you read it.”

Henry knelt down beside her and squinted down at the looping writing. “2345: engine failed. Seas rising. Wind speed 45-50. Navigation ...” Henry frowned at the page. “I can't read this bit. The boat must have lurched. Erm, all systems failure. Estimate position to be in region of Turn Ridge,” Henry paused, then looked up, his eyes wide. He swallowed hard. “He knew he was going down, Natalie. He left you a message.”

She stared at him, then turned the book to see. She was quiet for a while, reading and re-reading the message, then she closed the book and set it aside. Henry held her as she fell against him, her body shaking with thundering sobs. He held her until at last she calmed sufficiently to be led through to the living room.

She stared numbly at the floor. “He said I must leave. That I shouldn't stay here alone,” she took a shaky breath. “He said ... he'd always watch over me. And ...” she paused and looked up at Henry with a wry smile. “He said that you are very good man.”

Henry silently thanked his old friend, then he stroked her hair, easing it tenderly away from her face. “So, you'll come with me?”

She thought for a moment, staring around the old house that suddenly seemed less familiar, less like home. She nodded. “Yes Henry. I'll come with you.”