



# PART I

## CHAPTER 1

### **Panama City, Florida**

Born in a gush of blood, the dolphin calf's initial sense of the world is tail first into water colder than her mother's body. Her mother zips away to break the umbilical cord. The baby holds her breath out of instinct, not knowledge, and begins to drift away from the light above her into the darkness below. She's used to the comforting dark.

Her mother is back as suddenly as she departed and pushes her calf with her beak toward the surface and into the blinding brightness. Other female dolphins, some with calves of their own, are here when this newest arrival's blowhole opens and she takes in her first breath of the heavy warm air.

Inside her mother she could only arch her back and feel the confines of the womb with her flippers and tail. In this open water, she can swim freely, but instinctively

she tucks herself in close to her mother's body and nudges one of her nipples. A jet of milk squirts into her mouth, then another, again and again until the baby dolphin is full.

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Her mother will continue to nurse her for another year. During that time, the small community of dolphins roams the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico. It will be six months before the calf learns to follow her mother's lead and catch her own fish. She'll learn to follow boats because the humans sometimes share the fish they catch, tossing the scraps—skins and heads—into the water for the dolphins. The bolder dolphins are skilled at biting fish off lines, leaving only the head with the lethal hook embedded for the humans to reel aboard.

As summer approaches and the water warms, the dolphins travel to a spot where humans in boats from a place called AquaPlanet come to meet them. The first time the young dolphin sees these people squeaking and squealing at their arrival, she is frightened. She swims past the boat and turns on her side to watch. There are big humans and small humans. When the first of them steps off into the water, the calf darts away, but finds she is alone. Her mother, her aunts, and her cousins are letting the humans touch them.

She draws closer. Beneath the surface, she sees bony legs dangling uselessly from a puffy orange thing that makes the small human look like he is wearing a sponge to keep him afloat. The calf comes closer to inspect him with her sonar and can see his tiny heart beat as he flails the surface of the water with thin arms.

Curiosity gets the best of her and she draws closer. His face is distorted and red, and water, in big drops, drips off his chin. He lifts his arms and wails.

The dolphin starts to back away, but the boy sees her and stops the terrible noise. His head begins to waggle side to side like sea grass at the mercy of a current, and he reaches out to her with a small hand. She looks for her mother and sees her with one of the other children. This must be safe. Her mother would never lead her into danger. She lets herself float toward the child's outstretched hand.

When her rostrum touches the child's open palm, a shock runs through her; the child feels it, too. His head stills, his legs stop twitching; he smiles and makes a sound like water rolling across sand.

"This is that little dolphin's first visit to us," a human says. "You may have the honor of naming her," he tells the child whose cheek is now pressed against the calf's.

“What do you think, Owen?” says a woman in the water near the child. “You get to name her.”

The child opens his mouth, and tries to speak. “Nor . . . nor . . .” His head falls forward, and he tips face-first into the water. His mother reaches and rights him. His eyes widen, and he starts the unhappy noise again.

The little dolphin puts her head just beneath the surface and blows puffs of air out her blowhole. The bubbles, one after the other, erupt on the surface, which makes the little boy laugh. He reaches for the dolphin. “Nor . . . e . . . e . . . een.”

“He’s trying to say Noreen.” The woman smiles. “That’s his sister’s name. Her nickname is Nori.”

“Nor . . . e,” the boy says.