

1 SEPTEMBER

*122 days to go . . .*

Spindrift River

12:00 am

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Shivering, my fingers useless and numb, I staggered back to the stony bank near the bridge and collapsed.

A blurry glaze fell over my eyes as I stared hopelessly across the dark river.

I was in shock. I'd lost my sister.

I'd lost her.

In my desperate searching for Gabbi, I'd completely forgotten about the kidnappers and my friends. I looked up to the bridge for a sign of movement, but could see nothing. It was like I was the only being in the world right now, sitting alone on the side of a savage river that had just stolen my little sister away from me.

I turned back to the water.

Something suddenly caught my eye. Something was stuck in the shadowy branches on the other

side of the river.

Was something there or was my mind playing tricks on me? Creating shapes out of scattered moonlight and crooked driftwood? I rubbed my eyes and squinted through the darkness.

A gush of hope jolted through me—I was sure it was a figure! Half submerged and floating near the opposite bank! Could it be Gabbi, washed up and entangled in weeds on the riverbank? Could she still be alive?

I threw myself back into the freezing water and forced the burning muscles in my legs to kick, swimming diagonally through the current, trying to stop it from dragging me away downstream.

As I got closer, I became convinced it was Gabbi. The outline became more and more familiar with every frantic second. She could be alive, I repeated in my head. She could be alive.

The current was set on stopping me from reaching her. It pulled on me with all its might, but I pushed myself beyond my limits and forged ahead.

The water grew calmer, shielded from the rushing current by a narrow headland that acted like the wall of a dam. I was almost there. I thrashed over and finally I climbed to my feet in the shallow water.

I squinted and stared at the figure as I reached

for it. What I'd imagined was there—my sister—all of a sudden disappeared right in front of me. Her image was replaced by a lifeless mass of nothing.

I stopped short, and screamed with frustration and fury, smashing the water with my fists. The snagged figure was nothing but some plastic sheeting, stretched into a grotesque scarecrow shape that from the other side of the river had looked like a small person.

It had all been wishful thinking. There was no way she could have still been alive.

I crawled up the bank once more, too drained to swear, and too wrecked to cry.

12:21 am

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A brief thought of Mum swirled into my consciousness. She'd be devastated. This would mean the end for her. She wouldn't be able to go on without Gab. And she'd think that her own son had killed her daughter—that I escaped from the hospital to finish the job.

Like a wounded animal, I crawled further up the riverbank until I found a flat area.

I was numb, frozen, and half dead with exhaustion.

1:03 am

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Crazy dreams whirled through my head. I

imagined Gabbi kneeling beside me, healthy and well. I imagined turning to her and saying, "I saw you fall into the river. I went after you, but it was so hard to find you. The water was so cold and black and the current was impossibly strong. Please, forgive me, Gabs. I couldn't save you."

Then my surroundings seemed to transform and we were back at Treachery Bay, messing around in the boat.

A storm was brewing. Gabbi was frightened. "I shouldn't have brought you out here," I say to her. "I'm sorry."

"Cal," is all she says back to me.

"Cal," she says again, in a haunting, distant voice.

Something powerful was suddenly shaking me. Had I fallen back in the river? Was I being bashed along by the current?

"Cal, wake up!" came Gabbi's sweet voice once more.

In my dream, she was shaking me by the shoulder. Wonderful warmth flowed through my body, waking up my frozen arms and legs, sending a tingling sensation to my fingers and toes.

For a moment, I let the good feelings run all over me. It felt like the storm at Treachery Bay had passed and the sun had come out and my sister and I were sitting in warm light.

The dreamlike vision of Gabbi was leaving me. Reality started hitting home, but I didn't want to wake up and open my eyes. That would mean facing the truth.

The truth that Gabbi was dead. That I hadn't been able to save her. That I was lying sodden on the banks of Spindrift River, with Gabbi gone forever, because of me. I had failed to protect her.

"Cal!"

I opened my eyes. A black shadow loomed over me.

Someone really was sitting beside me, shaking me.

I blinked.

The dream figure of Gabbi was still there.

Was this like the dream I had in the caravan when Great-uncle Bartholomew appeared to me, telling me that everything was going to be all right?

He'd lied. Nothing was all right. Everything was worse than I could ever have imagined. My sister was dead, and now I was seeing things.

I shook my head to clear the crazy whirlpool of images in my mind, but the figure from my dream was still there.

"Cal!"

*Gabbi?*

"Cal, what's happened?"

*Gabbi?*

“Cal, why won’t you speak to me?”

Was I going crazy? Had my mind finally snapped completely?

“Gabbi?” I asked, squinting at the shape above me.

“It’s me, Cal, what’s going on? Why are we here?” Gabbi’s voice was weak and slurred.

It was no hallucination. I was looking straight into my sister’s face, and her small hand was clutching mine, gently squeezing it.

“Gabbi?”

“Yes, Cal, what’s wrong with you?”

“Gabbi, it’s really you! You’re OK!” I reached for her, grabbing her cheeks with my hands, shocked to feel her soft skin and fair hair against me.

“Ouch, Cal, what are you trying to do?” she said, wriggling away from me.

“I’m sorry,” I cried, “I’m just so happy to see you! And hear your voice! I can’t believe you’re alive!”

I stared at her. Her face had lost its chubbiness, and by the moon’s weak light she looked older. But it was Gabbi—alive! Kneeling beside me, confused and shivering!

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand,” she said, looking around, her voice not much more than a whisper. “Why are we here?”

What are we doing here? It's really dark. I'm scared, Cal. Let's go home. *Please?*"

I grabbed her in my arms and held her tighter than ever before. If only I could take her home, I thought. If only I could just wrap her up in something warm, call Mum and then all of us could go home together . . .

"It's OK," I whispered in her ear. "Everything's going to be OK. I promise."

I kept hugging her tight, trying to warm her up, trying to comfort her.

We clung onto each other, and gradually, her shivering eased. I pulled back and looked at her again. Her hair was flat and sleek on her head so that she looked like some little water creature. "I'll get you home safe," I promised.

"But I still don't know what's happening. Where are we?" she asked again. "How come we went swimming in this river? In the middle of the night? How come I feel so . . . confused?"

"We didn't actually go swimming . . ." I started to say, but then stopped myself. I could see Gabbi was too dazed to understand right now. I could tell her everything later. It was just so good to have her here with me, alive, to know that she was OK. I pushed some wet hair back from her face, then grabbed her in a bear hug again. I had missed her so much.