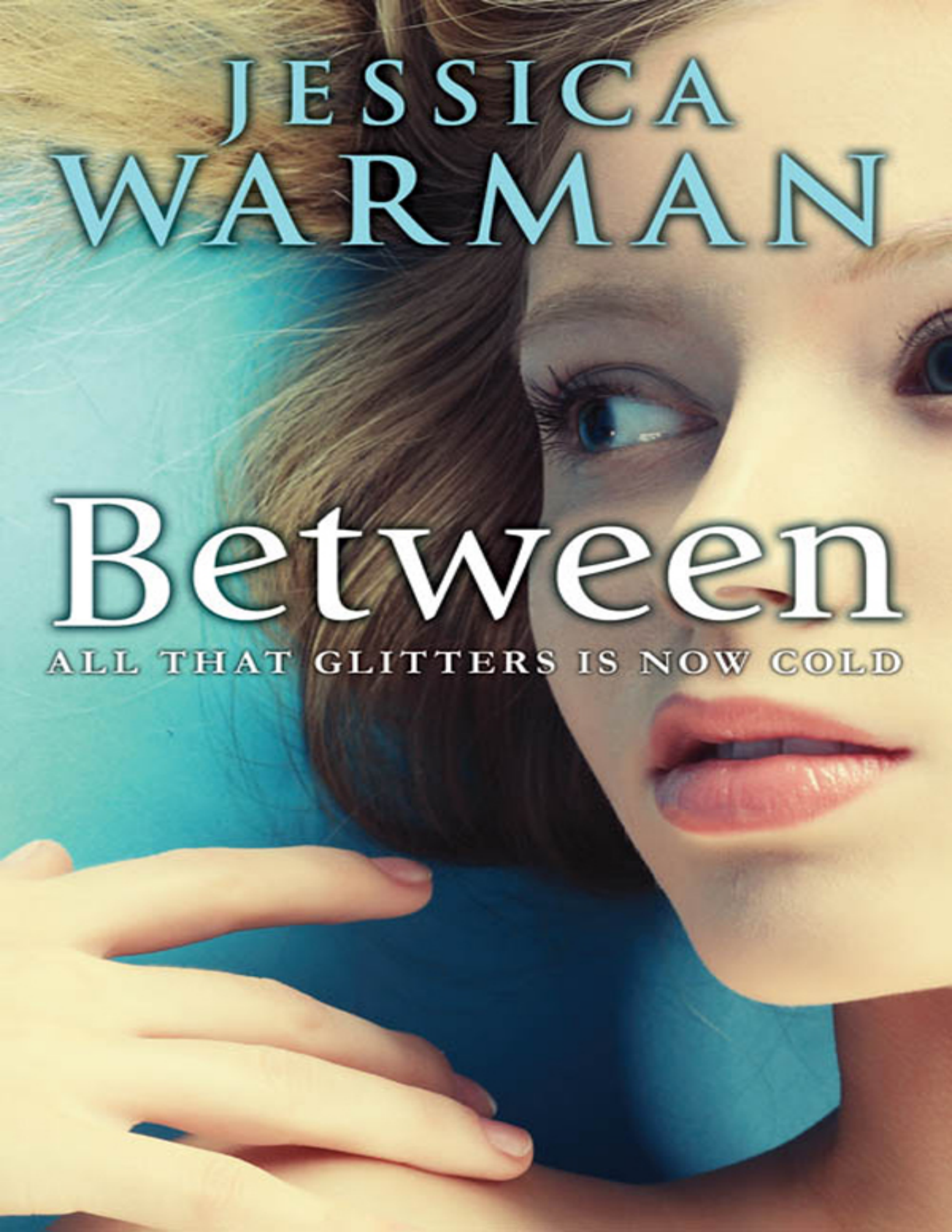


A close-up, high-angle shot of a woman's face, partially obscured by her hand. She has long, wavy brown hair and is looking upwards and to the left with a contemplative expression. Her hand is raised, with fingers slightly curled, near her chin. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue. The text is overlaid on the image.

JESSICA
WARMAN

Between

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOW COLD

'I'm telling you, there's no way I would have had that much cash lying around. For anything. I only remember using plastic.'

'What other explanation can there be, Liz? People don't walk around with cash like that any more. Why would you be hiding it in your bathroom?'

'I don't know.'

Jessica Warman writes poetry and short stories, as well as young adult fiction. *Between* is her third novel for young adults. She lives in Pittsburgh, USA, with her husband and children and has a passion for long-distance running.

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For M.C.W. Because we fit.

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmed - see here it is -
I hold it towards you -

John Keats

CHAPTER ONE

It's a little after 2 a.m. Outside the *Elizabeth*, things are relatively quiet. Boats – yachts, really – are tied to the docks, clean white buoys protecting their fibreglass and porcelain exteriors from the wood. The *slosh* of the Long Island Sound, water beating against boats and shore, is a constant in the background. In most of the other boats – with names like the *Well Deserved*, the *Privacy*, the *Good Life* – there is peace.

But inside the *Elizabeth*, there is persistent unrest. The boat is a 64-foot cruiser, equipped with a full kitchen, two baths, two bedrooms and enough extra space to sleep a total of twenty people. Tonight there are only six, though. It's a small party – my parents wouldn't have let me throw a big one. Everybody is asleep, I think, except for me.

I've been staring at the clock for twenty minutes now, listening to this persistent, annoying *thump thump thump* against the hull. It's late August. The air outside is already cool, and the water is undoubtedly frigid. Connecticut's like that; the water gets warm for a month or so in July, but near the end of the summer it's already cold again. Sometimes it seems like there are only two seasons around here: winter and *almost* winter.

Regardless of the water's temperature, I'm pretty certain there's a fish out there, stuck between the dock and the boat, pounding against the fibreglass, trying to free itself. The noise has been going on for what feels like forever. It woke me up at exactly 1.57 a.m., and it's starting to drive me nuts.

I finally can't take it any more. *Thump. Thumpthump.* If it's a fish, it's a *stupid* fish.

‘Hey? Do you hear that?’ I say to my best friend and stepsister Josie, who’s sleeping beside me on the fold-out couch in the front of the boat, highlighted dirty blonde hair plastered against the side of her face. She doesn’t respond, just continues to snore softly, passed out since a little after midnight from an alcohol/marijuana combination that sent us all to bed before the late show came to an end. That’s the last thing I remember before falling asleep: trying to keep my eyes open, mumbling to Josie that we had to wait for 1.37 a.m., which is exactly when I was born, before we fell asleep. Nobody made it. At least, I know I didn’t.

I stand up in the near-darkness. The only light in the boat is coming from the TV, where there’s an infomercial for the SuperMop! running with the sound turned off.

‘Anyone awake?’ I ask, still keeping my voice low. The boat rocks against the waves coming in from the Long Island Sound. *Thudthudthud*. There it is again. I look at the clock. It’s 2.18. I smile to myself; I’ve officially been eighteen for over half an hour.

If it weren’t for the thumping, the rocking of the boat would feel like being tucked inside a lullaby. This is just about my favourite place in the world. Being here with my friends makes it even better, if that’s possible. Everything seems peaceful and calm. The stillness of the night feels almost magical.

Thump.

‘I’m going outside to liberate a fish,’ I announce. ‘Somebody please come with me.’

But nobody – not *one* of them – even stirs.

‘Bunch of selfish drunks,’ I murmur. But I’m only kidding. And anyway, I can go outside by myself. I’m a big girl. There’s nothing to be scared of.

I know it sounds hypocritical, since we’ve been drinking and smoking, but it’s true: we’re good kids. This is a safe town. Everyone on-board has grown up together in Noank, Connecticut. Our families are friends. We love each other.

Looking around at all of them – Josie in the front of the boat, Mera and Topher, Caroline and Richie in sleeping bags on the floor in the back – life inside the *Elizabeth* feels like a hazy dream.

Elizabeth Valchar. That's me; my parents named this boat after me when I was six years old. But that was a lifetime ago. A few years before we lost my mother, before my dad married Josie's mom. My dad got rid of a lot of my mom's stuff after she died, but he was always adamant about keeping the boat. See, we have so many happy memories here. I always felt safe here. My mom would have wanted it this way.

Still, it can be eerie so late at night, especially outside. Other than the sloshing of the waves, the dull thumping against the hull, the night is dark and silent. The smell of ocean saltwater, of algae dried on to all the thick rock formations this close to shore, is so overwhelming that, if the wind catches it the right way, it can almost make me nauseous.

I'm not particularly keen on trying to figure out where the mystery noise is coming from all by myself, even though I'm almost certain it's just a fish. So I give Josie one more try. 'Hey,' I say louder, 'wake up. I need your help.' I reach out to touch her, but something stops me. It's the oddest feeling – like I shouldn't be disturbing her. For a minute, I think that I must still be drunk. Everything feels kind of fuzzy.

Her eyelids flutter. 'Liz?' she murmurs. She's confused, obviously still asleep. For a second, there's a flash of something – is it fear? Am I freaking her out? – in her gaze. And then she's out again, and I'm standing by myself, the only person awake.

Thudthudthud.

The docks are like a wooden jigsaw puzzle. Waves break in from the ocean, and by the time they reach the Sound, they're usually gentle enough, but tonight they seem stronger than normal, rocking us all to sleep like a bunch of

babies. Despite my attempts to be brave, I feel small and afraid as I tiptoe out through the open sliding glass door, my shoes making light *clacking* sounds against the fibreglass deck of the boat. Each arm of the docks has only two overhead lights: one at the middle, and another at the very end. There is no visible moon. The air is so chilly that I shudder, thinking what the water must feel like. Goosebumps rise on my exposed flesh.

I stand on deck, frozen, listening. Maybe the noise will go away.

Thump. Nope.

It's coming from the stern, between the dock and the boat, like something heavy and alive, persistent, stuck. We're the last boat on this arm of the dock, which means the back of the *Elizabeth* is almost fully illuminated by the light. I don't know why I feel the need to be so quiet. The noise of my shoes against the deck is jarring, every footstep making me cringe, no matter how carefully I step. I make my way along the side of the boat, holding tightly to the railing. Once the thumping sound is directly beneath me, I look down.

Wet. It's the first word that comes to mind before I scream.

Soaked. Waterlogged. Face down. Oh, shit.

It isn't a fish; it's a person. A girl. Her hair is long and so blonde that it's almost white, the pretty natural colour shimmering beneath the water. The wavy strands, moving back and forth like algae, reach almost to her waist. She's wearing jeans and a pink short-sleeved sweater.

But that's not what's making the noise. It's her feet; her boots, actually. She's wearing a pair of white cowgirl boots encrusted with gemstones, steel-toed decadence.

The boots were a birthday gift from her parents. She'd been wearing them proudly all night, and now the steel toe of her left boot is lodged awkwardly between the boat and

the dock, and with each passing wave, it's kicking against the side, almost like she's trying to wake people up.

How do I know all this? Because the boots are mine. So are the clothes. The girl in the water is me.

I scream again, loud enough to wake everyone for a mile around. But I get the feeling nobody can hear me.

CHAPTER TWO

I've been sitting on the dock for how long – hours? Minutes? It's hard to tell. I stare down at myself, stuck in the water, my body waiting for someone living to wake up and discover me. It's still dark.

I've been crying. Shaking. Trying to come up with any possible explanation for what's happened tonight. For a while, I tried to wake *myself* up, convinced I was having a nightmare. When that didn't work, I went back through the open door of the boat – making no attempt to be quiet this time – and tried to wake everyone else. I stood in their faces and shouted. I tried to shake them, to slap them, stomped in my boots and cried for someone, *anyone*, to open their eyes and see me. Nothing. When I touched them, it was as if there was a thin layer of invisible insulation between my hand and their bodies. Like I simply could not reach them.

Now I'm outside again, looking at my body. I'm officially freaking out.

'Elizabeth Valchar,' I say out loud, in the sternest voice I can muster, 'you cannot be dead. You're sitting on the dock. You're right here. Everything is going to be OK.'

But there is doubt in my voice, which trembles as I say the words out loud. I feel so young and alone, so incredibly helpless. It is beyond a nightmare. It's like a hell. I want my parents. I want my friends. I want anyone.

'Actually, it's not going to be OK.'

I look up, startled. There's a boy standing beside me. He can't be older than sixteen or seventeen.

I put a hand to my mouth, jump to my feet and clap my hands in excitement. 'You can see me! Oh, yes! You can hear me, too!'

‘Obviously,’ he says. ‘You’re standing right in front of me.’ He looks me up and down. ‘You were always so hot.’ Then he glances at my body in the water. In a voice that almost makes him sound pleased, he says, ‘But not any more.’

‘Excuse me? Wait – you can see her, too?’ We both stare at my body. All of a sudden, I feel exhausted and very cold. Beneath the light on the dock, I can make out enough of the boy’s face to realise that I know him. But for some reason, I can’t remember his name. My mind is fuzzy. I’m so tired.

‘Obviously,’ he repeats.

I bite my lip. It doesn’t hurt. I take a deep breath, and try to blink away my tears. As I’m doing so, the action feels ridiculous. I’ve already been crying. Something awful is happening; why am I embarrassed for this boy to see me crying? If there was ever a time to cry, it’s right now. ‘All right. *Obviously* something strange is going on. Right?’

He shrugs. ‘Not strange, really. People die every day.’

‘So you’re saying . . . I’m –’ I can barely force the word from my mouth – ‘dead.’

‘Obvi-’

‘OK! OK. Oh, Jesus. This is a nightmare. It has to be. This isn’t really happening.’ I stomp my foot in frustration laced with panic. My boots are a shade too tight; pain shoots up my calf, stinging all the way to my hamstring. Pain! My feet hurt! I must be alive if I can feel it, right?

‘I can’t be dead.’ I put my hands on his shoulders. ‘My feet are aching. I feel it. And I can feel you. I couldn’t really feel them in there,’ I say, meaning everyone on the boat. ‘Can you feel me?’

‘Obviously.’ He kind of flinches away from me. ‘I’d actually prefer that you don’t touch me, if it’s all the same to you.’

‘You don’t want me touching you?’

‘Obv-’

‘Say “obviously” one more time. Go ahead and do it.’ I try to give him a mean look, but my heart isn’t in it. He’s the only person who can see me. And the emotion feels

confusing; why do I want to be mean? Isn't he trying to help me? But he doesn't want me to touch him. What is his *problem*?

He just stares at me, his expression blank. He has messy brown hair. His face is young and smooth, his eyes a penetrating shade of grey. *Why* can't I remember his name? 'You're Elizabeth Valchar,' he says.

I nod. 'Well, actually it's Liz. Everybody calls me Liz.' As I'm speaking, I get the strangest feeling – it's like I'm not exactly sure about anything, not even my name. I have this sense of uncertainty, and it occurs to me that I don't remember much about the night before. I'm sure there was a party; that much is obvious just from looking around the boat at all the empty beer bottles, the half-eaten birthday cake. But the details are unclear. Did I really have that much to drink?

Before I can question the boy about any of this, he says, 'And that's you down there in the water. The very cold water.'

I stare at the girl in the water. *That's me. I'm dead.* How? When? I was in the boat all night, wasn't I? I am so frustrated that I can't remember exactly what happened. My memory of the previous night is broken into so many bits and pieces, each so small and fleeting that I can't force them into any cohesive whole. I remember blowing out my birthday candles. I remember posing for a photograph with Caroline, Mera, and Josie. I remember standing alone in the bathroom, trying to steady myself as the boat rocked in the water, and taking deep breaths as I stood there, like I was attempting to calm myself down. But I can't remember what I was upset about, or if I was even upset about anything at all. Maybe I was just drunk.

When I speak, my voice barely breaks above a whisper. I can feel myself starting to cry again. 'It would appear that way. Yes.'

‘And you’re not moving. You’re not breathing.’ He leans forwards to peer at me in the water. ‘You’re white. I mean, corpse-like white.’

I look at my bare arms. Standing there beside him, I’m not nearly as horrific a sight as the girl in the sea. I am still put-together, still beautiful. ‘I always had such a great tan.’

The thought doesn’t make sense to me. Why do I remember being tanned? And who needs to be tanned at a time like this?

He nods. ‘I remember. Those are some killer boots, too.’ He pauses. ‘So to speak.’

‘It’s OK. It’s just . . . they’re so pretty.’ And somehow I feel certain they were very expensive. ‘Can’t I . . . take them off or something? You know, I learned in history that the Egyptians used to bury their dead with lots of personal possessions to take with them to the afterlife. Can’t I take them with me?’ I pause. ‘Is there an afterlife?’ I look down at my feet, as I stand there next to what’s-his-name. They’re *so pretty*? Who *cares*? They’re only boots, for God’s sake. And they’re pinching the hell out of my toes. I don’t want to *keep* them; I want to take them off.

But they look so good. I feel disoriented, overwhelmed, almost like I’m going to pass out. Before I can focus on anything else, the thought continues. *They totally complete the outfit.*

I feel unsteady, like none of this is really happening. It can’t be. It’s as if I barely know who I am, aside from my name. I feel a flicker of new hope that this is all just a bad dream, that I’ll wake up, wiggle my bare toes as I lay in my bed, and later on my friends and I will go out for coffee together and we’ll all laugh about the crazy nightmare I had.

Except maybe not.

The boy shakes his head. ‘Slow down. You’re getting way ahead of yourself.’ He takes a breath. ‘I don’t want to talk about boots. First of all – aren’t you curious as to why I can see you? Aren’t you wondering why I can talk to you?’

I nod.

'Take a guess,' he says.

I put my face in my hands. My palms feel cool and clammy against my cheeks. 'Because I'm not dead. Because this isn't happening.' I peer at him from between my fingers. 'I'll do anything. *Please*. Just tell me this isn't real.'

He shakes his head. 'I can't tell you that. I'm sorry.'

'Then what happened? I'm not dead. Do you understand?'

I take a step closer to him. I scream as loud as I possibly can, loud enough to wake everyone on the boat, to wake everyone who might be sleeping on all the neighbouring boats. 'I am not dead!' Something occurs to me. 'There were drugs. We were doing drugs, I think. Yes, I remember – we were smoking up. Maybe I did some hallucinogens. Maybe I'm all tripped out, and this is just a side effect.'

He raises his eyebrows. He clearly doesn't buy the possibility. 'Did you do any hallucinogens last night? Really?'

I shake my head in disappointment. 'No. I wish I had, now. I wish I'd eaten more cake, too.' I frown. 'I don't know how I remember that. I can hardly remember anything. Why is that?'

'You can see me,' he says, ignoring my question, 'because I'm dead.' He adds, as though to drive the point home, 'Like you.'

A gentle feeling of sleepiness washes over me as he speaks. For a moment, the penetrating cold leaves my body, and I feel warm everywhere. Then, just as quickly as the feeling came over me, it's gone. And suddenly I recognise him.

'I know who you are,' I tell him. The realisation excites me. I want to hold on to it tightly; every new thought making me feel more steady, more in control. It's funny; of *course* I know who he is. I don't know why I didn't remember his name immediately. He's gone to school with me since kindergarten. 'You're Alex Berg.'

He closes his eyes for a minute. When he opens them, his gaze calm and even, he pronounces, 'That's right.'

'Yes. I remember you.' I can't stop glancing at myself in the water, looking from Alex to my body, unable to feel anything but numb horror. As I'm staring, my right boot – which has been loose on my foot ever since I first saw myself – finally slips off. It fills slowly with water. And then it sinks beneath the surface with a gurgle, disappearing as I reach half-heartedly towards it. In the water, my bare foot is exposed: bloated and shrivelled at the same time.

Aside from the fact that we went to school together forever, I remember something else about Alex. His face has been all over the newspapers for the past year. Last September, just after school started up again, he was riding his bike home from work after dark – he worked at the Mystic Market, just down the road from my house – when a car struck and killed him. His body was thrown into the sandy brush along the road; even though his parents reported him missing right away, he was thrown so far from the road that they didn't actually find him for a couple of days, not until a jogger happened to go past, noticed the smell and decided to investigate.

'How gross,' I whisper. Again, the thought surprises me. What is the *matter* with me? Aside from the obvious, it's like there is no filter between my brain and my mouth. *Be nice, Elizabeth. The poor kid is dead.* Trying to correct myself, I add, 'Well, you don't *look* like you got hit by a car.' And he doesn't. Aside from his mussed hair, there isn't a mark on him.

'You don't look like you just drowned a few hours ago.' He pauses. 'You drowned, right?'

I shake my head. It's the first time it's occurred to me to wonder. 'I . . . I don't know what happened. I don't even remember falling asleep. It's like all of a sudden I woke up because I heard a noise outside.' I pause. 'I couldn't have drowned, Alex. You have to understand that. It isn't possible.'

I'm a good swimmer. I mean – you know. We practically grew up at the beach.'

'Then what happened?' he asks.

I stare at my body. 'I have no idea. I can't remember. It's like . . . some kind of amnesia or something.' I look at him. 'Is that normal? Did it happen to you? I mean, can you remember anything from before you . . . died?'

'I remember more now than I did right after I – right after it happened to me,' he says. 'I'm not an expert or anything, but my guess is that it's normal for your memory to be sort of fuzzy for a while. Think of it this way,' he explains. 'People usually get amnesia after some kind of a trauma, right?'

I shrug. 'I guess so.'

'Well . . . death is one hell of a trauma, isn't it?'

'Dead. Shit.' I bite my lip and look at him. 'I'm sorry, Alex. I just can't believe it. It's a dream . . . right? I'm asleep, that's all. You aren't really here.'

He stares at me. 'If it's a dream, why don't you pinch yourself?'

I stare back. I feel so small and desperately sad, I can barely speak. But I manage to shake my head a little bit, to coax a single word from my mouth. 'No.'

I don't want to pinch myself. I'm afraid that if I do, I won't wake up. Deep down, I *know* I won't wake up.

I take a deep breath. I can feel my lungs filling with air; I *feel* alive.

'You're definitely a goner.' He's so flippant about it, so matter-of-fact, that I almost want to slap him.

'OK. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that this is all real . . . If I'm actually dead, then why don't you prove it?' I narrow my eyes in defiance at him. 'Seriously.'

He's amused. 'The sight of your corpse floating in the water isn't proof enough for you?'

'I'm not saying that. I'm saying there's another explanation. There has to be.'

‘Put your hand on my shoulder,’ he says.

‘I thought you didn’t want me to touch you.’

‘I don’t. But I’m making an exception.’

‘Why don’t you want me to touch you?’

‘Would you just –’

‘No, I want to know, Alex. Why don’t you want me to touch you?’ And then I can’t help myself; the words are coming out before I have a chance to think about them. ‘A boy like you? You’re a nobody. I’m *Elizabeth Valchar*. Any guy would give his pinky finger to have me lay a hand on him.’

Why am I treating him this way? We’re here together, with no one else in the world to talk to, and I’m being *mean* to him.

He stares at me for a long time, but he doesn’t answer. I know I sound conceited, but it occurs to me that what I’m saying is true. That’s right – I’m pretty. Beautiful, actually.

Alex stares past me, at the water. ‘You say you feel like you have amnesia. But it’s interesting what you *can* remember. You know I was a nobody. You know you were popular.’ He brings his gaze back to me. ‘What else do you remember?’

I shake my head. ‘I don’t know.’

He shrugs. ‘It doesn’t matter. You will eventually.’

‘What does that mean?’ I demand.

But he doesn’t answer me. Instead, he says, ‘Just do it, Liz. Put your hand on my shoulder.’

So I do. Then he closes his eyes, which leads me to do the same. I feel like my whole body is being sucked into a gelatinous vacuum. I almost yank my hand away from his shoulder, but just as I’m about to pull it back, the vacuum is gone, replaced by – Oh, God – the cafeteria of my high school.

* * *

It's crowded with students, but right away I spot my old table: it's next to the potato bar, at the far end of the cafeteria near the double doors leading to the parking lot.

'There you are,' Alex says, pointing at me. 'You and the cool crew.'

I can see myself; it's almost like being in reality, except not. There I am, and *here* I am, watching. I'm sitting with all of my closest friends: Richie, Josie, Caroline, Mera and Topher. They were all on the boat with me last night. They're still inside right now, sleeping.

'Oh, God,' I murmur, 'look at my hair.' Even as the words are leaving my mouth, I know they sound ridiculous.

'Your hair is fine.' Alex sighs. 'It's exactly the same as everyone else's.'

I realise that he's right: my girlfriends and I are all wearing our long blonde hair with the sides pulled back, a slight pouf at the top of our heads, the result of a good twenty minutes of painstaking teasing and hair-spraying in the morning. The look is called a *bump*, I remember. It was popular a few years ago. The only variation on the look is Caroline's hair, which is decorated with red and white ribbons, whose shades exactly match the colours of her cheerleading uniform.

'What year is this?' I ask. 'We can't be older than -'

'Sixteen. This was sophomore year. You know how I can tell?'

'How?' I hate to admit it, but even though we might be ghosts, even though I know nobody can see us, I feel awkward being here with Alex. It's as though I'm afraid my friends will look over at any moment and see me with him, and immediately brand me as an outcast. My God - what would Josie say?

Why do I feel like this? And what kind of a person was I, anyway? I know that I was popular, but it's so odd - I don't remember exactly why, or what I was like in my everyday

life. And all of a sudden, there's a part of me that really, really doesn't want to know.

Alex stares at us. 'I know we can't be older than that, because I'm still alive.' He nudges me. 'Here I come.'

I watch as he walks into the room, alone. He's carrying his lunch in a plain brown paper bag.

'Why didn't you just buy your lunch?' I ask. 'Nobody brown-bags it in high school.'

He gives me an exasperated look.

'What?' I ask. It seems like a perfectly legitimate question to me.

'It's four dollars a day to eat lunch at school,' he says. 'We didn't have the money.'

I gape at him. 'You didn't have four dollars a day?'

'No. My parents were strict. They were really tight with money. If I wanted to spend something on myself – even to buy lunch at school – I had to earn my own money. The Mystic Market, where I used to work, paid minimum wage.' He shakes his head. He almost seems to pity me. 'You don't know how good you had it. Not everyone just gets whatever they want handed to them. And besides, I wasn't the only one who brought his lunch.' He points. 'Look.'

We follow Alex across the room, to an empty table not far from me and my friends. At another table nearby, also sitting alone, is Frank Wainscott. Frank is a year older than we are, I suddenly remember, which would put him in eleventh grade here. He has bright red hair and freckles. He wears a blue T-shirt and ill-fitting jeans that are too short for his legs. And he is, I remember, a *major* dork. Like Alex, Frank has brought his own lunch. But on the outside of his brown bag, somebody – presumably his mother – has written his name in black marker and drawn a *heart* round it. I almost cringe with embarrassment for him.

As Frank unpacks his lunch, Alex and I start to eavesdrop on my friends.

Caroline is gazing longingly at a shiny red apple, passing it back and forth between her hands. 'I've already eaten six hundred calories today,' she says. 'How many calories are in an apple?'

'Eighty,' I say to myself. *How do I know that?*

'Eighty,' my living self informs her. 'But apples are good, Caroline. They have fibre and nutrients. Go ahead. Eat it.'

She gazes at my willowy body, visibly very thin even though I'm sitting down. I'm wearing a sleeveless shirt, my arms skinny and muscular. 'You don't have to worry about getting fat, Liz. You've got good genes.'

Josie snatches the apple from Caroline's hands. 'I thought you were trying to stick with twelve hundred calories a day. If you eat this, that's almost seven hundred calories right there. And you know you'll be starving after cheerleading practice.'

Caroline frowns. 'I'll eat a light dinner.'

'The last time I ate dinner at your house,' Josie reminds her, 'your mom made homemade pizzas. On white bread.' She pauses for emphasis. 'With *full-fat cheese*.' Josie takes a big bite from the apple herself. 'I'm doing you a favour,' she tells a forlorn Caroline, talking with her mouth full. 'Trust me, you'll thank me later.' Josie looks around. 'Think they've got peanut butter up there? I love apples with peanut butter.'

'You,' I inform my stepsister, 'are going to get chunky if you don't watch it. Peanut butter has two hundred calories for every two tablespoons, and it's all fat.'

Josie stops mid-chew, staring at me. 'You heard what Caroline said. We've got good genes.'

I don't respond. I just kind of glower at her, silent. The rest of the table falls into a momentary hush, the awkwardness almost palpable.

'I thought she was your stepsister,' Alex says to me.

'She is.'

'Then why would she say you've got good genes? You aren't blood-related.'

'Right. / know that. But Josie thinks . . . oh, never mind. It's ridiculous.'

'I want to know,' he presses. 'Josie thinks *what?*'

I shake my head. *This* I remember, although I sort of wish I didn't. 'Come on, Alex. You've lived in Noank your whole life, right? You must have heard the rumours.' But I don't have a chance to expand beyond that.

Alex and Frank are sitting at the only empty tables in the whole lunchroom. Alex starts to unpack his lunch. He slouches in his chair, almost like he's trying to seem invisible. Frank does the same.

It works for Alex, but not for Frank. Right away, Topher notices him.

'Hey, look. It's our favourite momma's boy.' Topher's grin is wide, his teeth an almost glowing white. 'Frankie,' he calls, 'what did momma pack you today?'

Frank doesn't answer.

'He's being so mean,' I mutter. 'Why is he doing that?'

'Because he can. Because he's a bully,' Alex replies.

'But . . . Frank's not doing anything wrong. He isn't bothering anyone.'

Alex stares at me, like he can't believe my confusion. 'Liz, the lunchroom was like a war zone. You and your friends used to sit at that table like you were the freaking rulers of the school.' He pauses. 'Keep watching.'

Caroline, Josie and I exchange subtle smiles as Topher continues to pick on Frank, but we don't say anything. Only Richie looks uncomfortable.

'Come on,' he says to Topher, 'cut the kid a break already. It's not his fault that -'

'Oh, my God.' Topher leans his chair back on two legs, clapping his hands.

'I wish he would fall on his stupid face,' Alex says quietly to me.

He doesn't. Instead, he rights himself, gets up and strolls over to Frank's table. Topher turns a chair around, straddles it backwards and sits down next to Frank. He starts picking through the contents of Frank's lunch.

My stomach feels hollow with guilt and shame as I watch my younger self, and all of my friends, giggle while Topher torments Frank.

'Look at this,' Topher says, holding up Frank's sandwich for everyone to see. 'Mommy cut it into the shape of a *heart*. Does Mommy wipe your bottom for you when you go poo-poo, too, little guy?'

Sitting at the table, Frank's face turns a deep red. I can tell he's trying not to cry. At the next table, Alex is clearly listening, his expression stoic. He's bothered by what Topher is doing to Frank, I can tell. But it would be social suicide for him to get involved.

I put a hand to my mouth. 'Alex,' I say, 'I'm sorry. We were all being mean, I know. But you have to believe me, I don't remember this.'

'It doesn't matter if you remember, Liz. It doesn't change what happened.'

'But it's not like I really did anything . . . I mean, it was mostly Topher -'

'You're right,' he interrupts, 'you didn't do anything. You never did anything to help him. You wouldn't have dared; it might have made you less cool.'

I blink at him. 'You didn't do anything, either.'

'What was I supposed to do? Speak up and get my ass kicked?' He shakes his head. 'No, thanks. It was enough work just to keep your friends from making *my* life miserable. I wasn't going to get involved with Frank's problems. I had enough of my own, trust me.'

For a moment, I'm at a loss for words. Finally, I ask, 'You don't like me, do you? Everyone likes me.'

He stares at me. 'You're right. I don't like you, Liz.'

I stare back at him. When I speak, the harsh tone of my voice surprises me. 'Then why don't you leave me alone?'

'Take your hand off my shoulder.'

So I do. And just like *that*, we're standing beside the boat again, the dock rocking gently beneath us as we glower at each other.

'What are you doing here?' I ask him. 'If I'm really dead, then why are you here?'

He shakes his head. 'I honestly don't know. Because I'm dead, too, I guess. Because I've been around for a year, just waiting for someone else to show up. Believe me, I don't want to be here, either. I'd rather be with *anyone* but you.'

For the first time since I've found my body in the water, the truth seems real. It seems indisputable. I am not dreaming. This isn't a nightmare that I'm going to wake up from. I'm dead.

And then something occurs to me – I don't know why it wasn't my first thought. The moment the words begin to come out of my mouth, I can feel myself starting to cry again. Dead people can cry. Who knew?

'Alex,' I ask, 'are there other people . . . over here? Can we see other people?'

'What do you mean?'

'Other people who are . . . you know . . .'

'Other dead people?' He shakes his head. 'I don't think so.'

'But you can see me.'

'I know. You're my first.' He pauses. 'Why do you want to know? Why are you crying?'

'Why am I crying?' I wipe my eyes, even though I'm not embarrassed for Alex to see my tears any more. I think of my parents – my dad and stepmother, Nicole – of my friends inside the boat, wondering when they'll wake up and find me. But, more than anything, I'm thinking of my mother. My *real* mother.

‘My mom,’ I tell him. ‘She died when I was nine. I was just thinking that maybe . . .’

‘You’d see her?’ He shrugs. ‘I don’t know, Liz. Hey – don’t cry, OK?’ His tone is less than comforting. If anything, he seems a little annoyed by my display of emotion. ‘You don’t need to feel sad. I’m not an authority or anything, but I get the feeling this situation – you know, being stuck here – is only temporary.’

I continue to cry. ‘And then what?’ I demand. ‘Are you supposed to be my guide or something? Because you’re not doing a very good job, if that’s the case. You haven’t really answered any of my questions.’ I pause. ‘Except for the one about my memory. And you only sort of explained it. But other than that, you’re *horrible*.’ I’m almost hysterical. I don’t *feel* dead. I feel alive and helpless and *so* cold. I want to go home. I want my dad and Nicole. And if I can’t have them – I want my mom. Where is she? Why isn’t she here? And how the *hell* did I end up in the water?

‘This cannot really be happening,’ I say, even though I know it *is* happening. ‘It’s my *birthday*. People aren’t supposed to die on their birthday! Especially not me. I’m Liz Valchar.’ I’m almost shouting. ‘I’m very popular, you know! Nobody will be happy about this.’

His voice is bone dry. ‘Yes, Liz. I’m aware of your social status.’

‘This isn’t possible.’ I shake my head. ‘No. It’s not real.’

‘Yes. It is.’ His tone is flat and bored. ‘Come on. Take deep breaths. Maybe I can . . . maybe I’m supposed to, I don’t know, *help* you.’

I breathe. I can taste the salt in the air. I can feel the dock swaying beneath my feet, my legs unsteady in my boots. If it weren’t for my own body, not ten feet away, everything would seem normal.

‘I don’t know that much about what’s going on here,’ Alex says. ‘Nobody gave me a rule book or anything. Pretty much the same thing happened to me that’s happening to you. I

remember being on my bike, riding home from work. It was a little past ten at night. It started to rain really hard. I could barely see. And then nothing – I woke up in the sand, lying next to my own body.’ He shudders. ‘I was a mess.’

I wipe my eyes. ‘You don’t remember anything? Not the car that hit you? Not what happened right before? You don’t remember hearing or seeing anything?’

He shakes his head. ‘I told you, nothing.’ He hesitates. For the first time since we’ve been together, his tone softens just a bit. ‘I was alone, Liz. Not like you are. I didn’t have anybody to help me. I’m sorry if I’ve been cynical, but you have to imagine – I’ve been by myself for almost a year.’

‘What have you been doing?’ I ask. ‘You’re here, so obviously you can go places. Have you seen your family? Your parents?’

He nods. ‘Sure. I’ve gone home now and then. But trust me, I’d rather be along the road. My house is not exactly overflowing with laughter at the moment. My parents practically haven’t left church in months, they’re so busy praying for my soul. And when they’re home, my mom pretty much stays in bed.’ He pauses. ‘When she’s not wandering around the house, lighting candles for me, crying.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ I whisper.

‘It’s OK.’ He half-smiles. ‘Not your fault, is it? Anyway, I can go places, but it’s not like there’s a whole lot to keep me entertained. For the most part, I’ve just been staying near the road where I died. And then, all of a sudden – here I am.’ He shakes his head. ‘I don’t know what I’m doing here. Honestly, I’m almost as confused as you are.’

I stare at him. ‘But we can go places? That’s what you’re saying. I can go home if I want to.’

He nods. ‘Yes. But . . . you won’t want to, not after the first couple of times. It’s horrible, watching everyone cry and mope around, watching them suffer . . . knowing you can’t

reach out to them and make them feel better, or even let them know you're all right.'

'But we're not all right,' I say. 'Not really. Are we? I mean, we're trapped.'

He appears to think about it. 'Yeah,' he agrees, 'I guess you're right. Trapped.'

'And you've just been stranded like this? For a year?'

'Well . . . not exactly. There's something else.' He hesitates. 'It's like I showed you. You can go into memories. You can go back and see yourself. You know how you don't remember everything from when you were alive?'

'Yes. Why is that happening? Do you know?'

He appears to be thinking. 'I'm not sure. But I have a theory.'

I stare at him. He doesn't say anything for a while.

'Well?' I demand. 'Are you going to tell me, or are we just going to stand here?'

He sighs. 'OK. But it might sound strange. Like I said, it's just a theory.'

'Tell me.'

'Well, we're here. On Earth. We're not . . . somewhere else.'

'What do you mean? That we're not in Heaven?'

Alex nods. 'Heaven, Hell . . . you're getting ahead of yourself. My point is, we're stuck here for some reason. We both died young. And we both want to know why, right?'

'Of course,' I say.

'Well . . . when I started to really think about what I could remember, something occurred to me. It was like I could only remember mundane facts. I knew who people were. I knew about some things that had happened. But I couldn't remember anything . . . significant. Not at first.' He takes a deep breath. 'I think we're supposed to learn something. Not only about how we died, but I think we're supposed to - I don't know, to gain some kind of deeper understanding.'