

SERENITY BAY

One

Stationery, the color of pistachio ice cream, stared at me, blank and accusing. How could Susan ask me to write a letter no one will ever read? My left hand trembled slightly and I gripped the pen more fiercely, as a tear splashed onto the parchment. I tried to brush it away, but the paper bubbled, leaving a raised splotch in its place. What words could possibly express everything I feel?

“I can’t do this. Not yet.”

“You don’t have to. I just thought it might help,” Susan said. We sat quietly in her living room, each in our own swivel rocker, facing the ocean. Our day had been long, full of emotion, effort, and trauma, leaving us both drained and exhausted. “Someday, though,” she said, “Leah might actually see it. Read it. You never know. Someday she may need to hear how you’re feeling right now.”

Obediently, I began writing. *Dear Leah*. Tears blurred the words until I could no longer see. I dropped the pen into my lap. “I can’t.”

She nodded, stood, and came to my side, kneeling beside my chair. We stayed like that for a few minutes, me rocking and weeping, Susan lightly patting my shoulder. “What would I do without you?” I asked.

“I’m here, Patricia, because I want to be,” she said softly. Reaching over to the table beside my chair, she lifted a box of tissue and offered it to me. “I wouldn’t choose to be anywhere else.” She pulled out a tissue and wiped her own nose vigorously. “I have the latte machine started,” she whispered. “Would you like something hot to drink?”

I nodded, afraid to trust my voice. With a long sigh Susan turned toward the kitchen.

Alone, I gazed out over the ocean.

Even in darkness I could clearly make out the bizarre triangular profiles of the trees. Here, on the west side of Cummins Island, relentless westerly winds buffet all the vegetation unfortunate enough to grow there. The trees that cannot withstand the assault of the wind do not survive. The ones that do are misshapen for life.

Just as the wind prunes trees, island life prunes people. Either they learn to grow under these conditions, or they leave.

Though it seems an eternity, ten months ago I left.

Floating amid the inland water of Puget Sound, our island is shaped like a dinner roll with the first bite missing. A tiny harbor rests on the lee side. Tucked away from the wind, Serenity Bay provides protection for boats traveling through the San Juan Islands. Someone named our town for the peaceful, quiet waters of the bay; while I lived here, I never knew serenity.

Ours is a tiny village, complete with marina, hardware store, two-pump gas station, and a small grocery store. The ferry dock is here, along with moorage for the summer people. The rest of the village consists of tiny shops carved out of ancient wooden buildings with false fronts and wooden floors. In these shops the summer people buy ice cream, T-shirts, linen dresses, and paintings by local artists. From each storefront the scent of potpourri and bayberry candles waft into the summer air, mixing with the smell of saltwater tides and diesel fuel. This is our town, our community, and the place where I once lived.

Only the stoutest of humanity remain on Cummins Island over the winter. During those long bleak months, marina docks float under dark rainy skies. Glistening wooden planks empty both of people and boats. Raindrops bounce off waves in the harbor, and the ferry rocks in the wind, wrestling with its tie-down. The shops of the summer people close. The sidewalks empty of all but locals, who refuse to run through the rain to their cars.

All our shoes are waterproof, and our clothing is made of Gore-Tex. Winter rain is constant, varying from heavy falling dew to monsoonlike downpours. Fabric here never really dries but stays damp with ambient moisture--the same moisture that turns cedar siding green and feeds the moss growing on sidewalks, fences, and roof tiles. Winter nights begin shortly after the ringing of the afternoon school bell. The season lasts most of eight calendar months, fraying island nerves and testing tempers. Only the distant promise of warm temperatures and summer sunshine sustains the locals through the long bleak darkness.

Following the summer solstice, daytime temperatures soar to the midseventies, and the docks in Serenity Bay fill with boats--hundreds of them--all bobbing against their fenders, gently rocking in the swell. Some, with sleek black windows and startling whiteness, belong to company executives or chairmen of corporate boards. Next to these float the reconditioned wooden hulls of old tugs converted to cruisers for families--happy families--who spend their summers wandering from island to island on the glistening blue waters of Puget Sound.

From Memorial Day to Labor Day, summer people crowd the village sidewalks and wander from shop to shop, imagining what it would be like to live in this ideal setting. They imagine themselves buying groceries at the Stock 'n Save and think longingly of their children attending our six-room elementary school.

"We don't have swing sets in the city," they say. And they believe that our town is missing all the evils of big city life.

But they are wrong.

When I lived here, our home sat high on a cliff on the west side of Cummins Island. Facing brilliant sunsets and stunning seascapes, ours was some of the most valuable land on the island. Russell built a magnificent home for us there, large and impressive. With weathered cedar siding, he tucked it inconspicuously among the fir trees on the hill. He built an enviable house, but I loved it for a different reason. I loved it for the whales--orcas--beautiful black and white creatures who spent their summers playing in the broad protected harbor just north of our beach.

Our ten acres bordered a marine reserve. Inhospitable rocks hiding just under the surface of the water in the bay's entrance safeguarded the whales from the intrusion of whale-watching vessels. The whales found safety in the harbor, and every year they returned.

I knew when they arrived because I watched for them, waited for them, keeping the kitchen door open all through the early summer. With one ear I listened for their return. Crashing water told me they breached. Squeaks and squawks told me they were "taking roll." Whatever their cue, I knew they were back, and I dropped everything to run down a steep narrow pathway to the water's edge. There on dark rock ledges I sat, hugging my knees, listening to the powerful whoosh of air from their blowholes, watching their glistening black bodies roll and slap the water. I watched every bit of their play until at last they tired of me and swam away. Away from the cove. Away from the island.

At the same time, someone watched me. Without looking, I could feel Russell's telescope focused squarely on the center of my back. I watched the whales, and from the window of our living room, Russell watched me.

I shall always envy the whales. They left the island so easily.

Dr. Russell Koehler was just Russ when I first met him. A small-framed man, with gentle aqua eyes and light sandy hair. His eyelashes were so blond that they nearly disappeared above the blue of his eyes--until he glanced downward. That was the first thing I loved about him, his shy habit of looking down and hiding his eyes behind palm-branch eyelashes.

That was sixteen years ago.

Sally Rhone, my college roommate, had asked me to be the fourth member of a group going to a fraternity party at the Delta-Chi house. Initially, I refused. Generally I preferred to spend Friday nights in Travensky Hall with my friend Lynn, who played with me in the same university chamber orchestra. Neither Lynn nor I majored in music. Thus we'd been relegated to the remedial chamber group. Lynn, a stubborn woman, determined that we would work our way into the premiere orchestra. She'd set her heart on a European tour, courtesy of university coffers. Week after week we played the scales, études, and chamber pieces she believed would develop our full potential as cellists.

Over time, Lynn and I discovered that practice rooms were easier to get than dates, especially on Friday nights, and our private practice sessions soon developed into an entrenched habit. Week after week we labored toward the dream. Some weeks we spent entire evenings perfecting especially difficult four-measure passages. I hardly wanted to trade an evening of Schumann for the smell of beer and the deafening noise

of bad speakers, even for Sally.

The particular event Sally had in mind was a costume affair, and it seemed that Ben, her boyfriend, had rustled up costumes for a foursome. Reportedly, Ben had a family friend in town and had begged Sally to find a willing fourth. At the last minute the woman backed out, leaving Sally desperate. So at three o'clock on Friday afternoon, she sat perched on the windowsill next to my desk, begging me to come along. Apparently I was just the right size for the costume in question.

I hated blind dates, not that I had mounds of experience. Still, it seemed to me that my failure rate remained extraordinarily high. I found these arrangements awkward and embarrassing. Worst of all, they seemed, without exception, to lead nowhere. None had ever developed into a second date. I couldn't explain this satisfactorily to Sally. I am hardly a candidate for the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition--though I do not consider myself ugly. I found it much less painful to blame the dating system than myself.

Not only did Sally ask me to forgo an evening of music, but Monday marked the beginning of midterms. At the time, I anticipated a grueling exam in Microbiology 400. Though I struggled in the lab section, I fared better in the lectures. I believed my acceptance to nursing school might hinge on this particular test. Sally declared this small detail irrelevant. I needed a night off, she proclaimed, a chance to relax, to let my brain rejuvenate.

In truth, I didn't get out much. It felt nice to be wanted, even if only because I could squeeze into a size six. So I agreed to don the belly dancing costume and join Sally and Ben and his mysterious family friend.

Russell Koehler, my date, arrived looking like Peter O'Toole in Lawrence of Arabia, complete with turban. The picture of courtesy, he opened the car door for me and let me pass through doorways ahead of him. When we arrived at the party, he took my coat and brought me a drink. He found a place for us to sit. Like all frat parties, this one was noisy. Russ hovered attentively near me.

I needn't have been afraid to go along. No one could be expected to hold an intelligent conversation in this environment anyway. Beer flowed freely among college students intent on having a good time. Over the loud music, our conversation was reduced to polite smiles and nods. Russ seemed nice enough.

Around eleven o'clock he took the beer glass from my hand, set it on the table, and pulled me off of the couch. "Let's get out of here," he shouted above the din. Still holding my hand, he led me to a porch off the back of the living room. Outside, we discovered a warm, quiet evening, unusual for late April.

"You don't belong in there," he said, gesturing toward the party behind us.

"What makes you think that?" I tried to sound coy, though I wondered if he were teasing me. Did he use this line on every woman he met?

"I can tell. You're a woman of purpose. Of quality. Not the kind who would sit around at a blaring party getting drunk."

He'd already taken off his turban, and in the light spilling from the French doors behind us, I saw his face clearly, in spite of the darkness. His eyes looked intense, yet gentle. Serious.

"Thank you. That was kind of you." I turned away, leaning against the railing. He followed my gaze, then, bending at the waist, rested his forearms on the banister. A light

breeze stirred the air while I searched for another less personal subject. "Tell me, Russ. What are you studying?"

"Medicine," he answered. "I start my third year of med school next fall." I heard confidence in his voice, certainty.

"Oh, really. Where?" Medical students impressed me. In my first year in college, I noticed that nine out of ten freshmen called themselves premed students. Most never got closer than an average score on their Medical Aptitude Test. If they finished college at all, they graduated with degrees in biology or chemistry and ended up selling shoes. Some wisely switched to the more lucrative business market. Those who were accepted to med school had to be the best of the best.

In the course of our evening, I had noticed that Russell was quiet, not boastful, never demanding attention, not like the other medical students I'd met. I'd listened carefully on the way to the party. Though he added many quips to the conversation, he never dominated it. Russell hadn't engaged in Ben's verbal parrying.

"I'm at UCLA," he smiled at me in the dim light.

Curious, I probed. "Out of state?" Most students found out-of-state tuition an enormous burden.

"I have a scholarship. It doesn't cover everything, but it brings the cost down--almost the same as residential tuition."

"Good for you!" I said without thinking.

His lips turned up slightly at the corners, and his face softened. My outburst seemed to please him. "So what are you doing in Seattle?" I asked.

"Mother's birthday." He smiled in the half-light. "Dad wouldn't let me miss it. For that matter, my mother might disown me." He turned back to me, leaning on one elbow. "Whatever Mother wants, she generally gets." He grinned. "I don't mind too much, though. She's a good ol' gal."

When Ben's car came to a stop at our sorority, Russ jumped out and came around to open my door. "Let's give them a minute to say good-night," he whispered, nodding toward Sally and Ben. As we walked toward the front door, I felt his hand resting gently on the small of my back. We passed the double doors of the front entry, and I allowed him to guide me to the far end of the porch. "I had a good time," he said, smiling. He glanced down at his shoes. Those eyelashes again.

"Me too. Thanks." Not the usual blind date, thank goodness. I would have to remember to thank Sally.

"Maybe we could do something again sometime. Can I call?"

"That'd be nice." Not too eager, a voice inside me coaxed. Slow down, Patricia.

He cupped my right hand in both of his and squeezed lightly. Leaning down, he brushed his lips gently against the side of my cheek. "Until later, then," he said quietly. Holding my eyes with his, he took a step back. Then he turned and walked briskly back to the car.

I don't know when I began breathing again. What an extraordinary man--not like anyone I'd ever known before. I took the house key from my purse and quietly let myself in the front door. I couldn't shake the feeling that something monumental had happened. Could one blind date change my life forever? I fervently hoped so.