

Chapter One

It's a beautiful day for a first date. The sky is a clear blue almost all the way to the horizon. Far in the distance, dark clouds cover the mountains. Past the shoreline waves, the ocean is as smooth as silk. Bass slips for the third time as his old sneakers hit a wet patch of seaweed. He skids and almost drops his end of the heavy boat he and Rosie are carrying. Cursing, he tries to ignore the view and concentrates

on putting one foot in front of the other. Only ten yards to the water. He can make it, even if his fingers do feel like they're about to be ripped off. Sweat runs down his face, stinging his eyes. His multicolored hair is plastered to his forehead. Bet I look great, he thinks sadly. On the bright side, it's always windy on the coast, so Rosie already knows what he looks like with a mop on his head.

"Take a deep breath, Bass. You look like you're about to collapse," Rosie says. She lets go of the boat with her right hand to sweep her fringe out of her eyes. Of course, she can hold the boat with one hand. She's stronger than Bass, even if he's much bigger. Her strength comes from all the time she spends climbing and throwing heavy metal things around. She's one of the best hammer throwers in the province. Bass's favorite sports are all played with a controller and a headset. Online gaming is not so great for building up your biceps.

Bass nods and inhales deeply. A deep breath of ocean air fills his lungs and helps settle his nervous stomach. His feet slip again on the slimy seaweed coating the smooth rocks, but he doesn't fall. Rosie grins at him, her round face glowing with excitement.

"This is going to be great! No one will even notice we're gone. You know Old Jack never takes this boat out anymore. I steal it all the time!" Rosie fist pumps and then grabs the crusty rope tied to the front of the old wooden boat again.

"I know." Bass tries hard to believe her, but the voice in his head won't be quiet. *You'll get caught! You'll get expelled for skipping school. Rosie will get bored once she's stuck with you all day and finds out how annoying you are, and then she'll dump you. You'll fall overboard and drown.* For a kid who grew up on an island, Bass is embarrassingly scared of the ocean. And all the stuff that lives in it. As well as animals.

And girls. Most things, really. His counselor has told him it's anxiety, and that it's manageable, but Bass just feels like a loser.

Bass slip-slides forward. He's tugged along by Rosie as she strides confidently toward the foaming sealine. With one last glance back, Bass pushes the inner voice down and concentrates on not falling over. That would not be a great start to their first real date. Sharing lunch at the Pride Club meetings doesn't count as dating.

In the small cove behind them, a large brown tarp looks like it still hides a boat. But all that's under there now are their abandoned schoolbooks and Bass's backpack. Rosie's pack is wedged into the small boat locker and stuffed with sandwiches and drinks. Honestly, Bass is really looking forward to the sandwiches. He's hot and tired already, and the day has barely started. It must be close to ninety degrees right now, and the air is muggy and still. He tries to distract himself from the great weight of the boat by

thinking about how cool Rosie is. He still can't believe that she somehow wants to spend the day with him. She's got incredible fashion sense, she's good at sports, she's a straight-A student, and everyone likes her. Bass is a C-minus kind of guy at everything, including life. His counselor has told him he should try to banish the negative self-talk, but it's so hard.

Bass jumps in surprise when water splashes up over his shoes, wetting him to mid calf. The sharp smells of brine and fish fill his nose. Together, he and Rosie guide the boat down into the shallow water. The smile Rosie gives him as she hops into the boat shows off all her dimples. It puts a warm feeling in Bass's belly that finally lets him relax. When he grins back at her, Rosie crinkles her nose at him. She's adorable.

"You need to relax, Bass," she says. "This is going to be great."

"I'm trying," he replies. The boat bobs up and down, making it more difficult to get in. Determined, Bass pushes the boat forward. It glides into deeper