

I Did It for Brian

Teens: Save Our Oceans, Save the World

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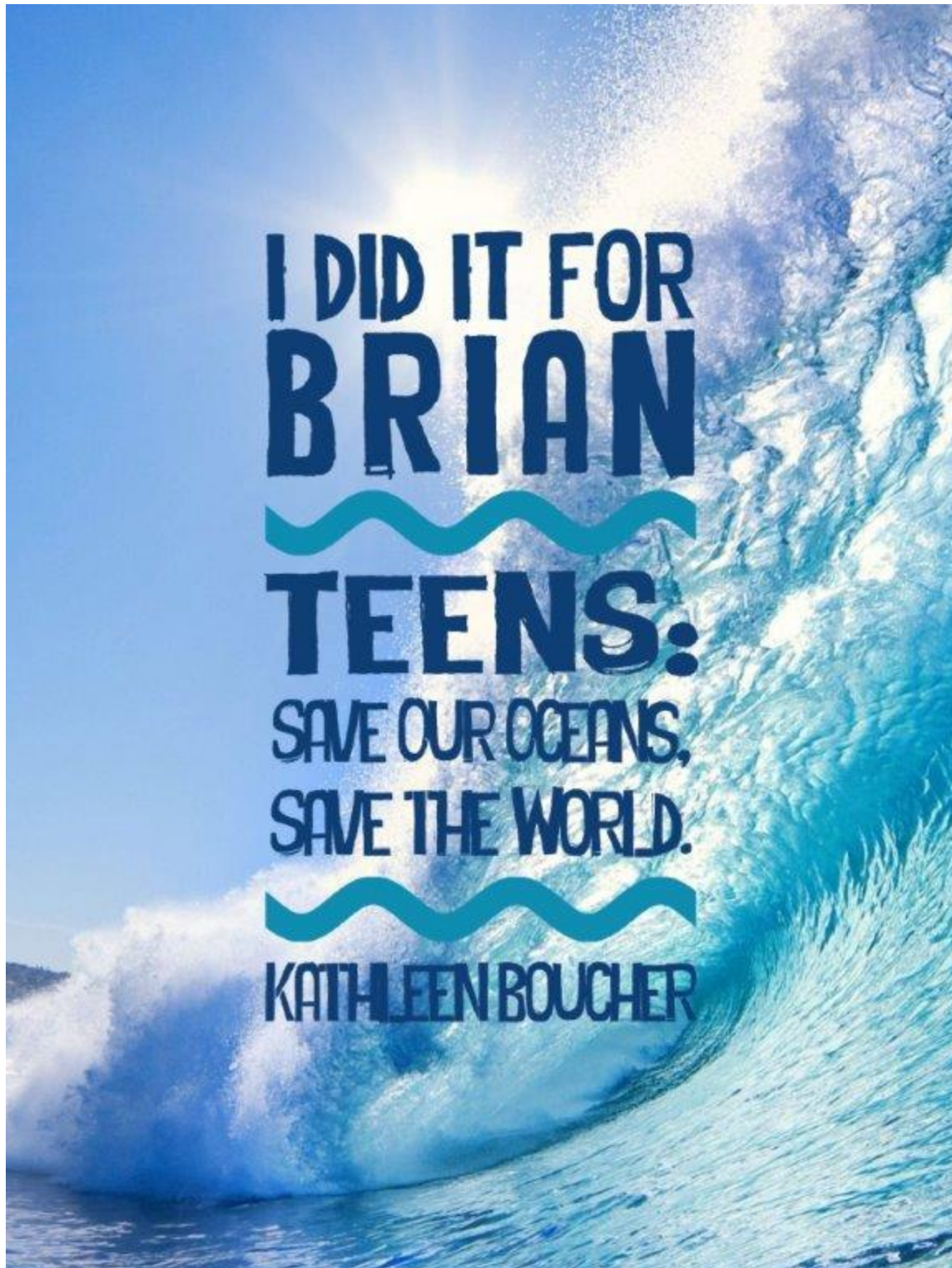


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Prologue

Screams fill the air, startling vacationers lounging in the sunshine on March break. Seagulls scavenging garbage on the beach scatter, adding their caws to the clamour. The force of the waves crash with a time-honored rhythm, unmindful of the efforts of the lifeguards desperately trying to reach the lifeless body of the young boy jostled like a buoy by the waves. Time slows. Despite their best efforts, the young boy never regains consciousness.

Standing motionless amid the bustle is a small girl with sand caking her legs and seaweed tangled in her hair. She watches in horror at the still body of her older brother face down in the water. Fear overwhelms her and she stares transfixed at a plastic bottle washed up by the waves instead of the lifeguards towing her brother to the shore. She is unable to deal with the chaos and events surrounding her.

Tied to the ocean by the tragic accident of her older brother, Tina discovers the chains around her heart are woven into the fabric of the sea water. She wonders if the oceans were to heal if she might heal as well.

That was three years ago.

Chapter One

It Starts with Awareness

“With every drop of water you drink, every breath you take, you’re connected to the sea. No matter where on Earth you live. Most of the oxygen in the atmosphere is generated by the sea.”

— Sylvia Earle, Oceanographer

Monday, March 7, 2016

07:00AM

Dear Diary,

Chaos and beauty fight for supremacy as the blizzard rages outside my window. The storm is mesmerizing to watch from the warmth of my bedroom.

Does that sound silly? Probably no sillier than asking questions in a book that only I will ever read. After all, I can practice my creative writing skills all I want in my diary. No one is going to see the fancy words I may use.

I guess I’m getting ahead of myself. It’s probably a good idea to write down something about me. I want to one day be able to look back on my life and re-live even the smallest details.

My name is Tina Annabelle Armstrong. I’m 14 years old and in the ninth grade. I live in

Kingston, Ontario, with my mom and dad and younger brother. I'll tell you about my family a little later on.

Right now, I'll tell you a little more about myself. I have a quirky thing about names. Names have meaning. Look at my name, for instance. Those of us with the name Tina may have characteristics in our personality such as *leadership*, *independence* and *creativity*. Armstrong means *strong*. My family and friends tell me the name Tina suits my personality.

Tina Annabelle Armstrong distinguishes me from the other people named Tina Armstrong in the world. Middle names have importance. I stand 5'3" and weigh 105 pounds soaking wet. My build is slim and willowy. My chest is small, 34A. Thank goodness for padded bras! I have short, curly red hair with gold streaks in it. My eyes are emerald green. I'm told that my eyes light up when I laugh. My teeth are straight, except for one tooth on the bottom that is crooked. My dentist thinks it makes me look cute—I'm not sure about this observation. I wouldn't classify a crooked tooth as "cute." I've inherited my body type and middle name from my grandma, Annabelle Jennifer Clarke. The name Clarke means *clerk*. She is one of my favorite people in the whole world.

I keep a photo of my grandma tucked inside my diary. Just now, I pulled it out, and I can't help but smile. Okay, let me see if I can do this justice:

The photo was taken on my birthday. We are standing side by side. My grandma has her arm around my waist, and I realize how small she is at 4'8". "Small but mighty," my mom always says. I can see the resemblance we share. We have similar body types and hair color, except her hair is red and curly with white streaks compared to mine with blonde streaks.

Annabelle Jennifer Clarke is a force to be reckoned with. I hope she lives forever. She is an advocate for the environment. That's probably why Mom became a florist. Grandma loves

anything that grows. She brings out the best in people. I wonder when she'll come for a visit. She lives in London, England.

It is so easy to get sidetracked. What more is there to know about me?

I'm interested in writing, yoga, and tai chi, and I want to know all about people—how they live, the origin and meaning of their names, and their environment, especially the quality and shortage of water.

Writing is probably my favorite. Right now, I'm curled up with my new diary, sitting on my window seat and staring at the activity outside. Dad built this seat because he knows it is my favorite place to write. I'm wearing my old, comfy, navy blue sweat pants and my favorite dark gray hoodie. Cozy, fluffy purple socks keep my feet warm, the kind you buy at the dollar store: a birthday present from my little brother Steven.

I'm not sure if Steven is awake yet. He is going to go ballistic when he sees the blizzard. He hasn't seen snowflakes this size in a long time. The snowflakes hypnotize me, making me realize that water in all its forms has always fascinated since my older brother's accident.

It's funny that the water molecules in the snow outside could have come from the other side of the world, from far out in the ocean. It looks so pure and clean, but I know that tiny particles of pollution are naked to the human eye. I've read about environmental pollution in articles in magazines. They always talk about climate change and islands of garbage flowing in the ocean. Has pollution affected climate change? Where did these islands of garbage come from?

I wonder: Should I ask Dad or Grandma more about this? I have a science project due on Friday. This might be a good subject to research. Maybe I can Skype with them? I'll have to think about this some more.

My mom just brought in a cup of hot chocolate. While I wait for it to cool, I thought I'd practice a little descriptive writing—Ms. Mason says practice is critical if I want to be an author someday. Okay, here goes:

The smell of hot chocolate teases my senses, bringing me back to where I'm sitting. The window seat cushions my body like a warm glove. A cup of hot chocolate waits patiently for me to take the first sip, its steam rising to mingle with the moisture, causing condensation to run down the window.

There, not too bad. I wonder if I should show it to Ms. Mason. Maybe she would have some suggestions for revisions.

An obnoxiously loud commercial for the latest video game interrupts my thoughts. The radio keeps me connected to what is happening to the people caught in the middle of the storm. This is the first blizzard of the season, which is kind of odd—there wasn't even snow at Christmas. Even so, this winter has had some of the coldest days on record in fifty years. I wonder if climate change has affected the weather. Somehow, maybe I can tie this into my science project.

It's been snowing nonstop since eight o'clock last night. It's Monday, but the school board announced that the buses won't be running. That's the best part of the blizzard to me—snow day! I'm pretty sure all teens love snow days. Actually, we love any day that we don't have to go to school! Of course, here, a snow day just means that the weather is too treacherous for the school buses to run. Oddly enough, the schools remain open. Teachers are expected to show up even though the students are not. This is one of the solutions the school board came up with so that they don't have to extend the school year.

With no school today, this is a perfect moment to jot down my thoughts. It would be a disgrace not to capture the energy of the storm creating havoc outside.

As I sit curled up on my window seat contemplating the scene before me, Thomas Edward Colbert jogs by. Thomas and I have known each other since elementary school. Thomas is one year older than me. He lives on my street four doors down. Today, he is covered in snow from head to foot, having gone for his daily jog. He isn't wearing a hat, so his black, wavy hair looks completely white.

Oh, he just saw me through the window! He waved! I waved back, and he smiled. Diary, I can't help giggling. Brilliant white teeth and beautiful eyes! What a winning combination. I would recognize those eyes anywhere, black as night. I think my heart just missed a beat.

Those with the name Thomas may have characteristics that make them a *leader* or *global thinker*, and Colbert means *famous* or *renowned*. I love the fact that we are both leaders! Thomas comes from a family of health enthusiasts. His dad is a former professional body builder and runs a fitness gym. His mom is a nutritionist. She owns a health food store downtown. Fitness is engrained in his lifestyle. Neither rain nor blizzards stop Thomas from his daily workout. Thomas is a vegetarian. Although I'm not a vegetarian, we are both into healthy living—but that is not the only thing that Thomas and I have in common. We're both passionate about the environment. He and I have had long discussions about this whenever our families get together. Our parents are also friends.

Well, considering there is a blizzard outside, today is getting off to a good start. Okay, enough about Thomas Edward Colbert. I focus on the radio again; it sounds like it is pretty bad out there. The words sort of tangle up with the view from the window—I wonder if I can record it all.

The blizzard has attacked the city with a vengeance, paralyzing the populace and bringing everything in its path to a standstill. Sixty-six centimetres have fallen in a matter of twelve hours. The flakes, uncommonly large and sticky, twirl close together, lingering in the air so that visibility is next to nil. The wind creates twisters of snow that dance across the landscape. Gusts of wind form snow drifts blocking roads, making driving treacherous. Snow plows work overtime to keep the main roads clear. It seems like a losing battle as the storm gathers in strength. Side roads will have to wait to be plowed: well into the night. Walking is reserved for the adventuresome or the barmy.

As I look out the window and listen to the radio, it reminds me that nature has the power to bring us to our knees. It doesn't matter how advanced we think we are: nature rules.

The radio announces that city buses are getting stuck. Taxies are no longer running. The police advise anyone not needing to drive to stay home. Hospitals are sending resident doctors home early if they are not on call overnight. Stores and daycares are shutting down unexpectedly, causing further chaos for parents battling the elements to pick up their children and loved ones. The weather network forecasted the storm to arrive yesterday. Normally, the weather report is right only about half of the time, so no one really pays attention. This time, we were caught ill-prepared. Nature has her own agenda, no matter what the weather network predicts.

I can hear the rest of the house come to life downstairs. I pause and look towards my bedroom door. Steven pokes his head in, his bedhead standing proudly at attention. He is grinning from ear to ear.

“The buses aren't running, Tina! It's a snow day! Do you want pancakes? I'm going to ask Mom to make pancakes to celebrate!”

“Pancakes sound like a perfect way to start a snow day!” I agree.

My mouth is watering as images of fluffy, thick pancakes dripping with melted butter and maple syrup pop into my mind.

He speeds off just as fast as he came in, and I have to smile. Steven Michael Armstrong is my little brother, and he is 10 years old going on 20. He is the best brother in the world and the friendliest person I know. He stands 4'10" tall and has red hair that never looks brushed. His face is covered in freckles, a fact he doesn't seem to mind at all. His eyes are the color of light jade. Positive energy just radiates from him, and he has many, many friends. It is not uncommon for him to be networking with kids around the world. He loves to play video games. He is a computer genius. But don't tell him I told you so!

Today is the perfect day for him to be outside building a fort or a snowman or something. Instead, he'll be on his computer designing an app so that he can play video games in different languages! Where does he come up with these ideas? We are really close. Whenever I need to confide in someone, he is there for me. He loves to steal my socks—not the purple fluffy ones that I have on my feet, but the ones I wear to school. I totally understand why kids wear different-colored socks on their feet, especially if they have little brothers!

Thinking about my little brother reminds me of Brian, back when I was the middle child and not the oldest. We were also very close. He would be sixteen now. He died in a freak surfing accident three years ago. Not a day goes by that I don't think about him and miss him. I'm sure he is watching over me wherever he is. He would have loved this snow storm.

He also would have wanted me to keep going, so I really need to decide: What does the day hold for me? My science project is due on Friday. I still don't know what my exact topic will be. Given the fact that I care about the environment and how people live, I should probably do it

about water. I know that there is a shortage of water around the world. Since I was 8, my family and I have travelled the world during March breaks and one week each summer. Dad often says that the best education is found in experiencing places firsthand.

His name is Stuart Anthony Armstrong. The name Stuart means *steward*. A steward often was in charge of a household. I told you I have a quirky habit with names. He is an engineer and builds bridges around the world. Luckily for him, he is in South America at the moment.

Travelling makes me appreciate our way of life in Canada. Canadians don't experience the water shortages that are commonplace to the rest of the world. We have travelled to Africa, where it is not unusual to walk miles to obtain clean water. We have also visited Australia, where your shower is timed to be less than five minutes! I'm passionate about the right of every person on Earth to have access to clean water. Maybe I'll do a Google search of the state of the oceans around the world. I want to find out more about those islands of garbage floating in them.

Mmm ... I smell pancakes and freshly brewed coffee. Steven must have convinced Mom. My research will have to wait until I've eaten breakfast. If I get stumped, I'll ask Steven to work his magic and help me. Maybe Thomas has some ideas. I wonder what he is doing today. I'll sign off for now, dear Diary.

Chapter Two

Start at the Beginning

“If man doesn’t learn to treat the oceans and the rain forest with respect, man will become extinct.”

— Peter Benchley, Author of *Jaws*

Monday, March 7, 2016

8:00PM

Joy and contentment surround me as I curl up in the early evening to write about my day. It is now 8PM on Monday. Glancing out my bedroom window, I see the intensity of the storm has lessened. In its path, freezing rain is tormenting the landscape. Like a thousand tiny fire-ant bites, ice needles pelt the window pane in a vain attempt to gain access to my bedroom. Snow-covered roads have turned into skating rinks, making driving treacherous at best. Walkways, sidewalks, and driveways that were cleared earlier in the day have a coating of ice that makes them shine and glisten like mirrors. The rain adds a sense of treachery and danger to those walking outside. Nature continues to dominate the city.

My hot chocolate from earlier today is replaced by a cup of steaming hot herbal tea with a slice of lemon. My achy muscles sink into the cushion on my window seat. The cushion envelopes me in comfort just like an old friend.

Where did I leave off this morning? So much has happened since then!

Oh, right, I wrote about going to the kitchen for breakfast. You won't believe what happened afterward! Here goes:

"Hey, Tina!" Steven shouts upstairs. "Come on—the pancakes are ready! And we have a visitor!"

A visitor? Who could possibly have come by so early on a morning like this? I bolt down the stairs and stop midstride, astonished to see Thomas Edward Colbert sitting at the kitchen table. I stare in amazement as my mom, Anna Armstrong, dishes a heaping pile of fluffy pancakes onto a plate in front of him.

"Tina, look who dropped by," Mom says, her eyes twinkling. Mom is wearing her full apron with roses all over it. Her face is flush from the heat of the stove. The smell of freshly brewed coffee permeates the kitchen. She smiles knowingly. It's probably obvious now. Mom must suspect that I like Thomas as more than a friend.

Thomas looks up and smiles. Dark eyes, killer eyelashes, and pearly white teeth should be considered lethal weapons!

"Hi, Tina!" Thomas says.

What is he doing here? Does he always have to look so good? I should have brushed my hair before coming down here. How do I look? Did I brush my teeth? Do I have morning breath? Don't think so. It is way too early in the morning for me to be worrying about this. I haven't even had my morning coffee yet. My mind is racing. I wonder what Thomas thinks of me. I wonder if he is seeing anyone.

"What are you doing here?" I blurt out. Oh, God!

"My dad sent me over here to help clear your walkway and driveway. He knows that your dad is in South America. Your mom offered me her famous homemade pancakes. I couldn't

say no. Do you want to help me shovel? It'll help strengthen your arms." He smiles slyly.

Thomas knows that I think I need more muscle tone in my arms. We've had this discussion before.

"Not everyone has muscles like you, Thomas!"

Thomas looks embarrassed as he glances down at his plate. "I'm just teasing you, Tina!"

"It is too early in the morning for you to be teasing me, Thomas," I say. "I don't comment on your arms, do I?"

"Tina takes after her grandmother. Her grandmother is slim but strong," Mom says.

"They have the same build."

"What's wrong with my arms?" Thomas protests.

"They're too strong!" I exclaim. Thomas laughs. This conversation is not going the way I want it to.

I quickly rally. *Two can play dirty*, I think.

"Okay, let's barter then," I offer. "You, Steven, and I shovel the walkway and driveway. Afterwards, you promise to help me do research for my science project. Deal?"

"Hey, how did I get volunteered to do shoveling?" Steven exclaims.

"Getting some fresh air won't kill you, Steven. It'll be a good workout for your arms and legs," Thomas says. "Besides, you know when you work out, your mind is clearer to do school work." He flashes Steven a charming smile. "I'm sure we can use your mad computer skills to help with the research!" Thomas laughs as he reaches for his coffee.

"Okay, okay," Steven says good-naturedly. "Always glad to do research on the computer! Let's do it!"

Mom nods her head in agreement as she piles pancakes onto our plates.

“What do you want to do the science project on, Tina?” Thomas asks. “You know my major will be in environmental sciences in university.”

“I was thinking I would like to clean up the oceans and seas.”

“Tina, you know I’ve a hard time saying ‘no’ to anything that involves helping the environment and our ecosystem,” Thomas says, his dark eyes sparkling in anticipation.

Mom pours orange juice for everyone and then joins us at the table.

“Hey, you’ve just given me an idea!” Steven says as he wraps a large piece of pancake around his fork. “I’ll research to see if there is an app to clean up the sea. Maybe Tina can start a project that will get kids her age to clean up the seas and oceans around the world!”

“Mom, these are really good,” I say. Mom agrees.

“Steven,” I say, taking a sip of my orange juice, “just how would I do this, exactly?”

“Easy, all you have to do is figure out how kids around the world access information. Most kids use mobile apps,” Steven says.

“You could also put the information on social media,” Thomas suggests. “You could blab about it, use Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, Google, and do videos on YouTube to start with.”

Before I can respond, he says, “These are really good pancakes, Mrs. Armstrong. Thank you for inviting me for breakfast.”

“You’re welcome, Thomas. Do you want some more?” Mom asks.

“Yes, thanks!”

Mom stands and opens the oven door where she has a towering stack of extra pancakes warming. She places these on a trivet in the center of the kitchen table. The warmth of the oven flows into the room adding to the comfortable atmosphere.

As Mom piles more pancakes on Thomas's plate, I wonder: How can someone eat that much and stay so slim?

Thomas glances at me as though he knows what I'm thinking. "I work out, Tina."

Mom and Steven look at each other as if to say, *Did we miss something?*

I hope I'm not blushing. How can Thomas possibly know that is what I'm thinking? It is like we are attuned to each other. He looks pleased with himself.

Determined not to let on how awkward I feel, I clear my throat. "Steven, remember when we travelled with Dad to South Africa and water was in short supply?"

Steven nods, his mouth too full to answer.

"Well, the water in the ocean is salt water. We drink fresh water."

He gives me a flat look. "I know that," he says haughtily.

"Maybe I shouldn't just research oceans and seas. We need fresh water to drink and that's scarce in parts of the world," I continue. It's best not to give him a chance to go on a rant. "I wonder if I should research the quality of fresh water too."

"I like that idea, Tina," Thomas agrees, his pancakes reduced to crumbs.

"There may be a way to get this information to go viral," Steven muses, off and running on his favorite topic. "It may take some preparation, but it might just work."

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"I'm pretty sure there are people around the world who have spent their lives working to save the environment. You contact them and send them your e-book, PowerPoint, or video and ask them to look at or read it. Then, if they like it, ask them to blast it to their email list. You could also contact the big companies who make apps, ask them for help. This is a real money-making idea."

“You’re getting me excited about kids my age helping clean up the world’s water! This could turn out to be really big, guys!”

“Imagine if teens around the world solve the world’s water problems, Tina. Adults would never look at us the same way again!” Thomas says. “Adults don’t give teens enough credit. Besides, our generation is the most computer-savvy of any generation, and we’re experts at networking. This is a good combination.”

“I’m stuffed!” Steven says, patting his stomach.

“Thanks for the pancakes!” Thomas and I say at the same time. Mom laughs.

Mom says, “You’re welcome. I love listening to your ideas. I believe you can do this. Using the internet is going to make it easier to contact people around the world. This conversation reminds me of my mom. You know she is a crusader for the environment. Looking outside and watching the snow reminds me of a story my mom told me.”

“Was Grandma caught in a snowstorm, Mom?” Steven says.

“Actually, she was ice fishing with a group of people in Norway when she was 16 years old. A blizzard caused a white-out and zero visibility for over 12 hours. Everyone had to stay inside the fishing huts because no one could see the shoreline.”

“What happened next, Mom?” I ask.

“Your grandma says that was the day she decided to dedicate her life to supporting a healthy ecosystem. She realized that nature has great power and should be allowed to be in balance.”

Mom stands, wiping her hands on her apron with a fond smile. “Her favorite quote is from Sylvia Earle: ‘No water, no life. No blue, no green.’ Your grandmother has dedicated her life to working on helping the ecosystem.”

“Mom, is that why you became a florist?” Steven asks.

“It’s one of the reasons, yes. My mother is always growing things. I especially love flowers. So, yes, you might say she rubbed off on me.”

There is energy in the room that wasn’t there before. I feel we are starting on something bigger than a simple science project. I’m also very grateful that Thomas and Steven have decided to help me.

The dishes are cleaned and put away. We get dressed to tackle the shoveling.

Thomas shovels snow in record time, leaving me and Steven behind.

“Not fair, Thomas! You are shoveling more snow than me,” Steven complains.

“No problem, Steven. Did you ever watch old cartoons with Popeye the Sailor Man? He used to eat spinach out of cans and developed massive muscles in his arms. Pretend you have massive muscles in your arms, and the shoveling will go faster!”

“I’ve never heard of Popeye the Sailor Man,” Steven says, “but I’ll look it up on the computer later. I’ve never heard of spinach in cans either, yuck!”

“Girls like guys who are in shape, Steven,” Thomas says.

“Why would I care what girls think? I’d rather be on my computer playing video games with my friends. Tina says I’m a computer geek.”

“A cute computer geek!” I declare.

This appeases Steven, and we all work methodically to get the walkways and driveways cleared. The only problem is that it is still snowing. So, as fast as we are able to clear the snow, it fills right up again. All we want to do is get back inside with a cup of hot chocolate. Thomas runs home when we finish shoveling and gets his laptop so he can work independently alongside me.

When Thomas comes back inside, he asks, “Where is the best place to work on the project, Tina?”

I tell him the den has the most light and the sofa is large enough to accommodate the three of us. Thomas and I decide to sit side by side on the brown leather sofa, our laptops on our knees so we can compare notes.

His knee touches mine, and he feels like a radiator. Warmth flows from his body. My entire system comes alive as though I’ve known this warmth my entire life. Surprise leaves me momentarily speechless.

Does he feel the same way? Am I melting, or am I having a hot flash flush?! Hopefully I’m not blushing. Is it obvious? There is no way I’m moving my knee! He’ll have to move his knee first. I look up. Steven is totally oblivious to my predicament. He is on the desk top computer searching the internet for apps that clean the sea.

What’s Thomas thinking? Does he lose his concentration as much as I do when he touches me? I wonder what kissing him would be like. You’re losing it, girl! A guy touches your knee and you start to melt. Does he have to smell so good?

Thomas takes a deep breath. Is he blushing?

“Okay, Tina. What are you doing your science project on specifically?” Thomas asks.

“A few years ago, I was walking on a beach in Australia. Dad had some work there, and we made a vacation out of it. I found a dead bird with its body decomposed. It had pieces of plastic inside it. That image still bothers me.”

“I’ve seen pictures like that on the internet,” Thomas says with a frown.

“I also have deep respect for sea turtles, especially ones who have lived for 150 years. Did you know that sea turtles swallow plastic bags? They think they’re jellyfish.”

“I’m glad I’m not a sea turtle then,” Steven says. “Jellyfish sounds disgusting.”

“Imagine living 150 years and then dying from a plastic bag! This is not okay! I love sea turtles.”

The room is quiet for a moment as we all look at our screens. Thomas turns his laptop towards me, showing me an awful picture of a turtle with a deformed shell from plastic trash.

“I know,” I say. “It’s so bad. And ... you know, I remember Dad talking to an old friend in Nova Scotia after the Australia trip. His friend told him for years the sailors would go out in the ocean and encounter islands of floating garbage. I really feel like I need to do something about this!” I exclaim.

“You sound passionate,” Thomas says with a small smile. The admiration in his eyes makes me flush. “What do you want to do about it?”

“I want to find out how bad the situation really is. Then I want to figure out what I can do about it. Then I want to spread the idea to everyone around the world and start a revolution to save the planet. That is what I want to do!”

“Is that all? No problem. Give me a minute!” Thomas laughs.

“Don’t laugh at me, Thomas. I’m serious. I have to try.”

“I’m not laughing *at* you, Tina. I’m laughing because I think the world better pay attention. You are a force to be reckoned with.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a compliment, I think.” His smile broadens, and I moderate my tone. A bit. “Well, thank you. Will you help me do the research on the oceans?”

“We already know that oceans are unhealthy. Mankind has been using them as a dumping ground for many years.”

“Hey, look what I found! It’s an app called Save the Sea!” Steven interrupts.

“That’s great, Steven,” I tell him. “Let all your friends know about it.”

Steven’s fingers fly across the keyboard. He looks like he is caught up in the energy of this project.

Thomas looks thoughtful. “What if you deal with this problem from the perspective of dealing with all water, not just the ocean? If you are going to help clean up the ocean, why not tackle rivers, streams, and lakes as well? They all lead to the ocean eventually.”

“I’m going to Google ‘clean up the oceans.’ Thomas, you can work on research for the lakes, rivers, and streams,” I decide. Thomas agrees.

I Google “ocean clean up” and click on the first site I see: www.theoceancleanup.com.

I’m so upset! I actually feel nauseated. After doing some research on the site, I learn that plastic and garbage are an even bigger problem than I thought. How come I didn’t know about this sooner? Why isn’t everyone taking massive action right now? Is everyone asleep? It certainly looks like it. How can I wake them up?

The first thing I realize is this: If kids, teens, and adults aren’t aware there is a problem, how can they even begin to correct it? So, being aware of the problem is the starting point.

As I’m looking through websites, I start jotting down a few notes:

1. There are areas in the ocean called “gyres” where the currents trap plastic. These areas are several million square kilometers in size. These gyres are referred to as garbage patches because there is so much garbage trapped there.
2. One, called the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” is an area between Hawaii and California.
3. Plastic is able to wash up on coast lines. In the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, there’s no land to catch plastic. So then Boyan Slat, the CEO of The Ocean Cleanup, came up with

the idea of sending out a long array of floating devices attached to the seabed. The intention is to catch the plastic and still allow the fish through.

4. His efforts are concentrated on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch because 1/3 of the oceans' plastic accumulates there.
5. Once the plastic is caught, it can be scooped up, removed, and recycled.
6. Fish cannot always distinguish what is food and what is plastic. When they eat the plastic, it kills them.
7. Small microbeads found in some toothpaste and soap is killing fish and birds once they've ingested it.
8. The goal is to get rid of plastic out of the ocean before it breaks down into small pieces

So far, today's research has showed me that the first step is to be aware. Kind of like my experience in Australia, Boyan Slat first realised that there was more plastic in the ocean than fish when he dove into water while on vacation when he was 16 years old. Through a Kickstarter campaign, he raised money from the public. He raised the money for his initial idea, but of course the project is current and ongoing. Although some people say it is best to stop the plastic from entering the ocean, what plastic is there still needs to be removed.

Okay, with everything I've learned, I think that the plastic needs to be removed *while* we are finding ways to prevent plastic from getting into the ocean. We must find ways not to be so reliant on plastic.

How can we assist the Boyan Slats of the world? I think those who want to prevent plastic from getting into the water and those, like him, who want to get plastic out of the water are both right. It's everyone's problem around the world.

I wonder how we can all work on this problem worldwide. It seems to me that people are walking around in a trance and overwhelmed, unsure how to fix a problem that seems this big. It is more than one person can handle alone. We have the best shot at cleaning up the oceans and seas. Teens today are smart, computer-savvy, great networkers, and we think outside the box. If Boyan Slat can come up with a solution to clean plastics from the ocean, then others in his age group or younger can do the same!

“Hey, guys? Don’t you want to see this app? <http://ocamar0.wix.com/savetheseasgame> . What do you think about it?” Steven asks. Only then am I aware of the silence coming from his part of the room. Thomas and I pause our searches and go over to his computer to check out the app he found: Save the Sea.

Is this the only app that kids are using? I wonder if there are any other apps on cleaning the ocean. More exposure has to be good, right? It is all about building awareness, and different kids react to different styles.

I decide to start by doing a Google search.

Ha! Steven is not the computer guru in the family.

Here is a free app I found:

<https://www.microsoft.com/en-US/store/apps/Clean-the-Sea/9WZDNCRDKX1K>

The more I think about it, the more I think that Steven might have come up with a great idea. Maybe I can build awareness of the need to clean the sea if I find apps specifically with this in mind, just like the free one I found.

I would rather listen to what other teens have to say than listen to adults because they are the ones who messed up the oceans in the first place. Maybe I can find teens who are having

success with cleaning up the environment and solicit their help. I'll put it on my list of things to research.

After finishing up my notes, I shut my laptop and stretch, glancing over at Thomas.

We've been working for a long time. "How are you doing with your research?"

"Well, in a nutshell, Tina, the planet is in trouble."

"I know." I sigh. "But what specifically do you mean?"

"There is more than one issue here. With climate change, there is a change in the supply and flow of fresh water."

"What can we do?"

"Basically we need to kick everyone in the butt! And wake them up!"

He turns his laptop screen so I can see it and starts reading the text: "One billion people will be facing a scarcity of fresh water. As populations grow, so does the need for fresh water. Pollution is a problem. Pollution from activities that humans do and the run off from agriculture finds its way into oceans, rivers and lakes."

"Is that it?" I ask airily, though I feel completely overwhelmed. This project is taking on a life of its own.

"No! That's not all!" Thomas says. "People have been cutting down forests. It's called 'deforestation.' They're sabotaging nature's way of keeping and storing water!"

"Oh my God, this project is endless. And everything needs immediate attention. What should we do next?"

"This is your project. What do you want to do?"

"I'm going to research some groups are already cleaning up the ocean and contact them for advice," I say. "What do you want to work on?"

“I’ll look at what people are doing around the world about the scarcity of fresh water. I’ve read about work being done to try to remove salt out of sea water.”

“Tina, I’m tired,” Steven whines. “Can I work on this later?”

“How about we take a break and go for a walk for half an hour to clear our minds?” I ask. “When we come back, we can pick up where we left off.”

You won’t believe what happened next, Diary. The memory of holding Thomas Edward Colbert’s hand while we went for a walk in a blizzard made today a day to remember. I must capture the memory in complete detail before I forget any, so I think I’ll turn to a fresh page.

Chapter Three

The Next Step

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

— Anne Frank

Monday, March 7, 2016

9:00PM

Dear Diary,

Words pale in comparison to how I feel right now. It is now 9PM on Monday evening. As I sip my herbal tea, I watch the freezing rain slip and stutter in tormented frustration against the window pane in my bedroom. The herbal tea slides down my throat, warming me on the inside. The taste of lemon tantalizes my taste buds to come alive. My heart is filled with joy: the ache in my muscles forgotten.

I love having my diary as a safe place to experiment with my creative writing! And after what happened today, I feel like singing.

Earlier in the afternoon, when Thomas and I were doing research for my science project, I felt frustrated, maybe even defeated. The problem is just so big! Still, it amazes me how one moment in time can change the way I feel. Today, that moment was entirely thanks to Thomas—here it is, in glorious detail:

“Come on then, Tina,” Thomas says, grabbing my hand. “Let’s go for that walk.” His warmth spreads up my hand and arm and tumbles into my heart. My hand feels small and fragile compared to the strength of his grip silently promising his protection. His skin is rough with calluses born from outdoor work and lifting weights. I feel a connection to him unlike anything I have felt before. I wonder if Thomas is experiencing the same thing.

“We’ll probably come back looking like snowmen,” he teases.

“Okay!” I exclaim, totally focused on him and the strength of his grip.

Thomas releases my hand and puts on his checkered red parka with a white tuque that has a big red pom-pom on top. His boots and gloves are black and designed for very cold weather. Immediately I feel the loss of contact against his skin and wish we did not have to wear gloves.

“I like your tuque, Thomas. I especially like the red pom-pom!” I say.

“My mom gave it to me as a joke. She thinks I’ll be seen more when I’m jogging if I have this red pom-pom on my hat.”

I’m wearing a royal blue, down-filled three-quarter length parka, a black tuque, and black mitts cover my head and hands. My red curls escape the confines of my tuque, playfully poking around its edge. Warm, waterproof Sorel boots cover my feet.

As we leave the comfort of my home, the wind and snow batter our faces. My hand is securely in Thomas’s hand, anchoring me as we fight the wind, digging our boots determinedly in the snow. The storm has left the sidewalks with twenty centimeters of snow, and my legs feel like lead as he pulls me along. The plow has already made one attempt to clear the sidewalk. The wind and snow dance around our collars, seeking entrance inside our jackets.

“Whose idea was this anyway to go for a walk in a snowstorm, Tina?” Thomas shouts at me against the blowing snow.

I laugh. “I think it was yours!”

Thomas smiles, his head bent to keep the wind out of his eyes. “I think we can probably make it around the block. After that, our parents may have to chisel the snow off of us!”

He is right. By the time we walk around the block, we are covered head to toe in sticky snow that clings like glue to us. As we walk up to the house, my mom snaps a picture of us.

“I want to email this to your father.” Mom says. “He’ll never believe the amount of snow that has fallen!”

I think secretly that she and Dad have known that I like Thomas and that she wants to prove it to him with a picture.

“No problem, Mom.”

Thomas doesn’t seem to mind having his picture taken while holding my hand in a death grip—or is it frozen to mine?

Once inside, we peel off snow-crusted gloves and hats, draping them over heating vents to dry. We laugh as snow showers at our feet as we strip off our coats. They are hung on sturdy brass hooks as thick clumps of snow fall like dead weight to the floor. Puddles of water swirl like angry rivers currents speeding towards our socks.

“Be careful of the puddles on the floor, Thomas.” I say. “If your socks get wet, let me know and I’ll give you a pair of my dad’s.”

“That’s okay Tina. I’ll manage to keep them dry.”

Mom surprises us with two cups of steaming hot tea perched patiently on a table in the den.

“Mom, where is Steven?” I call to her in the next room.

“When you two went for a walk, he escaped to his room to play video games.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Thomas and I glance at each other, silently nodding in agreement to allow Steven off the hook for now.

We settle into our spot on the sofa as the scalding tea begins to cool and open our laptops. This time, when Thomas’s knee touches mine, the warmth feels familiar.

“The walk cleared my head, Tina. I think I can explain why more people are not taking action to clean up the ocean.”

“Walking in a blizzard does that. It clears the mind.” I tease.

“I remember taking notes for my marketing class,” Thomas remarks, ignoring my teasing. “Let me find my notes....”

I lean over to read his screen.

“Here they are,” he reads. “The term that I am looking for is called ‘pluralistic ignorance’. This is the definition taken from the Oxford Dictionary online:

“A condition in which each member of a group believes himself or herself to be alone in holding a particular belief, when in fact the belief is shared by all or many members of the group.”

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pluralistic-ignorance>

“How does this explain why people are not taking action regarding the ocean?” I ask as I move closer to read the quote from the book.

My body is flush along the length of Thomas’s right side. His warmth feels like the embrace of a trusted friend, and I am reluctant to pull back. It just feels right.

“Let me finish explaining. My marketing teacher tells the story of this young girl in her twenties that was being chased by this guy who is stabbing her. Eighteen people watched this happen, but not one of them helped her.”

“Why not? That sounds crazy!”

“Let me continue reading,” Thomas says.

“Sorry, I’ll stop interrupting.”

Thomas flashes me a smile and goes back to reading his notes: “A person in trouble would be unlikely to get help when there is more than one bystander present. When several potential helpers are around, everyone thinks that someone else will intervene and help.”

“Oh, I get it. Everyone thinks someone else is going to help and it ends up no one does. Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Thomas says.

I smile and nod.

Thomas pauses and turns to face me. “When people are unclear as to what to do, they look at what everyone else is doing. By the principle of social proof, if everyone else seems unconcerned, then the event is considered not to be an emergency. Experiments have been done in the past that show that someone in need of emergency would be better off if a single bystander rather than many bystanders were present.”

“Now I understand!” I say. “The reason why more people are not cleaning up the ocean is because they think someone else will deal with the problem and two there is no global upheaval for immediate action.”

“Exactly!”

“How can I get people, especially teens, to wake up?”

“Well, the easiest way I know of is to network with kids our age using social media. Kids love to watch videos.”

“I agree. Maybe I can write an e-book with videos embedded in it and blast it around the world?”

“Don’t forget about social media.”

“Okay, so ... assuming I truly understand this pluralistic ignorance, there are too many observers.” I say.

“That’s right.”

“If I can get a handful of influential people in each country around the world to take up this cause at the same time, maybe then observers will wake up,” I declare.

“Maybe, but you’re forgetting about social proof.”

“No I haven’t. You’re jumping ahead of me.”

Thomas keeps talking as though he did not hear me.

“Remember everyone is looking at everyone else to see if they are worried and concerned. Since no one seems to be concerned that they’ll not have enough fresh water to drink in the future it must all be okay. ”

“Thomas,” as I just said, “No, I haven’t forgotten about social proof. To get rid of social proof, I need to create urgency.”

“How do you create urgency?” Thomas wonders.

“I send the book to all the leaders of the world and ask for their help in creating urgency.”

“You make it sound simple!

“It is simple. Why make it complicated?”

“Tina, you are talking about unifying the world in cleaning up everything—the ocean, the environment, the world, really.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m talking about. I have to at least try.”

“Confident women are hot, Tina!”

I feel myself blushing.

“Thanks, Thomas. I’m glad you think I’m hot!”

He punches me in the arm. “You don’t need me to tell you what you already know, Tina.”

“Hey, I like compliments just as much as the next girl. Any time you want to send some my way, go ahead.”

Thomas turns his head and looks at me with a searching expression on his face.

“Tina, I don’t know of anyone who would take on this kind of project except you. Am I surprised? Actually, I’m not. Am I impressed? You bet I am.”

I say, “What do you mean I’m the only one taking it on? Aren’t you helping?”

Thomas nods and looks like he wants to say more but doesn’t. The moment passes. He clears his throat.

“Okay, just to be crystal clear I promise once you have your e-book or PowerPoint presentation ready, I will help you get it out on the internet.”

“Thomas, your help means a lot to me. I know there are kids just like us around the world that want to heal the environment. Will you help me find them?”

“Yes, I will, Tina. I think you are right that there are teens just like us who are passionate about healing the oceans, cleaning up the environment, and changing the status quo about our

dependency on plastic. We simply need to unite them,” Thomas comments. “Now you have me thinking it doesn’t need to be complicated!” he exclaims, laughing.

I smile broadly, hoping my eyes reflect the gratitude I feel. I imagine how the success of this project will impact teens around the world.

Thomas finishes typing something and then hands me my tea.

“Okay, I’ve sent you my notes from my marketing class to your email, Tina. What’s next?”

“I’ve jotted down some notes. Let me go over them with you.” I take a sip of tea before beginning.

1. It starts with awareness that there is a problem with sea water and fresh water.
2. The oceans are unhealthy. They are polluted with a variety of things, one of them being too much plastic. Marine life is eating this plastic and dying. Boyan Slat, the CEO of The Ocean Cleanup <http://www.theoceancleanup.com>, is putting in place a way to collect plastic and recycle it. He is targeting the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. (Note to self: Could other countries target the other gyres in the world at the same time?)
3. Pollution, climate change, deforestation, and scarcity are affecting the fresh water supply.
4. Without fresh water, the human race will die.
5. Because of social proof, i.e. lack of urgency and too many observers hoping someone else will fix the problem, there is a lack of massive, immediate global action being taken.

“I think you have summarized what we’ve done so far, Tina,” Thomas says. “Perhaps we need to find ways to prevent plastic from getting into the ocean as well. Our dependency on plastic for one thing needs to radically change. This is definitely a large component to the overall

problem. I'll let you think about that and do some more research," Thomas says as he closes up his laptop. "I have to go home and do some homework of my own."

Mom comes in and says, "I just listened to the weather report. It is calling for freezing rain this evening and overnight. Don't be surprised if the schools are closed tomorrow."

"Mom, that is crazy! I think I've heard of schools being closed for two days in a row only once before."

Mom gives a small shrug. "I know, but that's what they're calling for. It's pretty bad out there," she adds before disappearing back into the kitchen.

"Thomas, if school is closed tomorrow, can you come over and help me with the rest of my research?" I ask.

"If the schools are closed tomorrow, how about you come over to my house? We can spend a few hours working on your project. Come over at ten, and we can work until noon."

"Okay, it sounds like a plan!" I secretly pray for freezing rain tonight.

Thomas gets dressed to leave. He says, "Tell your mom thanks for the pancakes."

"Tell your dad thanks for sending you over to help shovel our walkway and driveway. Little did you know that you were going to end up helping me with my science project!" I laugh.

"It was totally worth it. Let's hope for freezing rain tonight," Thomas says as he leans towards me.

Powerful arms surround me. Now I know what it feels like to get a bear hug. The warmth of his breath on my neck sends shivers down my spine. I melt against a body hardened by exercise. I could stay like this forever. Time seems to stand still. I feel as though a boa constrictor has wrapped us securely together.

Maybe Thomas likes me more than I previously thought as my mind does a happy dance.

He slowly releases me and says, “You are a good hugger, Tina!”

He smiles, turns, and goes out the door. As he runs down the stairs, he waves goodbye.

Immediately the storm sucks him into its midst. My heart misses a beat for the second time today. I’m already looking forward to tomorrow.

Chapter 4

Memories Prevail

“The sea lives in every one of us.”

– Robert Wyland

March 8, 2016

09:30 AM

Dear Diary,

God bless little brothers, hot tea and oatmeal. This morning started off with me drowning in memories and using up three-quarters of a box of tissues—which are incidentally still covering my bed and the hardwood floor. Fortunately for me, this day has taken a turn for the better, and I haven’t even seen Thomas yet.

Thank goodness, Dear Diary, I have you to write in. I need a place to vent. I have to be at Thomas’s house in thirty minutes, but I want to jot down my thoughts while they are still fresh. I had a dream about Brian last night. It feels so real, as though his death happened today.

Suddenly my heart feels swamped in sadness, and I want to curl up and cry. I have no control when these feelings take hold.

Other times, I expect him to walk in the door as though it’s all a dream and he has been on vacation. I’ve stopped telling my family about my dreams because it makes them feel sad. I can see it in their eyes. “The eyes are the mirror to the soul,” I’ve hear grandmother say. I just wish mine didn’t show quite so much of what I’m feeling all the time. My dad says I wear my heart on my sleeve. This doesn’t sound good either.

Steven can always tell if I'm upset, but I've never really told him exactly what happened when Brian died. Maybe I'll talk to him about it someday. For now, Dear Diary, I'll write down everything I remember about that awful day. I might feel better if I do.

This is how I woke up this morning.

06:00 AM

The alarm rings in my ear. My eyes slowly open to the sensation of tears tumbling over my eyelashes, flowing down my cheeks to form tiny wet spots on my pillow. The memory feels real, like it happened an hour ago, not three years ago.

"Oh! Brian ... I miss you!" a whisper escapes my quivering lips.

I feel disoriented. Where am I? What day is it?

I gradually get my bearings and blindly reach over to turn the alarm off. I close my eyes tightly to squeeze out the last of the tears, instinctively knowing I'm safe in my bed. The black, white and red hand-made quilt my grandmother made me years ago securely holds me close like a warm bear hug. Fluffy pink and white socks poke out the end of the blanket.

The alarm clock says 06:00 AM. The room feels warm. All of my senses are in survival mode. The house is quiet. As I glance at the window pane, I see ice crystals have formed overnight. They are without a doubt some of the most beautiful ice designs I've ever seen, reminding me that nature has infinite patterns at her disposal. The radio comes on. The Weather Channel reports a freezing rain advisory is still in effect. No school today.

My mind is still only half-awake. As my eyes reluctantly drift shut once more, the dream continues and the memory of Brian's death comes back to me in full detail. I'm thrown back in time.

#

The day is perfect. The atmosphere is vibrant with people loving the proximity of the sea while basking in the warmth of the sun. It is March break, and we're on vacation for a week. The beach is crowded with surfers impatient to get on their boards and show off their skills.

Lifeguards watch from surveillance towers lined up along the coast giving surfers and swimmers the best protection. Lifeguards also patrol the beach on foot, their bodies fit and tanned from the sun's rays. They have an air of being on constant alert, continually scanning the crowd of swimmers in the ocean for signs of trouble. Dad told us at breakfast that they're amongst the best-trained lifeguards in the world.

Mom and I watch from our beach chairs. We are lathered from head to foot with sunscreen. Floppy hats in orange and pink stripes top our heads. Flip-flops allow our toes the pleasure of sinking into the sand. Fights break out amongst the seagulls on the beach as they confront each other over bits of garbage. My little brother Steven is with Dad. They've gone to visit the building site. Dad builds bridges around the world, which is a good excuse for a family vacation.

Brian paddles out and catches the first wave, along with the other surfers. He falls off and disappears under the surf. Mom and I search for his head to break through the surface.

"There he is, Tina!" Mom says, sounding slightly concerned, but he's fine.

Out he goes again, over and over. We've got a good view of him. He looks like he's having a blast.

On his last run, the surfer next to him falls off his board. The waves catapult the board forward, hitting Brian in the back of his head. He plunges under the waves, head first, the waves

tossing him around like a limp doll. Mom and I start screaming, frozen in horror as we watch his motionless body.

Lifeguards take immediate action, battling the waves to get to him. *He'll be okay*, I tell myself. *Please, God, let him be okay.*

Seconds turn to minutes. Minutes feel like hours as we watch the lifeguards reach his body. They turn him over. The waves never hesitate. They keep on crashing on the beach. People shout. Chaos takes over.

“He isn’t breathing,” someone says.

Please God let him be okay.

A lifeguard starts doing CPR on Brian. He’s so still. Mom is hysterical, crying and screaming. The lifeguards have to pull her away from him. It feels like I’m watching a movie. It can’t be real. I keep expecting someone to shake me and wake me up. I start to cry. I can’t stop shivering. Someone calls the emergency number.

An ambulance arrives and drives down to the shoreline. Brian is lifted onto a straight board and into the ambulance. The lifeguards continue the chest compressions. They look grim, focussed on what they’re doing.

They ask Mom if she wants to sit in the back of the ambulance. There is room for only one family member. Mom doesn’t want to leave me alone on the beach. She tells them she’ll meet them at the hospital. The ambulance speeds away, its siren blaring.

A crowd has formed. The surfer whose board crashed into Brian comes over to Mom. He tries to tell her how sorry he is. She is crying uncontrollably and seems in a trance. She doesn’t answer him. He looks upset and stands holding his board, lost in his own thoughts. A man who looks like he is in charge offers to call my dad. Mom accepts his help.

My life is never going to be the same.

#

My mind snaps back to the present moment as a car outside honks its horn restlessly.

Tears fill my eyes again, making it difficult to see the paper in my diary. Where is my box of tissue? There it is. I grab a fistful of tissues as I dab at my eyes. I wonder how I am going to get through this, Dear Diary. Maybe I need to talk to someone other than my family.

The radio announces it is 0700 AM and there is a twenty car pile-up on the 401 Highway. It sounds like driving conditions are even worse than yesterday. Let me try to capture what is happening outside my window in an effort to settle my nerves.

Freezing rain arrived last evening with such savagery that the blizzard earlier yesterday looks like a walk in the park. Snowbound sidewalks and roads are now covered in frozen rain, making them glitter like diamonds. Rooftops, lamp posts and shrubbery have razor-sharp icicles hanging like daggers, waiting to strike anyone foolish enough to venture beneath them.

The radio announces that the police are again asking anyone not needing to go outside to stay home. The Weather Channel is calling for freezing rain well into this evening. Schools are closed for the day.

Steven is going to be so excited! Come to think of it, I'm pretty happy as well because I get to spend a few hours with Thomas. I better pull myself together and wash my face so he doesn't know I've been crying.

The tranquility of the house is disturbed as I can hear Steven bolting down the hall towards my bedroom.

He pokes his face through the door, his hair spiked like a porcupine's quills, grinning from ear to ear. This feels like déjà vu. Didn't he do this yesterday as well?

“Tina, are you awake? Can you believe it? We have two days off of school in a row! It’s freezing rain outside!” he exclaims.

Then he pauses and tilts his head. He looks pensive.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Have you been crying?”

He walks towards me with a determined look on his face. He climbs on the bed beside me, ignoring the tissues covering my lap, and leans over. He hugs me with all his strength.

“Tell me.”

I consider making up a story as to why I’m crying, but I know that Steven would see right through it. It is better if I tell him the truth.

“I had a dream about Brian last night.”

“I knew it. I knew it! It’s because of your ocean project, isn’t it?” Without giving me time to answer, he blurts out, “Well, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps? I’m not sure.”

“Tina, maybe you should do your science project on something else,” he declares.

“Steven, even if I’m dreaming about Brian because I’ve been thinking of the ocean, I’m still going to finish the project. You can’t talk me out of it.”

His face looks mutinous. “Look, I miss Brian as much as you do, but I stopped having bad dreams about him a long time ago. It makes me upset when I see you so upset, okay?”

“You weren’t on the beach when it happened. I can still see it in my mind.” I sigh. “And it doesn’t happen as often as it did.”

“Does Mom know that you’re crying?” Steven asks, sounding frustrated.

“No, and you’re not going to tell her, right?!” I demand.

Steven remains quiet. He looks like he’s thinking. This is a dangerous combination.

“Steven, promise you won’t say anything to her.”

“Okay, I promise on one condition.”

I wait patiently for him to tell me what he is scheming.

“Are you going over to Thomas’s house today to work on your project?” he asks.

“Yes, you know I am.” *What is he up to?*

“If you don’t want to tell Mom or Dad about your nightmares, then talk to someone you are friends with that will give you good advice besides your own family,” he says. “I think Thomas would be a good person to talk to.”

“Wow, don’t you sound all grown-up!” I chuckle sadly.

“Tina, I’m not stupid, you know.”

“I never said you were stupid. I don’t want to burden Thomas about my feelings. He doesn’t want to hear about my problems.”

“Tina, what are friends for? Think about it. Maybe you’ll feel better after talking to him. Besides, he is going to know something is up just by looking at your eyes. They are red and swollen like you’ve been crying.”

“Great, that’s all I need is for everyone to know that I’ve been crying.”

“Don’t worry, Tina. I’ll get you some tea bags from the kitchen, and you can leave them on your eyes to help get the swelling down.” Steven says as he jumps off of the bed. “Remember that is what Grandmother always says to do?” he inquires. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Yes, I remember. I love you!” I call after him as he darts out the door.

“Yeah, yeah, I love you, too,” he shouts back, and he’s gone.

Steven returns with two tea bags a few moments later, holding a hot cup of lemon tea.

“Mom knew something was up as soon as I took the tea bags,” Steven admits. “She asked what was going on. I told her I couldn’t say because I made a promise.”

“As though that is going to stop her from asking,” I laugh.

“She already had lemon tea made for you. I told her everything is under control.”

“Thanks, Steven. You’re the best.”

“No problem. Just lie down and put the tea bags on your eyes while your tea cools. I’ve already soaked them. Mom made us some cinnamon oatmeal, so I’m going to bring it upstairs so we can eat it together.”

“That sounds good, Steven. Thanks. I don’t want to go downstairs just yet.”

Steven dashes down the hall again and comes back slowly, carrying a tray with two bowls of steaming hot oatmeal covered with a thin layer of unsweetened almond milk drizzled with organic honey. The smell of cinnamon drifts to my nostrils. Mmm ... I am getting hungry.

I set the tea bags aside and dig into the oatmeal. My grandmother always says that oatmeal is comfort food. It fills your belly and warms your heart. Right now, my heart could use a little warming.

Steven interrupts my thoughts by asking, “What time are you going over to Thomas’s house?”

“He said to come by at 10:00 if there was freezing rain over night, but I’m going to send him an email just to confirm.”

“Well ... since it’s only 7:30, why don’t I help you do some more research after breakfast?” Steven says. “That way you can compare notes with Thomas and get more done. Unless, you decide to spend your time talking to him about you-know-what.”

“I appreciate any help you can give me, kiddo. I haven’t decided if I’m going to talk to Thomas or not. So let’s drop it for now, okay?”

“Okay.” He says looking a little frustrated.

“Brian, sometimes you are wise beyond your years.” I say.

“Yeah, I get that a lot from Mom and Dad!” he laughs.

Mom shows up at the bedroom door looking at me intensely. Fortunately, she doesn’t ask me lots of questions. All she says is that she is happy to take the tray and bowls off of our hands, disappearing the way she came.

Steven retrieves his laptop from his room.

“All right then!” Steven says, rubbing his hands together. He opens his laptop, preparing to fly his fingers across the keyboard. “What are you researching today?”

“Well, I want to find teenagers that are doing work to clean up the ocean,” I say as I place my laptop on my knees and turn it on.

“What have you come up with so far?”

“Late last night, I came across some articles about:

- A teenager designing a device that could stop oil spills, leaking from a broken well, with computer sensors far down on the ocean floor.
- There is a teen who has worked since he was quite young starting nature clubs, helping change what elementary students are taught in school regarding wetlands. He is a crusader for the environment.
- A female teen sailor who spreads the message of ocean conservation everywhere she races. She has also started a program helping sailing clubs reduce their environmental impact. They have switched over to reusable water bottles. We need more people like her.

“There isn’t a lot about individual teens cleaning up the ocean,” I muse, looking over my notes. “I wish there was a list of teens across the world that we could contact. They probably do a lot of their work without the media acknowledging them.”

“I know there are a lot of high schools that do recycling and have environmental students on committees,” Steven says.

“How do you know that?”

“I did my own research before I went to bed last night.

“Oh! And here I thought you were playing video games, Steven.”

“I think cleaning up the ocean and getting kids to help you is a really good idea so I decided I would do some more research. It’s no big deal.

“Well, I appreciate your help and I’m very proud of you.”

“No problem.” Steven says. “I told you I would help you. Now why don’t we both try researching what groups are doing to clean the water.”

“Oh, before we start, Steven, I want to show you a Facebook Page I designed. It’s called ‘Helping the Ecosystem.’ Here is the link.”

<https://www.facebook.com/Helping-the-Ecosystem-1044556268932837/>

“This is a great place to start with your campaign to reach teens on social media,” Steven says. “I’ll send invitations to my friends to ‘like’ the page. Have you considered starting a discussion group?”

“That’s one of the things I want to talk to Thomas about today.”

“Your eyes look better. I think the tea bags did the trick.” He grins at me. “How are you feeling now?”

“Much better, thanks. Your hugs and the oatmeal definitely helped,” I reply, sending him a smile.

“You know I’ve got your back, right?”

“Yeah, I know that you do. It’s just that these dreams make me feel out of control and I hate it.”

“Think about talking to Thomas, okay?”

“We’ll see. Speak of the devil!”

“What?” Steven says.

“Is my room bugged? Thomas just sent me an email to ask if we are still on for 10:00 this morning. It’s as though he is listening to our conversation right now.”

I immediately reply to his email, saying I will be there on time even if I have to wear my skates to get there.

“That’s too weird. Must be an ESP thing going on. Maybe you two are mentally connected.” Steven laughs.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up. Enough weird stuff has happened so far today. That comment doesn’t even justify a response. Time to buckle down and get some research done so that my time spent with Thomas is productive.

The question I have in mind to research is what groups are working to conserve and protect the ocean as I have not been able to find individuals working on cleaning up the ocean besides one girl and one boy.

Here are some of the links I found when I googled groups who are cleaning up the ocean.

<http://www.cleanoceanaction.org/index.php?id=334>

<http://www.5gyres.org/>

<http://www.theoceancleanup.com/>

<http://www.oceanconservancy.org/our-work/marine-debris/>

<http://www.gyrecleanup.org/cleanup-plan/>

<http://www.cleanocean.org/>

Steven glances at my screen and comments, “Those sites look like a good place to start your research. Why don’t you contact each of the groups and ask their advice on what teens need to know and do immediately?”

“How did you get so smart?” I ask as I lean over and give him a kiss.

“Cut it out! You know I’m not into that mushy-stuff.” Steven as he wipes his face.

“No problem.” I know deep down how pleased he is that I look and feel better. “What are you working on?”

“I’m contacting my friends on Facebook, from around the world, to see if they know of teens who are working on cleaning up the ocean.”

“You do that, and I’ll work on this for the next hour and a half until I go over to Thomas’s house.”

As I look over the research I managed to finish, I feel like my chest is lighter, even though the dream still lurks at the back of my mind. The distraction of Steven was just what I needed. The day is definitely taking a turn for the better.

I have to be at Thomas’s house in half an hour. I wonder if I should take a chance and confide in him.

Chapter Five
Believe You Can

“A challenge only becomes an obstacle when you bow to it.”

-Ray Davis

March 8, 2016

9:00 PM

Dear Diary,

What a day I've had—and I have the bruises to prove it! Actually, I've just had a relaxing bath, but the bruise on my right hip, earned from falling down my front entrance stairs this morning, is turning a lovely shade of purple and yellow. My right elbow is sore also as I took the brunt of the fall on my right side, even though my coat should have cushioned it. Fortunately, I didn't hit my head.

I may be getting ahead of myself. Let me see.

My last entry this morning was just before I left for Thomas's house around 10:00 AM. Hopefully I can write this down in chronological order.

After I confirm with Thomas that I'm coming over, I sneak past the kitchen, like a ninja on a mission, avoiding Mom because I know she saw my swollen eyes this morning. I didn't feel like going downstairs to eat at the kitchen table as I was still upset from my dream earlier in the morning. Steven covers for me.

Mom has a sixth sense because, as I put on my coat and boots, she comes through the kitchen door.

“I take it you are going over to Thomas’s house to work on your project?” Her voice is a little muffled as she hugs me. “You weren’t going to say goodbye?”

“Yeah, he is expecting me at 10:00. We’ll probably work for a few hours,” I say, hoping she won’t ask me any more questions. “I was going to say goodbye.” She doesn’t need to know I would have said it as I bolted out the door.

“I want you to know that I love you, honey.”

“I know you do, Mom. Don’t worry.”

“Moms always worry.” She laughs. “It’s part of the job description.” As a second thought, she adds, “The freezing rain probably made the stairs in the front entrance very slippery. Be careful you don’t fall and hurt yourself.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I won’t fall.”

“I’ll find the sand that Dad uses whenever it gets this icy and put some down on the steps before you come back.” She pauses and frowns. “I think he keeps it in the garage.”

“Okay, Mom.” Secretly, I’m so glad she does not ask me a ton of questions as to why my eyes were swollen earlier.

I leave the house after shouting goodbye to Steven and promptly fall on my ass. Since no one is going to read my diary, I’m sure it is okay to write *ass*—or should I write *derriere*, *buttocks*, or *butt*? After all, I am practicing my creative writing skills. How many words are there in the English language to describe a person’s ass anyway? I laugh to myself. I’m definitely not showing this part of my writing to Ms. Mason!

My fall is spectacular, if I say so myself. Let me try to describe it in all its glory.

As I leave the house and step on the front landing, I underestimate how slippery it is.

Have you ever seen someone freak out while slipping and sliding, their legs and arms going a mile a minute? Did you laugh because it looks ridiculous? Imagine this is me. I make a dive for the railing, desperately trying to grab hold of it. I miss it by centimeters and fall unceremoniously on my right hip, smacking my right elbow at the same time. Ouch! The ice is so slippery I take off like a rocket and thump down all four front steps. *Wham! Smack!*

As I land on the walkway, I'm still moving as the momentum from my fall pushes me forward. Finally, I come to a stop.

"Let me just lie here and die of embarrassment," I mutter to myself. "I hope Mom didn't see me fall."

All I can think of is whether my laptop is damaged or whether anyone witnessed my fall. I look up to see if Mom is watching out the window. Nope. Thank goodness. The laptop avoids the brunt of the fall as it is in my bag on my left side. Since I landed on my right side, it should be fine. Before I can scout to see if anyone else is outside, someone is calling my name.

"Tina, Tina! Are you alright?"

I hear a familiar voice behind me, excitedly bellowing at me.

I look over and can't believe my eyes. Thomas is trying to skate over to me. He is actually wearing a pair of skates! I know I should be embarrassed, but the entire situation is ridiculous. I start to laugh.

"Thomas, for goodness sake, what are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm trying to reach you!" he exclaims, making a herculean effort to get to me as his red pom-pom on his hat flops back and forth.

Still laughing, I comment, "What are you doing here in the first place? I'm coming over to your house, remember?"

“I thought I would see how slippery it is outside. When I couldn’t walk, I put on skates and thought I would help you come over to my house. Are you hurt?” He crouches down beside me.

“I hit my hip and elbow, but other than that I am more embarrassed than anything else ... and cold, come to think of it.”

“Let me help you up. Do you still want to come over?”

“Well, I’m not going back inside my house to explain that I slid down the stairs. That’s for sure,” I answer as I shift my position on the ice.

“Right! Then, hold onto my arm, and I’ll support you as I lift you off of the walkway. Put your left boot against my right skate. That way, you won’t slide.”

I move my laptop to my right hip. I get on my knees and move my left foot as he instructed me to do.

“On the count of three, Tina, I am going to pull you up, okay?”

“Ready.”

“One, two, three, up we go,” he says.

He lifts me as easily as though I weigh a feather. I love that he is so strong. He puts his arm around my waist. My left side is now flush with his right side.

“Let’s see if we can move forward. Otherwise, we’re going to spend the day at your house.”

He skates forward with me shuffling and slipping and sliding, glued to his side. “So far, so good,” he says cheerfully.

Our heads are bent, watching the placement of our feet as we make our way along the icy sidewalk. We take forever to get back to his house, giggling and laughing the whole time. I feel so much better than I did this morning.

Getting up his front stairs is interesting. He lifts me off my feet and tilts his right hip to bear my weight. His dad opens the door as he puts me down on the landing of the entrance.

“Hi, Tina,” Mr. Colbert says. “It certainly looks treacherous outside. I was watching you slip and slide making your way over here.”

“Dad, she fell down her stairs getting out of her house. Our steps are just as slippery. Maybe you should put down sand sooner than later.”

“Good idea, Thomas. Since the weather is so bad, maybe *you* should cancel your plans to go to the gym.”

I turn to Thomas, knowing that he said he could spare only two hours this morning to help with my science project.

“Yeah, Dad, you’re right. I’m not going out again today except to help Tina back home.”

Almost as if he’s reading my mind, Thomas turns to me and adds, “This means we can work on your project for more than two hours if you want to, Tina.”

It’s weird that we seem so attuned to each other.

“That’s fine with me. You may be stuck with me until summer. I’m not eager to go outside in *that* any time soon.”

Thomas and his dad smile.

We get inside his front porch, and Thomas and I take off our boots, coats, and hats and hang them up. My hip is starting to throb. No way am I going to mention it, though. Instead, I turn to Thomas. “Where are we working today?”

“Let’s work in the basement. It is quiet down there, and we’ll get more done.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you two to work on your stuff. Let me know if you get hungry,” his dad says. “I’m only going to the gym if the weather improves.”

“Don’t worry, Dad, I can fix something for Tina later. But it’s pretty slippery out there. I suggest you stay home.”

His dad nods and then goes off down the hall. Thomas asks if I need a pill to get rid of the pain in my hip. He was watching me closely when I took off my boots and noticed that I grimaced when I took off my right boot. I don’t deny it.

“I’ll wait a bit and see if the pain goes away,” I reply. “I don’t like taking pills.”

“Tell me if you want something for your hip later on. Why don’t we go downstairs?”

As we descend the stairs, the basement smells like vanilla and looks as though it’s out of an interior design magazine. It is beautifully decorated with a black leather sofa big enough to seat six people, taking up the center of the room. Cream-colored Berber carpet extends wall to wall. A bright orange leather La-Z-Boy lounge chair sits flamboyantly off to the side. On the wall is a fifty-five inch Samsung Smart TV. Three small rooms extend off of the main basement: the furnace room, laundry room and fitness room. I wonder how often Thomas uses the fitness room. I see him in my mind all sweaty as he exerts his muscles lifting weights.

I seriously have to stop thinking about what great a body Thomas has and focus on why I came over to his house today.

“Thomas, it looks so neat down here,” I say as I desperately try to refocus my thoughts.

“I don’t spend a lot of time down here normally, except if I’m working out. But my room is currently a mess and my bed isn’t made, so I thought we could work here instead. I brought my laptop down here earlier.”

“No problem. This is fine.” *Thank goodness Thomas isn’t a neat freak, I think.*

His laptop is lying on the coffee table in front of the leather sofa. Also residing on the coffee table is Thomas’s two-year-old Balinese long hair cat named Princess. She has blue eyes, a long body and wide ears. As soon as she sees Thomas, she starts to meow. Her coloring matches the carpet.

“Hi, Princess! You remember Tina. We’ve come to do some work down here,” Thomas says as he goes over to pet her and pick up his laptop. I join in petting Princess, and she starts to purr. She sounds like a freight train it’s so loud.

Thomas falls back into the sofa.

“Come sit down, Tina. And tell me what research you’ve done so far.”

I ease slowly down into a sitting position, aware of my sore right side. I unzip my bag and take out my laptop. As I turn it on, I feel Thomas staring at me.

When I look up, I’m still startled to catch him looking at me thoughtfully.

“What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I got an email from your brother this morning,” Thomas begins.

“No way! He didn’t, did he? He didn’t tell you that I was crying? How could he! He gave me his word!”

“You were crying?” Thomas asks with a surprised look on his face.

“Yes, Steven told you.... Well, that is, I assumed.... Wait a minute ... what did Steven actually say in the email?”

“All he said is that you could use a friend to talk to. Let me show you the email.” He replies as he turns his laptop to show me what Steven wrote.

“Hi Thomas, Tina could really use a friend to talk to today.” -Steven

“Oh! Is that all?” I mumble, hanging my head in embarrassment and feeling stupid that I blurted out that I was crying.

“Want to tell me why you were crying? Thomas asks softly.

I glance over at him, and he looks sincere and concerned.

“Now I feel stupid that I blurted out that I was crying,” I say, hesitating to tell him more.

Thomas just sits there waiting patiently.

Finally, I give in and say, “It’s no big deal. I had a nightmare; that’s all.”

“And the nightmare was about...?”

“The nightmare was about the day that Brian got hit in the back of the neck with a surfboard and it severed his spine.”

“Aw, that would make me cry, too, if I had witnessed that.”

I lift my head sharply in surprise, too stunned to speak.

“Don’t look so surprised. Brian was my friend, too.”

I never considered how my older brother’s accident affected Thomas or his other friends.

Hmm ... should I be consoling him? I wonder.

“Tina, give yourself permission to fall apart when you get swamped with bad memories. Everyone has bad memories. Lean on your friends when you need to talk it out.”

“I feel so stupid that it has been three years and I still have nightmares.”

“Why? You feel stupid because you love your brother? Don’t,” Thomas says as he leans over and hugs me.

I put my forehead on Thomas’s shoulder. He smells like Dove soap. I fight back the tears threatening to escape my eyes and wrap my arms around his waist.

“Thomas, I can’t talk about this right now, or I’m afraid I’ll start crying all over again.”

“Let’s make a deal that if ever you need a friend to talk to, you can talk to me ... and I can talk to you, okay?”

“Deal,” I reply as a small smile tugs at the side of mouth.

“Okay,” he says as he releases me. He looks relieved.

Princess must instinctively know that something is wrong because she jumps from the coffee table to the sofa and squeezes between Thomas and me, lending her warmth to an awkward moment.

“See, even Princess agrees with me,” Thomas laughs.

“Don’t worry, Princess. Everything is okay,” I say as I pet her. She loves the attention.

“How far did you get with your research yesterday, Tina?”

The awkward moment is gone. I remember that I need to talk to Steven about little brothers sending emails when he shouldn’t be interfering.

“All right, here is an organization I found on the internet that has been working for over 25 years with a vision of having a trash-free sea. This is the link.”

<http://www.oceanconservancy.org/healthy-ocean/clean-beaches-clean-water/>

As Thomas types it into his browser, I go over the notes I had jotted down after reading what the Ocean Conservancy does:

- Explains that everyone has a profound stake in healthy oceans and why.
- Informs that trash along coastal lines injures swimmers, is ugly to look at, affects the tourist trade, gets caught in boats’ propellers, and injures wildlife that eat it.
- Organizes the International Coastal CleanUp®, the world’s largest volunteer effort to clean our beaches and waterways.
- Publicizes data that helps the public and the science community around the world better understand the problem of ocean garbage. A new report is coming out in May 2016.

- Creates original and creative solutions with leaders in public, private and academic sectors.
- Is creating a movement to stop trash before it starts and live healthier lives.

Here is a link to a Call to Action.

https://secure.oceanconservancy.org/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=988&s_src=15WAXAXXX&s_subsrc=15ATFTACC

“I didn’t realize that The American Chemistry Council represents some of the world’s producers of plastic,” I comment to Thomas. “Imagine if we could get them to acknowledge that plastic in the ocean is a huge problem.”

“How do you propose to do that?”

“The site has a form that you can fill out as a call to action. What if teens everywhere fill out the form as a way to bring The American Chemistry Council into talks with the Ocean Conservancy and other concerned leaders in industry? After all, the producers of plastic are human and have the same water needs as everyone else.”

“That would be great, Tina,” Thomas says. “It is one thing to want to prevent plastic from entering the ocean and cleaning it up. But since I started researching your project, I’m more aware of how much plastic we use. I think changing our reliance on plastic should be part of the solution as well.”

“Agreed,” I say.

Thomas nods his head. We work in silence, scanning the website. He then asks me this question.

“Tina, what is the message that you are trying to give teens after you create awareness of the problem?”

“I think that teenagers need to feel they have the power to turn this problem around.

Ocean trash is an issue on a global scale that generations after us will most probably need to deal with, but it is possible to improve the chances of success in our favor.”

“I like your attitude.”

“Adults underestimate how powerful teens are,” I state. “We are going to amaze them with our ideas, solutions and ideas for the future.”

“Absolutely, there is no doubt,” Thomas says. “Is there anything else about this site that you really like?”

“Yes, I like what this site is currently working on. Let me review my notes.... Ah, here: they are fighting for trash-free seas, for sustainable fisheries, fighting against ocean acidification, outlining smart choices for a healthy ocean, working with partners in the private sector towards healthy oceans, and working to protect underwater parks called marine parks.”

“It sounds like they are doing some really valuable work.”

“Yes, here are some links I like:

<http://www.oceanconservancy.org/our-work/>

<http://www.oceanconservancy.org/our-work/international-coastal-cleanup/2015-ocean-trash-index.html>”

“Oh, and they also appeal to a younger crowd as well. So, if teenagers have younger brothers or sisters, this sounds like a good fit for them:

[Talking Trash & Taking Action](#)”

“Definitely,” Thomas added.

“I wish the educational system taught this stuff in schools in real time so that, right from a young age, everyone would be aware.”

“If your e-book goes viral, who knows what may change as people cease ‘to be asleep and wake up to this problem’? You never know.”

This day is getting better and better. I am so excited about all the good things ahead of me.

Oh, man, I didn’t realize how tired that bath made me. It must’ve been all that warm water. I have more to say about today, but I think I’ll have to pick it up here tomorrow. Good night, Dear Diary

Chapter 6

Small Actions Lead to Big Changes

“It is important to remember that the ocean’s resources are finite. The commitment these kids are making here today is a clear and compelling call to all of us to pay attention to our ocean.”

– Ted Danson

March 9, 2016

06:45 AM

Dear Diary,

I slept like a rock last night. Instead of bad dreams, I dreamt of Thomas going to the movies with Brian a few years ago. They went to see *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* starring Jennifer Lawrence. They had a good time. It’s funny what the mind remembers in dreams. It might be Brian’s way of letting me know he is okay. What a lovely thought.

I wonder if I have time to finish writing about what happened when I was at Thomas’s yesterday. Let’s see.... I’ll give myself thirty minutes to practice my creative writing skills before I need to get ready for school. First, I’ll describe the weather outside my window this morning.

#

As the sun rises today, it’s hard to believe that the blizzard and freezing rain caused so much turmoil the past two days. It feels like a distant memory. Ice melted overnight as

temperatures rose. Roads and walkways that were slippery as eels yesterday are now covered in slush. Glancing out my bedroom window, I giggle at the pedestrians who look as though they are trudging through oatmeal—the snow is so saturated with water! The radio announces that schools are open and school buses are running on time.

Hmm ... not bad. That oatmeal description is pretty spot-on, really. Okay, let me go back to the moment I left off writing yesterday.

Thomas and I are sitting on the black sofa in his basement with our laptops industriously waiting for our next command. Princess, his cat, is lodged between us as though she is holding court. It is quiet and peaceful downstairs. The embarrassment I felt moments earlier while confiding in Thomas has evaporated with the knowledge that Thomas shares my grief.

I decided to find out what Thomas's research has deduced. (I love the word *deduced*! I'll have to use it more often with my creative writing.)

"Thomas, have you done any research about the oceans? And didn't you say yesterday you were going to find out how countries are taking salt out of seawater?"

"Yeah, I did," he says. "I was surprised to discover it isn't the plastic bags and large pieces of plastic that are ultimately the problem. I've only done a preliminary review of what is currently being done to extract salt out of sea water. Let's talk about micro-plastics first."

"What do you mean?"

"The real problem with plastic in the ocean is tiny balls of plastics called micro-plastics or microbeads," he says.

"I've never heard of micro-plastics. Where do you find them?"

"Micro-plastics are plastic pieces of fibres measuring less than 5mm. Microbeads found in personal care products are usually smaller than 1mm."

“What!” I exclaim. “Someone decided to put plastic in personal care products?”

“Yes, they are found in scrubs and toothpaste.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I declare. Thomas keeps on talking as though he doesn’t believe I’ll be sick.

“The problem is that these microbeads flow through sewer systems worldwide and then into rivers and finally to the ocean and seas. It affects the fish that eat them and the humans that eat the fish. They have even found them in some beer and honey products.”

“The first question I have is: who came up with the idea of putting plastic into personal care products? And did they consider the long-term effects of plastic getting into the water around the world?”

“Probably not,” Thomas says.

“Imagine that these companies are destroying marine life, water and ultimately human lives long term by doing this.”

“That’s true in a nutshell,” Thomas states. “However, I’m not sure their vision was to destroy our way of life. I don’t think they thought that far. I do believe, though, that they were thinking of selling more products with novel ideas that would make them money.”

“They didn’t do their due diligence as to the consequences of their actions.... Is that what you’re saying?” I ask.

“Essentially, yes. You are so smart Tina,” Thomas says.

I smile and reply, “And because of *pluralistic ignorance* and *social proof*, everyone is walking around thinking someone else will take the reins and fix the problem. They don’t see any urgency so they think everything must be okay.”

“That’s about it.”

“Teens may not even be aware of the magnitude of the impact that microbeads represent,” I say. “I mean ... I didn’t even know what they were!”

“Aren’t you doing this project to raise awareness amongst kids our age group?” Thomas asks.

“Yes, this is true...,” I say. “I would love teens to take action now as well. But first teens around the world need to understand that the oceans need their help. And this starts with awareness.”

“I think you have the right idea by starting with creating awareness, Tina. Write your e-book and send it to every environmentally conscious individual on the planet. Ask them to send it to their contacts on their email lists.”

“I could ask them translate it to the language of their region so that everyone would understand the importance of what is happening.”

Instead of responding, Thomas frowns thoughtfully and comments, “It seems to me that there are three issues with regard to the oceans around the world.”

“What are these three issues?”

“The first issue is we need to change our reliance on plastic and do this on every level—continent, country, state, province, city, community. Manufacturers of plastic products need to be environmentally aware and accountable!”

“What else?” I ask.

“Secondly, we need to prevent plastic from getting into streams, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans. I read this article on circular economy. I’m not sure I understand it fully,” Thomas says.

“What is circular economy?”

“It has to do with using fewer resources, producing less waste and making better use of it. Here is the link to the article if you want to read it.”

http://www.ciwm-journal.co.uk/downloads/CIWM_Circular_Economy_Report-FULL_FINAL_Oct_2014.pdf

“Maybe we can find someone who can explain this to us.”

“Maybe?”

“You said there are three issues,” I remind him.

“Yes, the third issue is cleaning up the oceans. Honestly I’m not sure how to get rid of microbeads in the ocean, though.”

“I remember watching this video ... Boyan Slat said he is trying to get the plastic out of the ocean before it breaks down into smaller pieces. Now I know why,” I say.

“We need these three issues to be worked on simultaneously.”

“I totally agree with you,” I answer, giving Thomas a smile.

“Now that I know that microbeads, in water, is such a huge problem, I wish I knew how to get them out of the water,” Thomas grumbles, picking at a thread on his jeans in frustration.

“This is why the world needs teenagers. We are innovative thinkers who think outside the box. If someone can come up with a solution to detect oil spills in pipes as a way of preventing them, then someone can figure out how to get rid of microbeads in water.”

“I think once teens are aware they are using products with plastic in them and how devastating it is to the environment, they may stop buying them,” Thomas says.

“I hope so because I believe that small actions lead to big changes.”

The smile Thomas gives me is full of pride, and I feel my cheeks heat a bit. I'm thankful when he says, "Here is a video I found that explains that even washing fleece jackets releases plastics into the water."

I lean over and look at the link.

<https://youtu.be/RMkkYAf18Xk>

"Email me the link Thomas, and I'll see if I can embed it into my project," I comment. "I'm so impressed how many organizations are working to improve the health of our oceans."

"How do you know how many organizations are working to improve the oceans?"

Thomas asks.

"I did a Google search and read their websites. Many organizations have been working on this for years."

"I guess we have to give credit where credit is due then," Thomas says. "The adults who run these organizations probably inherited the problem of trash in the ocean as teenagers themselves."

"True," I say. "And they have been working sometimes their entire lives to correct the problem."

"Then imagine the hope they'll experience when teens unite the world and demand changes in policy of how plastics are produced and regulated, preventing plastics from entering the water and cleaning up what is currently there!"

"They'll probably say it's about time."

Thomas laughs. "It may take years off of these adults' lives. The best ingredient for feeling young is the knowledge that your life work is being acted upon."

“Better than face cream!” I exclaim. Then I mutter under my breath, “That probably has microbeads, too.”

With a chuckle, Thomas says, “Okay, so I’ve discovered what people are doing about extracting salt out of sea water. After all, I did say I would research more about fresh water than sea water.”

“I remember.”

“The process of taking salt out of salt water is called desalination.”

“What did you find out about desalination?” I ask.

“Well, there are two main techniques to get salt out of sea water. The first is distillation where water is boiled. The steam passes through a condenser, leaving the salt behind, and then this steam cools down to liquid form. This is expensive to do.”

“So, what’s the second technique?”

“The second technique is called reverse osmosis or RO. Plants specializing in desalination rely on high tech polymer membranes that allow water to pass through and deny the passage of dissolved salts.”

“Is this cheaper to do?”

“It’s becoming more affordable, but it is not without its own set of problems. Sometimes the membranes get clogged, so they have to wash them in a substance that declogs them. Then *that* substance needs to be extracted from the water. More research is currently being done.”

“It sounds like whoever figures out how to take sea water and extract the salt for a reasonable price will have the means to make money for the rest of their lives.”

“They will also have to figure out what to do with the salt that has been extracted.”

Thomas replies.

“Good point. I didn’t think of that.”

“I just hope they have in place a way to detect and extract microbeads at the same time,”

Thomas muses.

“I’m sure they will.”

“Tina, it’s almost lunch time. How about we take a break and go make something to eat?”

“Sounds like a plan.” I grin, already anticipating that Thomas will make something vegetarian.

Princess leaps off the sofa and follows us upstairs. The kitchen has stainless steel appliances and granite counter tops in a white speckled pattern that begs to have homemade bread made. The cabinets are white with ribbed glass showing off dishes neatly stacked. A large white ceramic bowl is piled high with green granny smith apples in the center of the kitchen table, which is covered with a crimson red table cloth. Six white chairs surround the table. Slat tiles adorn the floor. A red Russell Hobbs tea kettle sits on the counter. The sun is streaming through the back window. It looks like puddles are forming on the surface of the ice on the back porch.

“Tina, do you want a cup of tea?” Thomas asks as he fills the tea kettle with water and plugs it in.

“Yes, that would be great. What kind of tea do you have?”

“Actually the question is, ‘What kind of tea don’t I have?’” Thomas says. “Just tell me what you want, and I’ll see if I have it.”

“I would like peppermint tea and honey then.”

“One peppermint tea and honey coming up! Eh, what kind of honey do you want? I have raw unpasteurized Canadian honey, the KB Honey Brand from Western Canada or Manuka Honey from New Zealand.” He holds both brands in his hands, showing me the labels.

“Both sound good, but I will have the raw honey from western Canada this time.”

“Okay then.”

“What are you going to drink, Thomas?”

“I’m having NEON, it’s a cool energy drink made by Visalus and it’s actually good for you. It has 100mg of caffeine from green tea extract—and it’s only 100 calories!”

“You sound like a commercial for Neon.”

“Hey, when you find something good for you that works, why not share it?”

I smile and nod.

“Besides, word of mouth advertising is very powerful ... especially if the person you are talking to knows, likes, and trusts you,” Thomas adds. “Dad decided to join the company because the bodybuilders and trainers at the gym recommended their products.”

“Really? Is that all they have is energy drinks?”

“No, I make myself a protein shake every morning, and Mom and Dad like their cereal. I especially like that they have a program called Project 10 Kids. Every time someone reaches a ten-pound weight loss goal through this program, the company donates ninety days of healthy meals on their behalf to help kids eat healthier.”

“Wow, that’s such a great idea.”

“You got that right!”

He hands me the tea and honey and asks what I want for lunch.

“What are you having?” I ask.

“I told my Mom that if the weather was bad today and we were off school, you might come over and work on your project. So, she made a carrot ginger vegetarian protein soup.”

“That sounds good. What’s in it?”

“She put onions, carrots, coconut milk, rice, lentils, orange juice, and ginger in it,” he says. “I wasn’t sure you would like it, so I can make you an egg salad sandwich if you want one instead.”

“Have you ever had it before? It is good?”

“Yes, I’ve had it before and I love it. Don’t worry,” he says with a teasing smile. “I’m not giving you an experiment.”

“Okay, I’m willing to try it.”

“Also, I have sourdough bread to go with it. Why don’t you sit down while I get it ready?”

Thomas warms up the soup on the stove. He ladles it into green oval soup bowls and adds thick slices of sourdough bread on two side plates. Then he sits down to eat beside me.

“Look, I’m sorry about getting all teary-eyed earlier,” I begin.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But I—” I start to say when he leans over and kisses me on the mouth.

Well, that is one way to shut me up, I think. I’m too stunned to respond, but Thomas pulls back with a small smile. He goes back to eating as though it is the most natural thing in the world to kiss me.

I’m still reeling about what this means when he asks, “When is your project due, Tina?”

“It is due in on Friday this week,” I reply, surprised I can speak and I’m not tripping over my tongue. “Thomas, you just kissed me.”

“Yeah, I did!” He says as his eyes light up. He looks happy.

“Why did you kiss me?” I’m thinking that I’m really glad he did, but I’d like to know what is going through his mind.

“It seemed like the easiest way to shut you up.”

“To shut me up? Of all the nerve!” I exclaim.

He leans over and kisses me again this time lingering a little longer as he tastes and nibbles at my lips.

All I can think about is what a great kisser he is and that I don’t want the kiss to end. Simply wow!

When he straightens back up, I’m completely speechless. He carries on the conversation as though nothing out of the ordinary just happened.

“Well, I think you have enough research done to make a small e-book for the project. Do you agree?” he asks as he bites into a thick slice of bread.

Nothing comes out of my mouth. He looks at me and says, “It worked, didn’t it?” His eyes are sparkling with satisfaction.

I start to laugh. My mood feels lighter.

“You are full of surprises, Thomas.” I shake my head to clear my mind.

“Well, do you think you have enough research done to write a small e-book?”

“I think so. I would like to have a cover made for the e-book.”

“If you go on www.fiverr.com tonight, you may find someone who makes e-book covers in 24 hours. It’s worth a shot.”

“I’ve used www.fiverr.com before, and I’ve been pleased with the results. I’ll look into that later today.”

The alarm just went off in my bedroom, alerting me to the fact that I've been writing nonstop for the last thirty minutes. I'm surprised to see how much I've written. It's time to get ready for school, Dear Diary. Today, I'm bringing you in my knapsack so I can finish documenting the rest of what happened yesterday. Secretly I'm hoping Thomas has a few hours free this evening to help me put the e-book together. For now, I have to make a mad dash for the shower before Steven takes over the bathroom.

#

Noon

Dear Diary,

I'm in the school cafeteria on a chair hidden by a pillar, trying to steal ten minutes of uninterrupted time to myself so I may practice my creative writing. I want to finish my entry that I started this morning about the events that happened yesterday. The cafeteria is alive with energy as though students, teachers and custodians haven't seen each other in ages. Let's see ... it has been a total of four days off school instead of just the weekend because of the storm. I haven't seen Thomas at all this morning, not even on the bus. Normally I run into him at least once in a day at school. I hope he isn't avoiding me because he kissed me yesterday. I wonder if he regrets it. I hope not because I don't.

There's not much I can do about it until I see him, so for now I'll get back to my writing:

After lunch, we clean up the dishes and put them away. Then we go back downstairs and settle onto the sofa, sitting close together so that we can read each other's screens.

“Tina, I want to show you an artist who makes beautiful sculptures of people and puts them under the sea.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“You practice tai chi, don’t you? You probably realize that everything must be in balance, the yin and the yang, right?”

“Yes, balance is good.”

“Well, I thought that, if you introduce some beauty into the book, teens will realize what they are fighting for.”

“That’s an interesting thought.”

“Let me show you,” he says as he turns his screen toward me.



(Permission has been granted by Jason deCaires Taylor to use this photo.)

“That’s amazing, Thomas!”

“Isn’t it?” Thomas says with a smile. “The artist is Jason deCaires Taylor. He creates sculptures on land and submerges them, where they become vibrant habitats for corals and crustaceans and other creatures. It is as though he has ‘alive’ museums underwater.

“Here, this link has a video of him discussing his work.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/jason_decaires_taylor_an_underwater_art_museum_teeming_w
ith_life](http://www.ted.com/talks/jason_decaires_taylor_an_underwater_art_museum_teeming_with_life)”

“Wow ... I definitely think these sculptures add beauty to the book.”

“Contact him and see if he agrees to let you put some of his pictures in your e-book. It can't hurt to ask,” Thomas suggests.

“Sounds like a good idea.”

We work in silence for the next hour. I contact more organizations on my list as well as Jason deCaires Taylor. In the meantime, Thomas researches organizations dealing with fresh water.

After another hour of work, he says he has to watch a movie as part of his homework for English and write a summary by Friday. He asks if I'd like to watch a movie on Netflix with him.

“Sure, I'd love to.”

We put our laptops aside and cuddle on the sofa. It just feels right. I can't help but wonder what Thomas is thinking. “Did he like kissing me? Does he want to do it again? Should I kiss him next time?” As these thoughts are racing through my mind he finds the movie he wants.

The movie he picks in called *Big Fish*. It was made in 2003 and tells the story of a frustrated son who tries to determine fact from fiction in his dying father's life. It is unique and definitely different.

A few hours later, he walks me home, and this time I kiss him goodbye. He seems happy.

Life is full of surprises.

This is a perfect place to sign off until tomorrow, Dear Diary.

Chapter 7

The Power of Belief

“Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t—you’re right.”

— Henry Ford

March 9, 2016

10:00 PM

Dear Diary,

I’m curled up on my bed with my pink flannel pyjamas on, warm and clean from my shower. My short, curly hair is tame after using Herbal Essences smoothing shampoo and conditioner. Two bamboo pillows support my back, and a burgundy throw covers me from my waist to the tips of my toes. Under the blanket, purple fuzzy socks warm my feet. I feel a sense of contentment mixed with urgency at the need to write down all the things that happened today. I’m tired, but if I don’t write down the details when they’re still fresh in my mind, I may miss some. Here goes.

Today was full of surprises. I’ll never take anything for granted again. In the first place, Thomas wasn’t on the school bus this morning, and I didn’t see him at school all day. I know it’s stupid, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that he is avoiding me on purpose. Maybe he regrets kissing me?

All day, I wonder what he going through his mind. By the time, I get home from school, I’m feeling tired, confused and embarrassed. My mind is conjuring up all these terrible possibilities. And on top of this, I still want to talk to my little brother for sending Thomas an email when he shouldn’t be meddling. But it’ll have to wait because Steven went over to his best

friend's house to work on some math homework. He sent me a text this afternoon to let me know that he won't be home until later. He refuses to answer my texts about sending Thomas an email earlier in the day.

The house is quiet. No one is home. I'm sprawled on my bed at 3:30 PM. I'm trying to decide if I should feel sorry for myself, take a nap or work on my science project. My laptop is lying beside me, ready to go. I glance over at it and realize I've just gotten an email from Thomas. Sometimes I think my bedroom is bugged.

It reads, "Hi, Tina! Have you found someone on www.fiverr.com to do your cover for your e-book?"

I frown, thinking, *Where have you been all day—and why haven't I heard from you until now?*

But that's not what I say. Of course not. I email: "No. I haven't. I just got home."

Thomas' reply pops up right away. "Do you want some help? I've been stuck at home all day. I'm going to go crazy if I don't get out of the house!"

"Why have you been stuck at home? What have you been doing all day?" Now I'm concerned that something is wrong.

"I spent the day sleeping because last night I bit into a ridiculously hard *nut* and my tooth cracked. Can you believe it?"

"Really?"

"Then part of my filling fell out. The nerves were exposed. I had to wait overnight to get an emergency appointment with my dentist."

"Oh, that sounds terrible!"

"I didn't get much sleep overnight because of the pain."

“Ouch!”

“Tell me about it!”

My next email is simple: “How are you feeling now?”

But inside, I’m thinking, *Great! All day I’ve been worrying for nothing.*

“The freezing has worn off, and my mouth is sore. I *really* need to get out of the house.

Can I come over?”

“What do you want to do if you come over?” I reply as images of Thomas kissing me yesterday float into my mind.

“I thought we could hang out and do some research, or find someone to put your e-book together on www.fiverr.com. That is, unless you’ve decided to do a PowerPoint instead?”

“I’m not sure what I want to do. I just know I have to decide soon as the project is due in two days. I’d appreciate the help.”

“Does that mean yes I can come over?”

I laugh and type back, “Yeah, come on over.”

“Great, I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Suddenly, I find myself flying off of the bed and dancing around the room. My energy has sky-rocketed, and I am filled with happiness. How ridiculous is that? I wasted so much energy worrying about Thomas all day.

In five minutes flat, I brush my teeth, wash and moisturize my face, put a dab of lip gloss on, change my shirt, and put fresh deodorant on. I feel powerful.

I go downstairs so I don’t miss hearing the doorbell ring. I wander into the kitchen with the idea of putting the kettle on and making a cup to tea. As I fill the kettle with water and plug it in, I find a note on the refrigerator. It says that Mom has made chili for supper and to help

myself. She has gone to get her hair cut and will be home later. She reminds me that Steven is at Isaacs' house for supper.

Hmm ... chili might not be the best thing to eat when I'm trying to make an impression. It gives me gas. I open the fridge door and check to see if the chili has meat in it. Nope. I wonder if Thomas is hungry and wants to have some chili, too. It should be soft enough for him to eat with a sore jaw. I'll give him a choice on if he wants to have some. I may even warn him that it gives me gas! Talk about romantic!

The doorbell rings, and I check my watch. True to his word, Thomas arrives in exactly ten minutes. I open the door, and he smiles as soon as he sees me. His lower jaw on the right side is swollen and bruised.

"Hi, Thomas! Hey, how are you?"

"I'm great now, thanks."

I look at him and comment, "Your jaw looks sore and swollen. Is it supposed to be bruised? Are you sure the dentist only fixed a cavity?"

He starts to laugh and grabs his jaw, "Ouch! Don't make me laugh, Tina. It hurts. You're asking me too many questions at once. Let me take off my coat and boots, and I'll tell you all about it."

"I don't remember getting bruised when I get a cavity done. Are you sure that's what he did?" I ask as the kettle goes off in the kitchen.

"Do you want some tea?" I call over my shoulder as I walk into the kitchen.

"No, thanks. I'll hold off for now having anything to drink," he says as he hangs up his coat on a brass hook and takes off his boots.

"Well, did your dentist replace a filling and fix the crack in your tooth?"

I can't help but smile as I watch Thomas come into the kitchen and head over to the kitchen table.

"He did a root canal," he says as he sits down at the kitchen table and opens his laptop.

"Oh! That's a drag."

"You got that right," Thomas says as he gingerly touches his jaw. "He gave me a ton of freezing. It always makes me tired."

"I know what you mean. I have the same problem," I reply as I pour hot water over an orange pekoe tea bag.

"Between not sleeping last night and getting the root- canal today, it's probably why I slept most of the day."

I nod in agreement and ask, "Are you sure you don't want anything to drink before I sit down?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine. Let me get www.fivver.com online."

He starts to type, but I move closer and say, "How about if you and I share your laptop and watch some YouTube videos about gyres before we look at e-book covers?"

"Do you have any YouTube videos in mind?"

"Let me find the link that I'm thinking about..." I lean over him and type. Warmth, strength and the scent of Dove soap tantalizes my scents. I remind myself to stay focused at the task at hand.

"What I learned makes a lot of sense. Here it is."

I type in <https://youtu.be/h6i16CrI8ss> and then Thomas and I watch the 2.21-minute video in silence.

“Wow,” Thomas says, shaking his head. “I’m glad we watched this, Tina. To be honest, I didn’t really know what a gyre was until I watched the video.”

“Me, too,” I reply, pleased that I’m not the only one who didn’t understand what a gyre is. “Give me a minute. I’m going to run upstairs and get my notes. They are on my laptop.”

“No problem.”

I sprint up and down the stairs so fast an Olympic champion would be proud. Before you can say my name three times backwards, I’ve opened my laptop and found my notes.

“Okay, these are my notes I took, last night, when I watched the video we just watched:”

1. A gyre is a natural occurrence.
2. It is a rotating current system involving the earth’s rotation along with currents and winds.
3. It is like a huge whirlpool.
4. There are 5 subtropical gyres. All of these have numerous garbage patches in them.
5. There are 8 garbage patches in the 5 gyres.
6. This is where the inspiration for starting the 5 Gyres Institute came from.
7. A piece of plastic may take ten years to rotate through the gyres from California to Japan and back.
8. Plastics are coming from every continent.
9. This is an international problem.
10. Therefore, the solutions have to be international.
11. Garbage in the patches are constantly moving and elusive. They are not islands, but more like a plastic soup from disposal waste from land masses.
12. To clean a gyre—clean the beach, clean your water shed, clean your streets because cleaning closer to the source is a better way to solve the plastic in the ocean.

“Your notes look good, Tina. Are there any other videos you want to watch?”

“Yes, here is a link to another video from the 5 Gyres Institute that I like.”

https://youtu.be/ujpd_I7hLvA

This is the first time Thomas has watched it. He is so focused on what they are saying.

“Wow, Tina. I’m glad I’m a vegetarian after watching this video. I don’t think I’ll ever look at fish the same way again.”

“I totally agree, Thomas. Can you imagine these poor fish and birds ingesting these pieces of plastic? As the video says, it’s because we aren’t being mindful of our trash. We need to work globally to deal with this.”

“I’m going to remember what he said in the video: ‘Kick the Plastic Habit.’ Make small changes like bringing your own bag to the grocery store, bringing your own cup when you buy your coffee, and refusing things like a coffee cup with the reusable lid.”

“Absolutely,” I reply. “I agree with them that small changes add up.”

“Now more than ever, you need to make an e-book and blast it around the world. Teens need to watch these videos.”

“That’s my plan ... and to get an A+ on my science project, of course.” I laugh. “Don’t forget that.”

Thomas smiles, “There is no doubt in my mind you’ll get a great mark.”

I nod feeling happy.

“What really hit home for me is when he said in the video that plastic has a long life-cycle in the ocean, in our body, in the next generations. He’s right: this makes a compelling argument why *not* to use plastic,” Thomas says.

“I only hope that teens will watch these videos and band together to take action. I know if Brian were alive, he would have loved working on this project. He was always the one who was

fascinated with the ocean,” I say as I glance off into space, giving a small smile as I remember my brother.

“Ah, Tina, there is no doubt to me that Brian is cheering you on and that he is very proud of you.”

Thomas puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me closer to him.

“I know, I know. Did you know that Brian wanted to be a marine biologist?”

“Yeah, I remember he loved the movie *Finding Nemo*. He thought clownfish were very smart.” Thomas laughs.

“I forgot about that! He did love that movie,” I reply as a huge smile transforms my face.

“He loved everything about the ocean,” Thomas says.

“Maybe I can do the work that he would have done and leave a legacy in his name by getting this e-book to teens who will take action.”

“I feel him smiling, Tina.” Thomas says as he gives me a squeeze.

“That image makes me happy, Thomas.”

“Yeah, Brian was a wonderful friend.”

“It’s just...” I sigh, frowning. “I can’t control when I have these dreams at night, and they still make me sad.”

“I understand. It does the same thing for me, too.”

I glance sharply up at Thomas in surprise, no longer lost in my own thoughts. I’m totally focused on him. His eyes look kind. I never knew that a person’s eyes could look kind before.

“The book will be a success; you’ll see,” he says with conviction, looking at me with total resolve. He lowers his arm and starts typing on his laptop.

“Thanks, Thomas. I really appreciate your understanding.”

Thomas smiles and says, “Is that it for videos? Or do you have any others that you want to watch?”

“Let’s watch one more video,” I say. “It’s short but powerful.” A comfortable silence has settled surrounding us as we focus on the video. It feels so good to be around Thomas.

https://youtu.be/CqZjvD_Xs4k

“Yuck! The plastic soup in the jar looks disgusting,” Thomas says after the video stops.

“I know.” I wrinkle my nose as I take a sip of my lukewarm tea. “Yuck is right. I like this video because it raises the question that, by fish eating trash and, by us eating fish ... are we eating our trash?”

“That is definitely something to think about,” Thomas says. “Yet another argument for *not* eating fish.”

I nod in agreement.

“All right,” Thomas says. “Do you want to search for e-book cover illustrators on fiverr.com now?”

“That’s a good idea, and I want to check out www.Blurb.com.”

“Sounds good.”

So we log on to www.fiverr.com separately and click on e-book covers.

“Some of the e-book illustrators are asking for good-quality stock photos,” Thomas notes. “Do you have any stock photos that you want to use, Tina?”

“Yes, I have one,” I reply, “but it might be too dark. I like it because it is a picture of the ocean in the North Arctic.”

“Can I see it?” Thomas asks.

“Let me find it. Give me a minute,” I say as I search for it. “Here it is.”



“This is a great picture, Tina. I can feel the power of the water.”

“I agree. That’s why I like the picture. I’m drawn to it. I feel like the water is demanding respect.”

“I’ve heard and read stories where people are drawn to the sea,” Thomas replies.

“I’ve read the same stories,” I agree, “but this picture may be too dark in color for the cover. What do you think?”

“Let’s scroll through some of the books that are on the www.Blurb.com website to get ideas.”

As we scroll through the books on www.Blurb.com, my stomach starts to rumble.

“Thomas, are you ready for a break?” I ask. “I’m getting hungry. Are you?”

“I could eat. What did you have in mind?”

“My mom made a meatless chili. Do you like chili?” I ask.

“Sure, I love chili. The only problem is that it gives me tons of gas. I’m not sure you’ll want to be around me,” Thomas says, laughing.

“No problem.” I grin. “Chili gives me gas, too!”

“That reminds me of this fart joke,” Thomas says. “What do you call a person that doesn’t fart in public?”

“I don’t know. What do you call a person that doesn’t fart in public?”

“A private tutor,” he says as he laughs, slapping the kitchen table. “Get it? A private tutor?”

“Ha, ha, what a ridiculous joke,” I laugh, feeling suddenly lighter. It feels good to be with Thomas.

Never in a million years would I have thought that Thomas and I would be discussing fart jokes. Life is full of surprises.

“All right, then. I’ll warm the chili up, and we can eat before we do any more work.”

“Tina, do you think I can have a glass of water?”

“Sure, help yourself. You know where the glasses are, right?”

“Yes, as long as they haven’t moved,” he says as he walks over to the cupboard and takes out a mug.

“My tooth is sensitive to cold so I won’t put any ice in it. Maybe I’ll make sure the water is lukewarm, instead.”

“Use the water in the Brita water jug on the top shelf in the fridge. I’ll see if the water in the kettle is still warm. Then you can mix the two together to make the temperature lukewarm,” I suggest.

Thomas pours water from the fridge and from the kettle together.

“Ah, no pain!” he sighs as he sips the water.

“Imagine Thomas, in the future, if taking a sip of water is as valuable as Fort Knox because it is so scarce?”

“How scary is that!” Thomas says.

I ladle the warm chili into Mikasa Belle Terre bowls that my family have had since I was little.

“Thomas, do you want pumpernickel bread or light rye?”

“I’m going to pass on the bread, Tina, and just have the chili right now. I don’t want to aggravate my tooth.”

As we start to eat our food, the front door opens and I can hear voices from the porch.

“Hold on a minute, Thomas! I think I hear my mom and grandma!” I say as I bolt out of my chair. “I’ll be right back.”

“Grandma! Grandma! Hi!” I exclaim as I run up to her in the porch and throw my arms around her. “Mom, you didn’t tell me that Grandma was coming!” I exclaim as I glance over at my mom.

My mom is smiling ear to ear. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“I love you, Mom!” I throw my arms around my mom, and she laughs, hugging me tightly.

“I know, Tina, I know. I love you, too.”

“Does Steven know that Grandma is here?”

“No, it will be a surprise for him, too.”

“I can’t wait to see his face!”

I turn to see Thomas standing in the kitchen doorway, smiling.

“Thomas is here. We’re having chili. You remember Thomas, don’t you, Grandma?”

“Yes, of course. How are you, Thomas?” Grandma asks.

Before he can answer, I tell Mom and Grandma he had an emergency root canal.

“Sorry to hear that you had to have an emergency procedure,” Mom says. “How are you feeling now?”

“Great now, thanks,” Thomas says, “especially since Tina gave me some of your chili.”

“Thomas is helping me do research for my science project. I still have a bit left to do,” I comment. “I want to find out about water sheds and how to keep them healthy.”

“I can help with that,” Grandma says.

“Great! Why don’t you get settled and I’ll put the kettle on? We’ll finish our chili, and you can tell us what you know, Grandma.”

I am going to sign off here, Dear Diary, as I am feeling tired. Mom, Thomas, Grandma, and I had a great time talking about the environment. This information will keep for one more day, but I want to be up early to make sure I get extra time with Grandma before school.

Chapter 8

Where Did This Water Come From?

“Even the upper end of the river believes in the ocean.”

–William Stafford

Thursday, March 10, 2016

6:15 AM

The alarm blasts in my ear, jolting me awake. With my eyes still shut, I blindly reach over and turn it off. My mind feels peaceful. I slept like a rock last night, no bad dreams. I recall with glee that Grandma arrived yesterday for a surprise visit. You should have seen Steven’s face when he came home last evening. Seeing how happy he is makes even me happier. I’ll make sure I write in my diary before I go down for breakfast.

Dear Diary,

It’s about twenty minutes before sunrise, and the weather announcer says to expect sunshine this afternoon. I have just enough time to write about last night and still spend time with Grandma before school. I still can’t believe she’s here. She arrived yesterday around supper time.

I don't want to waste a minute of my time with her, so let's see if I can get this all down before the sun rises...

After I finish hugging Grandma, she takes off her coat and boots. I hug Mom next. Thomas clears his throat. He is standing in the kitchen doorway watching us. As I start to introduce Grandma to him, I'm surprised to find she has gotten shorter since the last time I saw her. She normally stands 4'8". She seems littler.

She is wearing Tilley khaki zip-off pants and a black long-sleeved t-shirt under a vest. Her socks match the color of her pants perfectly. Her shoulder-length, curly gray hair is peppered with red streaks. It dances wildly around her face. She looks lovely, brimming with health. Looking at her reminds me of tea time and biscuits warm from the oven.

"Tina, your mom says you are doing research on the ocean. Maybe I can help because as you know I am passionate about fresh water and the health of watersheds." Grandma asks.

"That would be great, Grandma." I reply so excited that she wants to help. "We could really use your expertise."

"Tina, would you put the kettle on to boil and heat up some chili for both of us?" Mom asks, breaking me out of my reverie. "I'm going to help Grandma bring her suitcases upstairs to her bedroom. When she is settled, she can help you with your research. She may be too tired, though."

"Nonsense, Anna. I'm nothing of the sort."

Mom smiles and nods in agreement.

Grandma winks at me, her dark green eyes lighting up like fireflies. She heads upstairs with her suitcase. Mom carries a second carry-on bag, following close behind her.

“I’m on it, Mom,” I answer, turning to Thomas with a huge smile on my face. “Thomas, my grandma is here from England! Isn’t this exciting! She can help us with our research! She knows lots about watersheds! Isn’t this great?” I dance past him into the kitchen.

“Slow down, Tina,” Thomas says looking amused as he raises his hands in a stop position. “Come up for air. You are talking a mile a minute.”

“I’m just so excited!” I exclaim as I fill the kettle to the top with water.

“That’s great. You said your grandmother knows about watersheds?” Curiosity resonates in his tone.

“My grandma loves everything about the environment. She can help with research about fresh water.”

“We need all the help we can get,” Thomas replies. “Since today is Wednesday, you have all day tomorrow to put the e-book together. Then you’ll be all set to hand it in on Friday.

“That’s right,” I reply as I take out the pot of chili from the fridge and put it on the stove. “Are you finished eating your chili? Or does it need warming up?” I ask as I turn to face him.

“I’m all done,” Thomas replies as he opens the dishwasher. “Are these dishes clean or dirty, Tina?”

“They are dirty. We only run the dishwasher when it is completely full. Go ahead and put your dishes in it.” I put an Earl Grey tea bag in the Brown Betty Teapot as Thomas rinses his dishes and puts them in the dishwasher. He sits back down at the table, typing on his laptop.

“I have an idea for the cover of the e-book. Have you ever used www.picmonkey.com to make posters?” Thomas asks.

“Yes, I have. Why do you ask?”

“Well, since you are working against the clock, why don’t you make your e-book cover on www.picmonkey.com?”

“That would be faster,” I agree.

“Get a professional cover done when you’re ready to email the e-book to organizations willing to help you. I noticed that www.Blurb.com has a service like this,” Thomas says.

“That is a great idea. It means I simply have to organize my research—I mean *our* research,” I reply suddenly feeling like a weight is off my shoulders.

Thomas flashes me a brief smile and turns his attention back to the screen. “Let me look up the definition of a watershed since I’m unclear as to what it means.”

He squints at the screen, browsing for a moment, before he says, “Okay, here is the link: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/watershed>.”

“Thomas let me jot down this definition from the Merriam Webster dictionary online.”

Simple definition of a watershed is:

- a time when an important change happens
- a line of hills or mountains from which rivers drain; a ridge between two rivers
- the area of land that includes a particular river or lake and all the rivers, streams, etc., that flow into it.

I frown, considering the definitions, but before I can say more, Grandma walks into the kitchen.

“Tina, your mom should be along shortly. She is putting a load of laundry on,” she says.

“Okay,” I answer as I notice Grandma smells like Chanel No. 5. Every time I smell this fragrance, it reminds me of her.

“I heard you talking about the definition of a watershed, Thomas,” Grandma says.

“That’s right, Mrs. Clarke.”

“Nonsense, Thomas. Mrs. Clarke is my mother-in-law’s name. Call me Annabelle.”

“All right then, Annabelle,” Thomas says, smiling. “Isn’t Tina’s middle name Annabelle?” he asks thoughtfully.

Seeing the two of them talking makes me feel like I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

Grandma sits down beside Thomas at the kitchen table. She pats him on the knee, saying, “It is. She takes after me in more ways than just my name.”

“Does that mean that you are strong minded, determined, creative, *and* care about the environment?”

“Yes, I like the way you summed that up.”

I interrupt as my face feels hot, “Okay, enough talk about me. Can we get back to talking about watersheds? I have a project to finish.”

Grandma and Thomas glance at each other. They both look mischievous.

“Thomas, I don’t believe Tina has a boyfriend at the moment.” Grandma sighs.

“Is that right?” Thomas teases, turning to look at me. “Why do you think that is, Mrs. Cl—I mean Annabelle?”

“She is very independent, has a strong mind, and loves the environment. Anyone who goes out with her would have to have similar interests.”

“The two of you do realize that I’m standing right here and can hear every word you say?” I declare with my hands on my hips.

“Is she looking for a boyfriend?” Thomas says suddenly, sitting straight up as though he is on high alert.

“I’m not sure.” Grandma replies, turning to me with a questioning look.

“What is Thomas thinking?” I wonder. As I throw my arms up in frustration, the front door slams and I can hear Steven saying, “I’m home!”

“Excuse me a minute. I need to go talk to Steven about meddling little brothers. Grandma, the kettle is boiled if you want to make your tea,” I say as I dash out the doorway and into the hall. I’m so relieved I have a moment to collect myself.

“Hi, Tina. Whose coat is that hanging up? Why are you red in the face?” Steven asks.

“I’m flustered because Grandma is trying to set me up with Thomas!”

“She is? You mean Grandma is here? Where is she? I can’t believe it! When did she get here?” Steven pulls off his boots and hurriedly hangs up his coat.

“I’m in the kitchen, Steven!” Grandma calls out.

I’m so unsettled about Grandma and Thomas teasing me I forget to chastise Steven. He runs past me into the kitchen.

“Grandma, Grandma! How are you? When did you get here? I can’t believe it! Does Mom know you’re here?” Steven exclaims, throwing his arms around her.

“Of course she does. She is the one that picked me up,” Grandma says, hugging Steven back.

“Hi, Thomas,” Steven says, turning to wink at him and mouth, *Thank you for talking to my sister.*”

Thomas looks up with a gleam in his eye as I come back into the kitchen. “Your grandmother is telling me stories about some of the wayward things you got yourself into when you were younger,” he says. “I say ‘wayward’ as she describes your ‘shenanigans’ with exactly those words.”

“Remind me not to leave the two of you alone again,” I reply, wondering what she said to him. Should I be even more embarrassed than I already am? I hope my face isn’t red.

Thomas has a playful glint in his eye as though he now has blackmail material.

“Steven and Grandma,” I ask to distract myself, “do either of you want to eat some chili before we continue with the discussion about watersheds?”

“No, I’m not hungry at the moment, dear. I already have my tea,” Grandma replies.

“I ate at Issacs’ house,” Steven says. “Can I join and help you?”

“Sure, we need your sharp computer skills,” Thomas replies, giving Steven a high five.

“Give me a minute to get my laptop,” Steven says as he runs out to the porch.

“Now can we keep to the topic at hand, the watersheds?” I ask, looking at Thomas and Grandma.

“We’re just having a bit of fun, honey”, Grandmother says teasing me.

Thomas looks abashed. Thomas says, “Okay, Tina we’ll change the subject. I’d appreciate hearing what you have to say about watersheds, Annabelle?”

“It would be my pleasure, Thomas. A healthy watershed conserves water, provides a habitat for wildlife and plants, provides healthy drinking water, and supports rivers, streams, and lakes.”

“Thomas is going to study the environment in university, Grandma,” I pipe in.

“Is he now?” she says. “This will be right up your alley then.”

“This is why I’m helping Tina with her research,” he says.

“Really?” Grandmother says as though she thinks this may not be the only reason.

Thomas cheeks turn red and he focuses intently on his laptop.

“Can you tell us more about a healthy watershed?” Steven asks.

“Hold on a minute, Grandma. I want to type what you say on a Word document for my project,” I say. “Okay, go ahead. I’m ready.”

“There are ways you can keep watersheds healthy,” Grandma continues. “You can collect rainwater in barrels to conserve water, and you can water your lawn and garden less frequently. You can limit the time you take a shower.”

“Tina, remember in Australia we were only allowed to take a five-minute shower?” Steven interrupts. He doesn’t even look up as he says this. He is so engrossed in typing on his laptop.

“Yes, I remember. They have a shortage of water.”

“It is a good idea for everyone to take five-minute showers to conserve water, not only people living in Australia,” Grandma replies. “Don’t use fertilizer or pesticides on your lawn. It may leach into groundwater. Plant trees along rivers and lakes to prevent soil erosion.”

“Is there anything else?” I ask.

“Yes, people living in the country should keep their septic tank in good working order. Everyone should support environmental education.”

“How does our ecosystem affect a healthy watershed?” Thomas asks.

“Remember our ecosystem is made up of plants, animals, wetlands, forests, and water. When the ecosystem is healthy, so is the watershed. A healthy watershed also produces water for agriculture, households, and industry. Wetlands and forests reduce climate change.”

“It sounds like everything works together,” Thomas says.

“To survive, we need healthy watersheds and healthy oceans,” Grandma answers. “Everything works in balance.”

“Remember I was saying the other day that I wish we were taught about the environment in schools, Thomas?”

“Yes, I remember,” Thomas says.

“Well, I just found a fabulous PDF with everything I was looking for regarding environmental education in schools.” I turn my laptop to show him the URL:

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/enviroed/ShapeTomorrow.pdf>

“There is simply too much good information in this PDF for me to take notes,” I moan.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Tina. If someone wants the information, all they need to do is click on the link,” Thomas replies. “Just include it in your e-book.”

“This is part of taking responsibility for the environment. You need to support ongoing environmental education,” Grandma says.

“I agree,” Thomas and I say together. We look at each other and chuckle. It’s uncanny how often we seem to be in tune with each other.

“I contacted The Ocean Foundation earlier this week,” I say, “and they referred me to this blog post.”

“What does it say, Tina?” Steven asks.

“It talks about 24 things you can do on #SEAStheDay which was February 29, 2016, but these recommendations are applicable all year round,” I reply. “Here you go, Steven.” I lean over and type in the URL for him:

<https://www.oceanfdn.org/blog/24-things-you-can-do-seastheday>

“Some of these sound like fun challenges,” Steven notes. “You know, like those challenge videos on YouTube? I wonder if we could get teens to do some of these: go a whole day without using ‘single-use’ plastics—that’s like plastic utensils and straws, right?”

“Yeah,” I answer, excited by Steven’s suggestion. “And avoid carbon-emitting transportation for a whole day.”

“We could maybe organize a walk or bike to school day,” Thomas interjects.

“Yeah!” Steven agrees. Then he mutters under his breath as he reads, “Stop eating meat for a day.... Whoa! Did you know vegetarians save 3000 pounds of carbon dioxide per year?”

“There are lots of good reasons to go vegetarian,” Thomas says. “Look at this! The article says that 2.5 million plastic bags are used every day. We should definitely encourage people to bring reusable bags to the store.”

“Reusable water bottles, too,” I add. “I read that 90% of them aren’t recycled, and they take thousands of years to decompose.”

“I like the idea of watching *Mission Blue* and all three *Sharknado* movies over and over again.” Steven says. “I’m totally into doing this.”

“What about starting an eco-friendly business like what college students did at Fair Harbor Clothing?” Thomas suggests. “Fair Harbor Clothing recycles plastic bottles into board shorts and other beach clothing.”

“That’s a great idea. I’m going to network with my friends around the world and see if we can come up with a few ideas on how to use plastic in an eco-friendly business,” Steven says as his fingers fly over the keyboard.

“Imagine teens that have never been near the sea actually travelling to see it” I say. “They may realize how being near the sea does wonders for the mind.”

“This one is a challenge.” Thomas says.

“What is a challenge?” I ask.

“It is a challenge to go all day without producing any trash”, he replies.

“Absolutely!” Steven exclaims. “It would be fun to try it, though.”

“I like the one about composting food waste and stopping to throw cigarette butts on the beach.” Tina says.

“Don’t people already compose food waste?” Thomas asks.

“Apparently they don’t.” I reply.

“I like this one.” Thomas says. “Stop using products with microbeads and find an alternate. I’m especially proud that Canada has put a ban on microplastic and microbeads.”

“I’m proud of Canada as well.” Steven says.

“I didn’t know that 6% of landfill comes from discarded clothes.” Tina says. “This makes a good argument to recycle clothes you no longer use and want to get rid of.

“We have heard this one before.” Thomas adds. “Grab your to-go coffee in your own cup. Bring your own coffee container to the café.”

“I think it’s worth repeating.” I say. “Too many people use plastic lids and plastic utensils when they purchase coffee. Small actions lead to big results over time.”

“This is one to be aware of.” Thomas says. “Avoid investing in fossil fuels.”

“When I have money to invest I’ll keep this in mind.” I reply.

“What about these suggestions. Clean up the coast line. Unplug everything to conserve energy.” Thomas says.

“I’ve seen programs in Canada and the States where people clean up the coastline.” I reply.” I think it’s a great idea and more people should get involved. Conserving energy is a no-brainer.”

“This all sounds great. But I don’t know what seagrass is?” Steven asks. “Can you know tell me what seagrass is Grandma? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Seagrass is a plant, not seaweed, Steven. Think of sea grass as the ecosystem engineers of the ocean. They are known as ‘the lungs of the sea.’”

“Wow, that sounds like an important job!” Steven exclaims.

“The reason they are called ‘the lungs of the sea’ is because ten liters of oxygen can be made by one square meter of seagrass daily by photosynthesis. I remember this from university,” Grandmother says. “That was a long time ago.”

“What is photosynthesis?” I ask. “I’m sure I learned this in school, but I need reminding.”

“Photosynthesis is the process used by plants and algae to transform sunlight into energy the plant can use. I’m not sure of the exact process that seagrass makes oxygen.”

“I found a great link that explains seagrass,” I announce, “and you are correct, Grandma, about seagrass making oxygen. Here is the link.”

<http://ocean.si.edu/seagrass-and-seagrass-beds>

“Wow, it seems like we’ve covered a lot,” Thomas says, “but I’m not sure I caught everything. Tina, can you help?”

I grin at Thomas, happy that I’ve been taking notes. “Sure thing. We looked up what a watershed is and how to keep it healthy. Then we went over my notes on what each of us can do during the week to help our ecosystem...” I pause, adding a few last notes so I won’t forget.

“And we now know what seagrass is and how it makes oxygen among other things.”

“What have you got left to do to finish your e-book?” Thomas asks.

“I need to make a cover. Thanks to your suggestion, I can do that through www.picmonkey.com. I can have a professional one done later. I need to find some pictures showing plastic in the water and on beaches. And then I need to put my notes together.”

“How long do you think it will take you to get it done?” Thomas asks.

“I think about two hours at the most,” I say. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I was thinking if you can get it done by 7:00 tomorrow evening, you could come over and watch a movie with me to celebrate finishing the project.”

I wonder what Thomas has in mind. As the memory of Thomas kissing me comes back to me I can feel my face get hot. Steven and Grandma exchange glances as if to say *I told you so*. I ignore them.

“My grandma just got here. I’m not sure I should be leaving to go over—”

“Nonsense, Tina. You have both worked hard on this project. Go have fun. I’m staying for an entire month. We have lots of time to talk,” Grandma says.

Steven keeps looking back and forth between us with a silly grin on his face. I ignore him, too.

“Great, Thomas. I’ll be at your house by 7:30 at the latest,” I reply, secretly pleased that he has asked me.

Time to sign off, Dear Diary. I’ve been writing for the last thirty minutes. I can hear Grandma talking to Mom as they go down the stairs. I want to spend some time with her before I get ready for school—especially since I have plans with Thomas tonight!

Chapter 9

I Did It for Brian

“All good men and women must take responsibility to create legacies that will take the next generation to a level we could only imagine.”

– Jim Rohn

Thursday, March 10, 2016

Noon

Dear Diary,

I woke up with sunshine streaming through my window this morning. It bathed me in warmth. What a great way to start the day! I cannot believe how happy I am. So much is going on. I'm in the school cafeteria right now. It is crazy busy at lunch time two days before March break. Everyone is looking forward to having time off.

I am, too, but so much has been going on that I wanted to jot down what has happened so far today. I'm tucked away in my favorite spot behind a pillar to steal a few moments of alone time so I can write. It all started when I woke up a few hours ago:

I jump out of bed and bound down the stairs, taking two at a time. I feel like I'm on top of the world. Mom and Grandma are in the kitchen eating steaming hot bowls of oatmeal drizzled with organic honey and covered with almond milk. The smell of freshly brewed True North Blond roast coffee from Starbuck lingers in the air. It is my mom's favorite. Grandma is having lemon tea, which is also my favorite. They look up as I bounce into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Tina,” Mom says. “You look like you have lots of energy today.”

“Yes, I do!” I reply.

“Why do you think that is?” Grandma asks.

“It’s because you’re here, Grandma!” I say as I throw my arms around her and give her a hug. “And I’m going to finish my project today. And I slept like a log last night. I feel great!”

“Wow! If I could bottle your energy, Tina, I could light up the world.” Grandma laughs.

“Tina is never short of energy. Isn’t that right, darling?” Mom states.

“That’s right!” I exclaim.

Steven walks into the kitchen smelling like Irish Spring soap after his shower. His hair is on a mission to spike even though it’s still damp.

“Hi, everybody,” he says as he opens the fridge and takes out the orange juice. He turns and looks at me. His eyes light up.

“Tina, you look happy today.”

“I am! I slept great! In two days, we’re on March break—and my project is almost finished.”

“When you put it that way, I’d be happy, too,” Steven says.

“And Grandma is here. Don’t forget that.”

“How can I forget? She is sitting right here.” Steven laughs. “Does anyone else want some orange juice?” he asks as he pours himself a glass.

“None for me thanks,” Grandma says.

“I’m okay, thanks,” I reply.

“I’ve got coffee, thanks, Steven. Do you two want some oatmeal before school?” Mom asks.

“Yes, please,” Steven and I say together.

She dishes out blistering hot oatmeal into Mikasa Belle Terre cereal bowls and places them in front of us.

“Help yourself to honey and almond milk,” Mom says.

“Tina, I found a site last night that has a schematic to build a device to recycle plastic,” Steven says as he digs into his oatmeal.

“Really?” I reply as Mom puts a lemon tea in front of me. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Yes, the schematic is a free download. The guy who has the site says anyone around the world can start a business recycling plastic and turning it into things that they might make a living at.”

“What a great idea!” Grandma says.

“He says he can’t do it alone.” Steven’s words are a little muffled around his oatmeal. “He asks everyone to share his site and the free download.”

“Can I see the link?” I ask.

“Give me a minute to get my laptop and find the link,” Steven says, wiping his mouth. “May I be excused to get my laptop, Mom?”

“Yes, you may be excused, Steven. I would like to see the link as well,” Mom replies.

Steven races out of the kitchen and comes back a few moments later with his laptop. He opens it and types something quickly. “Okay, here is the link.” He turns the screen to show us.

<http://preciousplastic.com/>

As we watch the video presentation, we can’t help exchanging looks.

“What a great idea!” comments Mom. “He even gives ideas on what you can make with the recycled plastic.”

“I’m so happy that so many people are aware of the need to do something about plastic,” I say. “It gives me hope.”

“And so it should, Tina,” Mom replies. “People are essentially good. They simply need to be aware of what needs to be done.”

“Are you putting your e-book together today?” Steven asks.

“I wrote out a simple script and found someone on www.fiverr.com. She is putting together an animation using the script,” I reply. “I thought this would be faster.”

“What does your script say?” Grandma asks.

“Well, the project is called *Teens Needed to Save the Ocean* by Tina Annabelle Armstrong.” I feel my cheeks heat, but I’m not sure if it’s pride or embarrassment.

“Sounds like a good title,” Steven says.

I smile and continue, “So, I wrote about all the stuff we learned. Society is full of plastic—in rivers, lakes and oceans. Fish, turtles and whales are ingesting it—”

“I’m so glad I’m not a fish,” Steven interjects as he takes a sip of orange juice.

“—and marine life and the ocean are dying.”

“Did you mention that Thomas and I helped you with the research?” Steven asks.

“Not specifically. I did say that *we* are asking teens to get involved. If anyone asks why I say ‘we,’ then I’ll tell my class that you two helped.”

Grandma and Mom and Steven look at each other and smile.

“In the animation, I say that teens are great networkers and computer-savvy.”

“You got that right!” Steven exclaims proudly.

“I wanted to make sure to emphasize that the ocean needs our help. Teens give the world hope by helping to change current policy on how plastic is used.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we didn’t rely on plastic?!” Grandma says.

“Did you mention anything else, Tina?” Mom asks as she stands up to refill her coffee cup.

“I asked that each community stop putting plastic in the water and help get plastic out of the water.”

“What about reducing the amount of plastic people use every day?” Grandma asks.

“Oh yeah, I mentioned that, and then I asked teens to conserve water and take short showers.”

“If Thomas were here, he would say to boycott products with microbeads in them,” Steven pipes up. “I think microbeads really freaked him out.”

“I think you’re right,” I reply.

“Is there anything else?” Grandma asks as she sips her tea.

“Just stuff we’ve already covered, like clean up beaches and water in your community, stop polluting and help heal the ocean.”

“What about links to social media?” Steven says.

“I put a link to my Facebook page called *Healing the Ecosystem*. They can message me on Facebook.”

“What is it again?” Steven asks. “I forgot to ‘like’ it.”

“Here,” I answer, leaning over to type for him:

<https://www.facebook.com/Helping-the-Ecosystem-1044556268932837/?ref=bookmarks>

“It sounds like you are organized, dear.”

I flash Grandma a grateful smile. “I’m mostly organized. I just have to compile my notes.” My smile grows as I realize how close I am to completing this project.

“What you describe is not an e-book, Tina,” Steven says as he finishes his oatmeal.

“You’re right, Steven. My presentation will be the animation with me reading my notes as well.”

“Are you still going to blast an e-book around the world?” Steven asks.

“Yes, I’ve decided to ask an expert at www.Blurb.com to help me put the book together. Then I’ll know it’s done right.”

“You sound like you have given this some thought,” Grandma observes.

“Haven’t you and Mom always said to follow your heart?” I reply.

They both nod, looking at me with curiosity.

“Well, my heart says that by making this book the best it can be I’ll get an amazing response to it.”

“There is no doubt it will get a great response,” Mom says. “Teens need to know how much we value their expertise and skills.”

“I’m going to dedicate the e-book to Brian,” I say with absolute resolve, knowing it feels right.

“Oh, honey, what a lovely thing to do.” Mom places her hand over her heart.

Steven looks at me with such love in his eyes it floors me. He bolts out of his chair and gives me a hug. “I love you, Tina.”

“I thought you weren’t into that mushy stuff,” I reply, surprised.

“I must be having a nervous breakdown.” He laughs, and I hug him back.

Grandma simply says, “Wonderful, darling.”

Mom suddenly looks at the clock and says, “Tina, look at the time! You might want to rush and have a shower if you want to catch the bus on time.”

“I’m on it. See you later!” I exclaim as I dash from the kitchen and make a beeline for the shower.

I get ready in record time. I even have five minutes to spare before the school bus arrives.

I cannot believe the change in the weather. It is so warm out today. Thomas is already waiting at the bus stop. His checkered jacket is open, and he doesn’t have a hat on. His dark hair curls at the tips where it touches his shoulder. He has earbuds in his ears, listening to his iPod. When he sees me, he comes and stands beside me. He takes his earbuds out of his ears and turns off his iPod. I smile at him.

“Hi, Tina. How are you?”

“I’m great,” I reply. “Are you feeling better today? Is your tooth bothering you?”

“My jaw is still a bit sensitive,” Thomas says. “My tooth doesn’t hurt. I’m pretty much back to normal.”

Before I can respond, he says, “Do you have any adverse effects from the chili?” His sly grin curls his lips.

“Thomas, I’m not going to talk to you about farting! Please stop it!” I chuckle as my face turns red.

“Let’s see if I know any more fart jokes.” He pauses, pondering this. “Yes! I know one.”

“Stop! Listen to me. I don’t want to hear any more fart jokes. Got it? Not one,” I say, desperately trying not to laugh.

“Why don’t farts graduate from high school, Tina?”

“I don’t know,” I groan, thinking he is hopelessly cute, kind—and tells terrible jokes.

“Why don’t farts graduate from high school, Thomas?”

“They always end up getting expelled.” He throws back his head and laughs. “Get it? They get expelled?”

“I get it. It’s not that funny,” I say, laughing. “On second thought, it’s so bad I can’t help but laugh. As they say, ‘Don’t quit your day job.’” Thomas grins broadly as I glance at the ground, shaking my head.

“I don’t have a day job, Tina. I’m still in high school. I just love making you laugh.”

“I love when you make me laugh, too,” I reply, grabbing his hand and squeezing it. I wonder if he knows how much I like him. He turns to me with a piercing, soul-searching look that curls my toes.

“What is it?”

“Are you still coming over tonight?” he asks.

“Yes, I’m ninety-nine per cent sure. I just have to organize my notes and get the animation back from www.fiverr.com.”

“Great, because there is something I want to ask you.”

“Okay....” Butterflies stage a riot in the pit of my stomach. “Can you give me a hint about what you want to talk about?”

“Let’s just say it’s personal.”

Now my curiosity has gone through the roof. I’m not sure I can wait all day to find out what he wants to talk about. I’ll just play it cool.

“No problem, Thomas. You can tell me anything.”

He nods as we file on to the school bus. Thomas sits beside me, except he takes up three-quarters of the seat, and I’m squashed against the window like a pancake. He doesn’t seem to notice. I feel small compared to him.

“Tina, once your project is done and you’re ready to blast it around the world, I want to help you.”

“Actually, the presentation will be an animation that I am getting done on www.fiverr.com and me reading my notes to the class.”

“Are you still going to get the project formatted into an e-book?” Thomas asks as he turns to look at me.

“Yes, I’m going to ask a professional at www.Blurb.com to help me. I would have done it for this project but I ran out of time.”

“Yeah, a whole e-book would be a lot to get done in a week.”

“I’ve decided this book will be a legacy that I leave for Brian. I’m dedicating the book to him.”

“That is wonderful, Tina.”

“When I think about it, I realize that I did it for Brian. And doing this project has finally given me a sense of peace.”

“I believe you,” Thomas says softly.

“If Brian were still alive, he would have done the same thing.”

“I agree.”

I reach over and hold Thomas’s hand. He smiles at me. We remain silent the rest of the ride to school.

The bell just ran, signifying the end of lunch period. I better sign off until later, Dear Diary.

#

10:00 PM

Dear Diary,

Here I am again! The day is coming to an end. I'm curled up in the middle of my bed, feeling happy. I'm in my comfy clothes, still warm from my bath. My feet are wrapped up in fuzzy fuchsia socks, and I am wrapped up in Grandma's quilt. I feel peaceful, as though everything is right with the world. Before I go to sleep, I want to finish my diary entry for today—especially what happened tonight! Back to this morning...

When Thomas and I get off of the bus, I'm not sure how he'll act with me, in front of his friends. But he doesn't seem shy at all to walk into the school holding my hand. It just feels right. I'm thinking he must feel the same way about me as I do about him.

"Tina, I'll see you around 7:30 tonight. Think about what movie you want to watch. We'll make popcorn!"

"If you are making popcorn, I want melted butter on it!" I exclaim.

"Is there any other kind?" He grins as he leans towards me and gives me a fleeting kiss.

He smiles at my shocked expression and tells me, "My dad is picking me up after school to go to the gym, so I won't be on the bus. Email me if you can't make it tonight. Okay?"

I can't seem to get my mouth to work, so I simply nod.

He looks at me intently as though he's memorizing my face. "Have a good day. I'll see you later." Then he turns and walks down the hall.

I can't wait to see him tonight! I wonder if he is going to ask me out. My stomach does somersaults just thinking of it. I realize that I feel content.

In science class, my teacher says there might not be enough time for everyone to present their science project tomorrow. I'm hoping that I'm one of the people chosen to present. I don't

want to be worrying about it during March break. Apart from this announcement, the day is uneventful. It seems to drag on forever.

I'm off the bus and in the house by 3:30 PM.

"I'm home! What smells so good?" I announce when I come through the door.

"Tina, I'm in the kitchen," Grandma calls out.

As I enter the kitchen, I see Grandma wearing Mom's apron with the roses on it. She is bending over the oven, taking out a tray of perfectly round chocolate chip cookies. The oven mitts look gigantic on her tiny hands.

"Grandma, are those *your* homemade chocolate chip cookies?" I ask as my mouth starts to water.

"Yes, they are, dear."

"They smell good enough to eat."

"I certainly hope so." She laughs.

I wonder if she'll offer me one before supper. Mom is kind of picky about us eating dessert before our meal.

"What are we having for supper? I'm starving," I ask.

"Your Mom made a huge pot of homemade vegetable soup. She said she is making grilled cheese sandwiches to go with it."

"Where is she, by the way?"

"She went to the grocery store to pick up some milk," Grandma answers. "I didn't go with her because I was in the middle of making these cookies."

"Okay, when supper is ready, can you let me know? I have to organize my notes for my science project."

“Do you want a cookie to tide you over until supper?” Grandma asks. “It will be our secret.”

“I would love one. Can I have one for Steven, too? Is he upstairs?”

“Of course you may give one to Steven. I’m sure your mother won’t mind if you eat one cookie before supper.”

I’m not so sure about this.

The cookies are warm and soft, and the chocolate is melted. I carefully put two cookies on a plate and sprint upstairs. I glance in Steven’s room. He is on Skype talking to one of his classmates about a science project! I’ll ask him about it later.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I say. “Do you want one of Grandma’s chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven?”

“Absolutely!” he says. “Thanks.”

His classmate on Skype moans and says he wishes he could have one, too. “Sorry, no can do,” Steven replies apologetically.

I continue on to my room and settle on my window seat. I put the cookie beside me to cool as I open my laptop and start to organize my notes. I give myself a reminder to send thank-you emails to all the organizations that helped me with my project. It takes me exactly two hours to compile and organize my notes.

I print them. Then I stand in front of my mirror and imagine I’m giving the presentation in front of my class. I feel confident I’m prepared for tomorrow—and fortunate that the rest of my homework was completed at school.

“Supper is ready!” Mom calls upstairs. Steven and I run downstairs.

“It smells wonderful, Mom,” Steven says.

The four of us dig into gooey grilled cheese sandwiches and steaming hot bowls of chunky homemade vegetable soup.

By the time I finish helping clean up the dishes, it is 7:15 PM. I send Thomas an email saying that I’ll be over in fifteen minutes.

Thomas, I just finished supper. I left room for popcorn. I’ll see you in fifteen minutes. You decide on the movie. –Tina.

As I put on my coat and boots, Grandma comes over and hugs me.

“It is so nice to see you happy, Tina,” she says. “I’ll have to come and visit more often. You are growing up so fast.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay for the evening? I can change my plans. I can watch a movie with Thomas another time.”

“Nonsense, Tina. Go have fun. You’ve earned it. We’ll have plenty of time to visit.”

I kiss her goodbye. As I step on the stairs, I’m thankful they aren’t slippery. I walk the short distance to Thomas’s house, wondering what he wants to talk to me about.

Before I can ring the doorbell, the door flies open.

“You’re here!” Thomas exclaims.

“Weren’t you expecting me?” I ask, puzzled.

“Of course. It is just that it feels like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“What do you mean? You saw me on the bus this morning,” I reply, thinking that Thomas is acting a bit odd.

He smiles and grabs my hand. “Come in. I just made popcorn a minute ago. Let’s eat it while it is hot.”

“Okay, okay. Let me at least take my coat off and my boots. Boy, you’re full of energy. What is going on?” I ask, laughing.

“I’m just happy.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Mom is reading in the den, and Dad is working in his office. They told me to say ‘hi’ to you. I told them we’re watching a movie downstairs on Netflix.”

“What movie did you pick?”

“I checked what movies are streaming and picked *Groundhog Day*. Have you ever seen it?”

“No. What’s it about?”

“You’re in for a treat!” Thomas grins, looking proud of himself—and incredibly handsome. “It’s an older movie, made in 1993. It stars Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. Bill Murray plays a weather man who finds himself living the same day over and over again.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anything like that,” I comment, thinking I wouldn’t mind reliving those blizzard days with Thomas over and over.

“It’s really funny,” he answers. “I’ve seen it only once, but I couldn’t stop laughing. I thought you might like it.”

“Let’s go watch it then before the popcorn cools!”

We go down in the basement, which looks immaculate. The cat is nowhere to be seen.

Lying on the coffee table is Thomas’s laptop and a single red rose.

“Why do you have a red rose beside your laptop?” I ask curiously. Thomas is glowing with happiness. His smile is as wide as the ocean. (A pun if I ever heard one! Well, after all, it is my diary. I can write whatever I want.)

“Tina, I got the rose for you in celebration of completing your science project.”

“Wow, Thomas, that is so ... romantic.”

“Remember I said I wanted to talk about something personal?” he asks.

“Yes, I remember.” I realize I’m holding my breath as I reply.

He takes my hands and looks me straight in the eye. My hands feel delicate in his. The warmth of his hands travels up my arms and straight into my heart.

“Tina, I’m asking you to be my girlfriend. I think you are amazing.”

My mouth works, but nothing comes out. I can feel my eyes start to water. I nod and hope I can find my tongue. I’m overwhelmed with happiness.

“Does that mean, yes, you’ll be my girlfriend?” His eyes light up like diamonds.

“Yes. I think you’re amazing, too.”

“But will you be my girlfriend?” he persists.

“Yes, yes, I’ll be your girlfriend!”

He picks me up and twirls me around he is so happy. When he puts me down, he hands me the rose.

“This is yours.”

“Thanks, Thomas. I’ll never forget this. I didn’t realize you were so romantic,” I reply as I look at him, my eyes teasing.

“My mom says Dad gave her a single red rose when he asked her out. I wanted this moment to be special.”

“It is!” I throw my arms round him and hug him with all my strength.

“You are pretty strong for such a slim person,” Thomas says.

“I’m small but mighty, just like my grandma!”

“I have no doubt, no doubt at all.”

We cuddle on the sofa and watch the movie. I feel wonderful.

Today is perfect. My project is done. I can feel Brian smiling, wherever he is. And Thomas has asked me to be his girlfriend. The only thing that could possibly make this day better is if the e-book goes viral and the ocean is restored to complete health. I have total faith in *teen power!*

On that note, Dear Diary, I am signing off.

END

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