Prologue

I don’t know exactly how I landed a short while ago at the tide’s edge on this island, with its blue rocks, singing sea grasses, and powdered sand. My memory’s still a little fuzzy. I suspect I had help. I recall feeling the water propelling me as if I were riding atop a rocket. And I still feel the firm imprint of unseen hands guiding me.

Ah, yes, a giant wall of water was about to engulf me. Then everything went black. I remember that part now. I hope I remember the rest soon.

Older memories are more intact. I know who I am: Ell Gossamer, in her twentieth year of life. I know I put on this wetsuit, which I’m now peeling off, to shield me from the icy river that brought me from home to the sea and then to here…wherever here is.

I know what I’ve concealed inside the wetsuit: a family heirloom, Dreams of Song Times. I’m counting on this book to help me understand what happens next.

I’ll take a moment now to feel the hot sun on my naked skin, the color of walnuts, someone once told me. Actually, my skin looks more like the blue-gray of the ocean, sleek and smooth. The wind makes the grasses sing, a soft handful of notes gliding up and down a scale. The island is so small I can see the other shore. A speck of land surrounded only by water as far as the eye can see.

Left so completely alone, shouldn’t I be terrified? I’m not. I suspect this isn’t a permanent situation. Change is sweeping in with the tide. This excites me, but I worry that my future could erase my past. I’m not ready to lose the memories of those I’ve loved and lost—their smiles, their scents, the feel of their skin against mine.

Ahr and Per. Kay. Val. Bibi. There’s even a tiny corner of my heart reserved for Angel.

If no one objects, I’d like to dwell on the past for just a bit longer.

I’m not hungry or cold, just gloriously naked, sitting on a blue rock. As night falls, I’m committed to reminiscing until my heart aches. Up in the night sky, my secret constellation, Lyk, winks at me.

I arrived at this place, and at this moment in time, because of secrets.

Secrets have defined me for so long, I am eager to learn who I am without all the baggage. My parents swaddled me from infancy in secrets, crooning lullabies in a strange tongue they never taught me. They tutored me to remember who I am, yet sent me out into the world forbidden to speak my truth.

They were trying to protect me, even if they made a mess of it. I understand that now. I have forgiven them.

I also understand that when you live your whole life as a secret, falling in love will break your heart.

I came of age only once I began telling the truth. And the truth is that I am a mermaid, possibly the last of my kind. And possibly also a carrier of deep and ancient magic, long forgotten and ripe for rediscovery. Love anchors me to the past, but magic may open the door to my future. I will know soon enough.
Chapter One

At the age of eleven, in Mrs. Hopper’s fifth grade class at Blyler Elementary School just north of Baltimore, I figured out why I didn’t have a best friend—or any friends, for that matter.

Our last science unit before Christmas break was about animals and cultures that have gone extinct or were well on the way to disappearing forever. Mrs. Hopper showed us many slides of endangered animals, from the spotted turtle to the bald eagle, to polar bears.

“Oh, look at the monk seal!” Carla, our class alpha-girl, exclaimed. “He looks so sad, lying there on the beach. Like he’s gonna cry. This is so unfair!”

“That poor little mouse lemur and his big shiny eyes,” said Ashley, Carla’s number two. “I want one! If I had a pet lemur, Mrs. Hopper, I could save it!”

Carla and Ashley were fake-nice to me when they weren’t ignoring me completely. But I felt a surge of solidarity because yes, the idea that these animals wouldn’t be around much longer, like, poof!, they’re gone tomorrow, was horrifying. If these really cute animals could vanish from the planet, then maybe other creatures, even mermaids like me and my parents, could also disappear at some point.

After Mrs. Hopper showed us a bunch of doomed animals, she moved on to a new slide of a human being. Had she read my mind? I squirmed in my seat as the screen filled with a painting of a light-brown-skinned woman with feathers in her hair, red paint around her eyes, bright tattoos on her arm, and several necklaces that looked like they were made from shells and beads. Her expression was serious. At least, she wasn’t smiling.

Our teacher paused and pointed to the portrait. “Do you know that many, many different kinds of people have also become extinct?”

Wait, what? This really happens?

A murmur swept through the classroom. Many of us shifted slightly in our seats, even boys like Jake and Marc, who always act super-cool about everything.

“Dozens of Native American tribes, for instance,” Mrs. Hopper continued, “no longer exist at all. For example, this woman’s tribe, the Timucua, lived in Northern Florida for thousands of years. In the fourteen-hundreds, there were around 200,000 of them living in over five hundred villages. That’s more than a third the size of Baltimore’s current population. Three hundred years later, only a single Timucuan Indian was left alive. And he was the last one. Forever. Now,” she said, walking up and down the aisles between our desks, “what do you think happened to them all?”

Nobody bothered to raise hands.

“Their enemies killed them!”

“They couldn’t get enough to eat, like the polar bears!”

“Hurricanes!”

“Well, the truth is even harder to hear,” Mrs. Hopper said. “Most of them died from diseases they caught from the Spanish settlers who came looking for gold and wanted to take the natives’ land. The Timucuans’ bodies couldn’t protect them from foreign germs and viruses that the Spanish brought with them. You all got shots as little kids, right? Those shots protect you from catching a disease that could make you very sick. Of course, good medicine didn’t exist back then.”
I knew all about getting shots. Seeing Dr. Cope for my school shots and boosters was a big deal. My parents told Dr. Cope we were mermaids and made him swear he wouldn’t tell anybody else or show anybody our medical records. They told me the doctor was the only one outside our little family who knew our secret. I didn’t see what the big deal was. But my parents were major worriers. Drove me crazy, at the time.

Mrs. Hopper was still talking about why the Timucuans were wiped out.

“Many of them were also enslaved,” she said. “And over the years, lots of Timucuan families tried running away to safer parts of Florida and Georgia, and even Cuba. But they didn’t make it.”

I didn’t understand how people could treat other people the way these Native Americans had been treated. It was so unfair. And mean.

“Mrs. Hopper,” I said loudly.

“Yes, Ell. Question?”

“Why didn’t anybody try and save the Indians? Wasn’t anybody on their side? Couldn’t some group of people, like, fight for them instead of against them? Did the Spanish people know the Indians would get sick?”

“Great questions, Ell.”

“They were conquered,” Jake said as if he were stating an obvious fact. “You win some, you lose some.”

I really hated Jake in that moment.

Mrs. Hopper said we had to move on because there was still a lot to cover. I wanted to cover my ears, but I couldn’t do that. Animals going extinct was bad enough, but humans getting wiped out all over the place was even worse, and Mrs. Hopper didn’t mention anybody who was trying to stop it.

She pulled up a new slide. I thought it was a drawing by someone who couldn’t draw. On the left side of the drawing, a slender adult who could have been male or female since they wore loose clothing, stood ankle-deep in waves at the edge of an ocean. On the right side, several other adults stood on dry land. The adult by the ocean handed a basket to the others.

“What’s in the basket?” asked one of the other girls. “Not kittens, right? Kittens aren’t endangered, are they?”


“A mermaid?” said Carla. “A real mermaid? No way. That’s gotta be a mistake, Mrs. Hopper.”

Mrs. Hopper, Mrs. Hopper! I wanted to cry out. I could tell the class all about mermaids. Or some things, anyway. I’m the only one here who can.

I had to clamp my hand on my mouth to stop from calling out. Rule Number One at home: Don’t tell anyone you’re a mermaid. Ever. Rule Number Two at home: See Rule Number One.

I’m not kidding. My parents told me all the time that if I shared our secret with anybody besides Dr. Cope, VERY BAD THINGS might happen. They refused to tell me what the bad things could be. I lay awake in bed many nights worrying about the disasters that might befall me, or all three of us. And I would get so mad because why should bad things happen to any of us if we didn’t do anything wrong? After today’s lesson, I would add to my list the possibility of vanishing into thin air, which now seemed like a real thing.
“That mermaid doesn’t have a tail,” said Marc, seated directly in front of me. He leaned across to Evan and whispered so Mrs. Hopper wouldn’t hear, though I did. “She doesn’t have any boobs, either.”

Marc and Evan snorted with laughter.

“Does anyone know how mermaids are classified?” Mrs. Hooper asked.

“Fish,” someone called out.

“Mermaids aren’t fish,” I cried before I could stop myself.

All eyes in the class turned on me. My heart jumped to a gallop. I would not say another word. Not one word. My parents would never hear about this. Besides, I told the truth, that’s all. Why should that be a problem? It’s hard enough keeping a big secret, but I didn’t want to be a liar, like some of the girls in this class who stuff their training bras and pretend they don’t.

Mrs. Hopper smiled. “Ell is right.” Her gaze shifted from me and I slumped in my seat.

“Mermaids are believed to be descended from aquatic cetaceans—marine mammals,” she said. “We know what mammals are, don’t we?”

“That means they have their babies live,” Ashley said.

Mrs. Hooper smiled. “ Exactly. Their lungs were a little different than ours. Like other marine mammals, their lungs collapsed in deep water, so they didn’t get sick.”

Is that true? Why have my parents never told me this? We swim in Cummings Pond every summer, and they never said anything about my lungs collapsing. That sounds dangerous.

Mrs. Hopper scanned the class. “Who here has ever seen a mermaid?”

“Well, Ariel, right?” Ashley looked to Carla for confirmation.

“I mean a real mermaid,” Mrs. Hooper said. “You haven’t, of course. Scientists tell us they don’t believe anyone alive today has seen a real mermaid.”

I’m here. I’m right here. What if…No. I pinch the skin on the back of my hand until it hurts, so all I can think about is the pain.

“And guess what?” the teacher continued. “It’s a big mystery! Nobody knows where they all went!”

“Cause they’re extinct!” several kids cried out at once.

“Or maybe they’re hiding,” said Marcy, the quietest member of Carla’s little gang. I wished I could go up to her later and ask, Why do mermaids need to hide, Marcy, huh? What do you think they’re afraid of? I knew I couldn’t do that.

“Maybe,” Mrs. Hopper said. “Look at this photograph from the late eighteen-hundreds.” She put up a grainy black-and-silver picture of a tiny figure shot from a great distance, who appears to be walking into the ocean. “The original photo hangs in the Museum of Natural History in New York. On the back of the photo, the photographer wrote that this is a mermaid at the end of its life, returning to the ocean to die.”

A silence fell on the room. The mermaid in the picture, from what I could see, looked like any of us. Like a person. Like me. I started pinching my skin again.

“Of course, we don’t know for sure if that’s true. But so much has been written about mermaids over many centuries, it’s hard to know what’s true. Remember the Timucua? The Spaniards said they were over seven feet tall and were cannibals.”

“You mean, they ate people?” Jake called out in disgust. Loud choruses of “Ewww.”
“They’re myths, you see,” Mrs. Hopper said. “Stories people made up about them, or else they’re really exaggerating. Mermaids are supposed to be able to talk to whales and tell the future. Do you think that’s true?”

Is it?!

I pressed my hands to my flaming cheeks. If only I had Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak, I could vanish instantly—not forever like some Native Americans, but until everybody stopped talking about mermaids.

I squeezed my eyes shut, imagining I had already disappeared.

“Okay!” Mrs. Hopper said, clapping. “You’ve asked really great questions today, class, and since we’re so close to winter break, I have a treat that fits with our unit—sort of.”

She pressed buttons on the laptop projecting the slides and the screen turned white. “We’re going to watch, or for some of you I should say, re-watch The Little Mermaid.”

The room erupted in cheers. Yesss! Moveeee!

“Okay, settle down. I want you to take notes while you’re watching. Look for the all the objects and ideas about Ariel, King Triton, and her undersea world that might be myths. So here we go.” Mrs. Hopper pressed ‘play’ and turned out the classroom lights.

I spent the first ten minutes of the movie trying to decide whether to tell my parents later that I finally watched The Little Mermaid. They’d never let me watch it before, and when I’d asked why, they said the story and the characters were disrespectful. Disney movies were famous, they said, for celebrating stereotypes. That engendered a short conversation about the definition of stereotypes. After all that, they still said they didn’t want me to see it and I still didn’t understand why.

Too late now. As the movie went on, I could not understand how my parents could think this was a big deal. I loved the song about kissing the girl. And the line: “Life under the sea is better than anything they got up there.” Maybe mermaids used to feel that way? What if some mermaids still lived underwater and didn’t tell anybody? That would be sort of cool. I wish I could tell somebody. Ariel was smart and brave. Was she a mermaid? Nah. Just a cartoon. No way a cartoon could hurt me. I was beginning to think my parents had some pretty big hang-ups.

When the movie was over and we all headed to the cafeteria for lunch, I caught up to Carla, Ashley, Marcy, and Pilar. Why couldn’t they be my friends? We all felt sorry for the lemurs and the polar bears. We had stuff like that in common.

I did a little shimmy and launched into the portion of the lyrics I’d already memorized. “Under the sea, darlin’ it’s better, down where it’s wetter, take it from me.”

The girls burst out laughing. We picked up trays and got in line for bright orange mac and cheese.

“TLM is a classic, right?” Carla said. The other girls grinned and nodded. “I’ve seen it, like, sixteen times. How many times have you seen it, Ell?”

“Um, oh, I lost track. Like, so many.”

“I watched it when I was three,” Ashley said. “My parents said I danced around the living room exactly like a baby mermaid.” How would they know?

“Mermaids are cool, right?” I said. I didn’t say I was cool, but allowed myself to think it.

“Where did they all go?” Pilar asked.

“Oh, they’re out there, somewhere,” Carla said as if she had inside information.

“You think?” I said. This was sort of the first real conversation Carla and I had ever had. I thought we were getting into a good groove.
“I’d make an excellent mermaid, wouldn’t it?” Carla said, turning away from me and toward her posse for validation.

“When I have boobs, I’m gonna wear a purple shell bikini top like Ariel’s,” Ashley added.

“Totally,” Marcy said.

“It’s too bad, Ell,” Carla said, turning around again as we headed toward the tables. Was I going to sit with Carla and Ashley? Really? Was that about to happen?

“What’s too bad?”

“You can’t be a mermaid.”

I nearly dropped my tray. The bowl of macaroni slid right to the edge.

“What?” I croaked.

“Your skin isn’t the right tone,” Carla said matter-of-factly. “It’s nice ‘n all, your skin. Sort of walnutty. But mermaids are really white. Like Ariel. So, you know.”

“Pocahontas couldn’t be a mermaid, either,” Ashley chimed in. “But she’s kind of like a princess, anyway, so, there’s that.”

“You’re still awesome, Ell,” Marcy said, so softly I doubt the others even heard.

I don’t remember what I said to them after that, if anything. I do remember forcing a smile and shaking all over. I don’t think they noticed the shaking. Then I walked away, blowing my chance to sit with the popular girls at least once.