

Chapter 1 - Dreams

Who is this man I'm about to reach and then vanishes?

Sometimes, the one thing you desperately want is the one thing that keeps slipping away. Then you try harder, Erin thinks to herself as she closes her eyes.

All she can hear is her fast breathing, but she won't stop running through the endless corridors, her bare feet stamping hard on the marbled floor. A bright, beckoning light flashes in the distance, and she accelerates even more. Soon she finds herself at the shore of a multicoloured ocean, separating her from a sky-piercing tower. Flickering sunbeams break through the far horizon, reflecting on the thin edges of the glassy structure. A sudden gust of wind lifts her body and spins it over the ocean, her long waving hair wrapping tightly around her neck. She cries out loud until her hurting throat makes her cough. She kicks and flutters, trying to find

her balance, but ends up spinning even faster.

Through her blurred vision, she discerns the dashing silhouette of a golden-uniformed soldier standing in front of the tower. She anxiously extends her arms in a vain attempt to reach him while he speaks to her softly, as if oblivious to her torment.

A rising fog obscures his face, but his enigmatic presence and low soothing voice lure her. She soon forgets about her fears. Just when she thinks he's within reach, he disappears behind a dark cloud, his voice fading into a whimper. Suddenly, a blunt blow to her back pushes her harshly into the water. She's sinking fast into the deep black ocean, her body still spinning out of control, faster and faster.

She tries hard to open her eyes, the pressure on her shut eyelids working against her willpower. Still, she keeps trying. At last, the light breaks through her contracting pupils. The impatient figure standing in front of her makes her jump and sit up straight. She buries her head in her hands, as she realises she is only in her bedroom. It was a dream, the same kind of dream that keeps haunting her. *Who is this man I'm about to reach and then vanishes?*

"It's time to get up, you lazy girl," shouts the plump woman, her unkempt curly hair bouncing as she pulls the sheets away and noisily opens the curtains.

"Sure," Erin mumbles. She nearly falls over as she rushes to the bathroom door across the aisle.

Mornings are the least favourite part of Erin's day, especially when she oversleeps and her adoptive mother, Pat Lobart, has to wake her up.

The woman shakes her head, frowning in disapproval. "Hurry up, or you'll be late," Mrs Lobart shouts, continuing to shake her head as she leaves the room.

Erin washes her face and combs her long, sun-streaked hair while thinking about her dream. A swirl of emotions makes her body shiver. She relives the hopelessness and fear. But it's the alluring image of the unreachable soldier that makes her heart flip. "It's all in my imagination," she whispers as she ties her long hair in a ponytail.

She pulls down the blue overalls hanging from the wall and slides them up her body, giving a final glance in the mirror. "That will do for today," she says to herself.

As she enters the kitchen, Mrs Lobart still has a bad temper. "Erin, you'll be such a bad example to the others in the tuna farm ... arriving late."

"But I'm on time," she protests.

"As always, at the last minute," Mrs Lobart snaps as if she doesn't want to hear any more excuses.

Erin grabs a piece of bread and takes a sip from her black coffee mug before running out the back door. Blazer, her smooth fox terrier, runs joyfully towards her, jumping on her chest with his two front paws. She strokes his soft, white and tan coat while sharing the rest of her bread with the overexcited dog. She takes a deep breath, looking towards the winding country road that will take her to the tuna farm. The weather is good today, with

no bulging clouds or dense mist covering the otherwise perfectly blue sky. She can even see the flocks of seagulls circling over the steel suspension bridge joining the island to the tuna farm's control tower.

The wind brings the smell of the salty sea and the shrieking calls of the agitated birds. Erin looks at her watch. She still has a few minutes to spare before her shifts start. *Shall I go running or get my horse?* She ponders while looking towards the stables.

"Erin." Mrs Lobart's stern call makes her jolt. She jumps over the fence and onto the footpath. "Ah, Erin ... Happy birthday! Come back early today ... will you?" She hears Mrs Lobart's fading voice as she runs towards the coast.

All the while, she cannot stop thinking about the mysterious man in her dreams, wondering why he keeps turning up ever more frequently, night after night.

Chapter 2 - **The Island**

Everyone knows she's smart, out-of-the-ordinary smart.

The Lobart family live on the remote island of Tinian, part of Mariana's archipelago in the Pacific Ocean. Erin's adoptive parents, Albert and Patricia Lobart, brought her to live on the island when she was eleven years old. The family moved from LA (Los Angeles, California) when Albert took over the running of the tuna farm.

Anyone on the island can tell you that Erin is a one-of-a-kind girl. Her dreamy gaze and her aloof demeanour are as irritating as self-evident. She prefers to stay out swimming alone in the open ocean or horse riding by its shores, watching the night sky, or playing with her pet dog. Still, despite spending most of her time in outdoor activities, occasionally looking at her school notes, she always comes top of her class. Everyone knows she's smart, out-of-the-ordinary smart. But most of those who admire her are also dismayed at her unruly nature. Behind her delicate, girlish appearance, there's a strong will and a zest for independence. Erin always finds a way to do the opposite of what others ask. This infuriates Mr Lobart, who is accustomed to being obeyed to the letter by everyone else.

Mr Lobart runs the tuna farm like clockwork. Mrs Lobart proudly claims her family saved the tuna from extinction after the most significant decline of the species in recorded history. Although very small, the island is of great importance to the world's food supply, as it's the site of the biggest and most successful tuna breeding farm ever built. The fortified steel control tower, located two kilometres from the island's rugged west coast, rises as far as it sinks. From its sturdy underwater spine, stacks of tubular channels extend and wrap around the island, forming a long spiral down to the seabed. It's here where the islanders breed large quantities of giant bluefin tuna for the world's food supply. And it's here where most of the world's tuna population can be found.

By the end of the twenty-first century, the unpredictable weather had a devastating impact on food production. The very survival of humankind depended on carefully managing resources and selflessly helping each other. For some time, the Sun's periodic cycles had become impossible to predict, with a long period of high activity exceeding the expected eleven-year cycle. An unusually high number of sunspots had appeared and doggedly stayed put, causing frequent eruptions of solar flares and coronal mass ejections. Freak snowstorms, seemingly endless deluges, massive sea surges, raging wildfires, swallowing sandstorms—all could be brewed and unleashed unexpectedly from the rapidly fluctuating supercharged atmosphere.

The changing global temperature and ubiquitous low-pressure systems provoked long spells of disruptive weather, making reliable forecasts almost impossible. With recurrent episodes of widespread floods and droughts, this worldwide unstable climate caused the whole of humankind to reorganise themselves to survive against all the odds—even if it meant the total upheaval of long-held customs and values.

Managing food and water supplies and efficiently distributing them to the areas where they were most needed demanded a rigorous, centralised effort for a faster, worldwide, effective response.

Survival had become the number one priority. "First and foremost, survival"—that was the slogan of the time.

The existing world order was not good enough, fast enough, or fair enough. There had been no other option but to change it. Countries had merged into regions, and regions had merged into alliances. Alliances had merged into one administrative coalition—the ARA (Aid and Recovery Alliance).

The ARA's INST (Instant) Network regularly updated the food storage levels and distribution status, weather conditions, and areas in most need of help. Self-organising rapid assistance brigades were always ready to act, as they were dispatched to assist with ongoing emergencies. The whole interconnected world was now in a constant state of alert, response, and action.

During her first year at high school, Erin often volunteered to help distribute food and drinking water to evacuees of powerful storms on both her island and others nearby. She took it close to her heart, not only the plight of the islanders but also that of Mother Nature. Through her tireless work, she became widely known and admired, and she felt revived and accomplished. At her teacher's insistence, Erin applied and was admitted to the prestigious university's early entrance program in Los Angeles when she was fifteen. But after finishing the first year of her math degree, and to everyone's surprise, she decided to go back home, much to the Lobarts' chagrin. She explained she missed her island dearly—the immense blue sky, the boundless sea, and her beloved farm animals.

But her adoptive parents could not fully understand why Erin chose to go back to finish high school instead of staying at the university. "The university can wait," she had said. Of course, they were then quick to conclude that it was all about a boy, the charmingly attractive Sam Sheppard.

Sam had welcomed her decision with unreserved pleasure. After all, Erin had been his best friend since she arrived on the island. Even better, she was working at the farm for the summer season as well. *This time is the perfect opportunity to tell her about my true feelings*, he thought.

Erin's main job at the tuna farm is checking on the timely execution of the daily upkeep activities and it's demanding work. But for her, being at the tuna farm's control room is her favourite part of the working day; she hates it when it's time to go home for dinner. In most cases, the conversation with her parents will end up in disagreements and reproach.

At dinner, Erin always sits as far from Mr Lobart as possible. She doesn't like his serious face, although he's usually looking down at his plate, tucking into his big servings. But when he gets angry, he even throws the dishes against the wall; once, he missed her by an inch. That's why she's learned not to contradict him while he speaks.

Albert Lobart is a short, stocky man with small eyes and a big curved nose. The islanders know him as "the Mad Bulldog" because of his short temper.

He is a man of brief words and little patience. When he opens his mouth, it is most certainly to give orders. Patricia accepts his irritable mood as part of his strong character. To her, he is the best man in the world, and no one else could run the tuna farm as he does. But their marriage has always been pure business for Albert. Marrying Patricia Lobart, the farm owner's daughter, was his way to take over one of the world's essential feeding industries and become a highly respected man.

As for Erin, she tries to avoid being near the Lobarts as much as possible. The outdoors is her refuge, her private paradise. She belongs to its blue ocean and carved-up cliffs, its green meadows and soft rolling hills. She cannot imagine living anywhere else. *It's the place where I can truly be myself*.

At home, she tries to spend most of her time in the back garden with her beloved dog, Blazer. After taking him for long walks, she stays inside the dog's outhouse, reading her favourite science books while Blazer rests by her feet. She feels safe and tranquil there, even after nightfall.

I should be grateful I'm living on this beautiful island. The alternative could have been much, much worse. It's certainly better than if I'd stayed at the orphanage. That's what Mrs Lobart says.

Chapter 3 - Best Friends' Secrets

No one will believe us, you know ... it's better if we don't say anything.

Erin walks into the spacious control room and sits in front of the tracking monitors. Today is her sixteenth birthday, and she's looking forward to the evening. Sam promised he had a surprise for her.

She touches the flashing green button from the computer menu. The whole map of the tuna farm's maintenance plant fills the screen with its crisscrossing, distinctly coloured lines.

A flashing green dot over a five-digit number marks each worker's position. The markers move along the lines, updating each point's time and coordinates.

At a glance, Erin checks the position of each marker and its ID number.

She knows by heart the expected time and location of everyone.

She notices that one marker starts flashing in red, but she hears Sam's voice through the intercom before she has time to worry.

"Sam Sheppard ... signing in. Checking Level D." "Sam! Just in time," she gently reprimands him.

"Erin, you shouldn't worry about that. We all know we have to keep to the schedule or else," Sam replies calmly. "I'm on level D, section A4 now." "That's better!" Erin says while verifying the red flashing dot changing into green.

Sam and Erin have been close friends since they met on her first day at school on the island. She was sitting alone in the canteen when a cheerful boy with curly brown hair and a cheeky smile sat beside her and asked her name. As she turned around to look at him, he jumped up from his seat.

"Yours are the biggest, bluest eyes I have ever seen!" he exclaimed. "They're not blue ... they're purple, horrible." She lowered her eyelids,

unable to hide her blushing.

"They're beautiful," he countered.

"Well, everyone makes fun of me because of my eyes. They even call me 'Big Eyes'." She sighed, clutching her hands nervously but daring to stare back at him regardless.

His broad friendly smile made her feel more confident almost instantly.

He regularly invited her to go for horse rides by the sandy beaches not far from the Lobarts' ranch. Erin would accept sometimes. As their friendship blossomed, she even offered to help him study for the exams, something that turned Sam into a very keen student.

When she announced she was leaving for Los Angeles to start university, his heart was broken. He thought about telling her before she left, but his mind froze, and his mouth dried at the thought that she would reject him. She would never give him any clues; she never flirted with him.

But when she came back, Sam started to think that he may have got it all wrong. *Of course, she's coming back because she misses me*, he thought. *I must tell her how I feel, but I'll find the right place, the right time.*

That same summer, they had gone horse riding to the northernmost part of the island, into the narrowing curved peninsula known as El Cuchillo, stretching out into the rough ocean for two and a half kilometres.

They were enjoying the magnificent views of the radiant sunset before they were due to start their summer jobs at the tuna farm.

Erin loved to ride her horse to the end of El Cuchillo to enjoy the view of the impressive black cliffs, especially around the area known as Diablo's Point, where the power of the waves had carved jagged stone arches and pillars around the sprawling coastal caves. The cliffs' rocky crevices led into a maze of underground tunnels and high chambers, forming a unique, intricate cave system that attracted the most daring explorers. But everyone knew there were some routes they must avoid—the deep waterlogged passages leading towards Diablo's cave's gorge, where an underground waterfall kept plunging through a vast chasm and into an underground river.

They trotted carefully on the stony path as the waves kept crashing on each side of the narrow peninsula, squirting random water jets through the blowholes. They enjoyed the refreshing splashes on their bodies, laughing at each other whenever they were showered by the sudden sprays.

The cries of the nesting seabirds and the hissing of the water jets combined into a unique rhythmic sound.

Although it was very cloudy, the Sun had managed to come through a small opening, unveiling its reddened edge and bathing the ocean surface with its fiery shafts of light.

The wind was playing on Erin's long blonde hair, weaving it in thick strands in front of her face that she kept pulling apart as she admired the breathtaking view. Sam couldn't keep his eyes off Erin. Deep in thought, he struggled to arrange his words into a sentence, but only silence prevailed.

"One day, I'd like to have a peek inside Diablo's cave," Erin said as if talking to herself.

"That's something I've been practising ... I tried it once with my father and we made it into the second lake ... But after that—"

"What did you do?"

"Well, we immediately turned back," he replied in a self-deprecating tone, bursting into laughter that she promptly joined.

Erin kept looking towards the cave's entrance as a fluttery feeling of anticipation revolved in her stomach. Her heart missed a beat when she noticed the shimmering object once again—that same object that sometimes appeared out of nowhere while she had been swimming in the ocean.

"Sam, look!" She eagerly pointed in the direction of Diablo's cave.

Sam stared, completely bewildered, as a shiny metallic sphere emerged right at the entrance of the cave, getting wider and brighter as it rose gradually out of the water.

"What is it?" Sam yelled while trying to keep his horse still.

"I've no idea ..." Erin kept gazing at the luminous sphere, her heart pounding ever faster, but she didn't feel in the least frightened. Instead, she was utterly spellbound.

By now, the object had started to shine so brightly that they had to look away. A warm air current surrounded them while a low booming sound pounded in their ears. They tried hard to contain their nervous horses, tightly clutching their reins for a long tense minute.

As the humming sound and the bright light dwindled, a cool breeze coming from the sea refreshed their sweaty skin. Relieved, they opened their eyes and looked back towards the cave. By then, the shiny object had disappeared.

Only the agitated waves crashing against the dark entrance gave a hint that something had been there and suddenly had plunged into the water.

A wide-eyed Sam looked back at Erin, trying hard to open his stiffened mouth. "Wh-wh-what was th-th-at?" he stuttered.

"I wish I knew," she mumbled. "It seems like it's following me—"

"Jeez! You mean you've seen it before? Why haven't you told me?"

"You would've never believed me ... Anyway, I'm glad you've seen it," she said with a smug grin while patting her horse's mane.

"You don't seem very scared—at all," Sam noticed while looking at Erin, intrigued.

"It always keeps its distance ... and it looks beautiful." "When was the first time you saw it?"

"This summer. Only happens at sea. Seen it twice before ..."

"What can it be? What can it be?" Sam pondered as he scoured the rocky shore.

They kept looking around the cave's entrance, closely following the erratic movements of the choppy waters. But as the swell started to dissipate slowly, it appeared as if the bright metallic sphere had been a mirage.

"No one will believe us, you know ... it's better if we don't say anything," Sam concluded as they cautiously led their horses away from El Cuchillo peninsula.

"Agreed," Erin said while looking back, wondering why she felt so attracted to the mysterious sphere and why she could sense its appearance, even if she didn't know where it came from.

That was the only time Sam ever saw it. But for Erin, it would appear numerous times, especially before one of her recurrent dreams. She was convinced that both events were connected, and she never mentioned it to anyone, not even Sam.

Today, while wondering what surprise Sam is preparing, she goes back to reviewing the data from the morning's activities before Mr Lobart arrives at the control room. He usually inspects the report as soon as he enters the tuna farm. Despite all the automated verification and warning systems, he insists on additional manual checks on site.

When the door opens and the stocky figure of Albert Lobart blocks the incoming light, she has finished checking the whole network, but this is the first round of the day.

As she rushes to get the report ready, she feels his pressing stare behind her back. She knows he's often in a bad mood, so there must be a frowned forehead, angled eyebrows, and tightly pressed lips on his face.

"Is everything okay?" he asks without moving from the door.

"Yes, sir, everything is okay." She extends her hand, holding the electronic notepad with the latest downloaded report.

"Oh, happy birthday, Erin!"

"Thank you, sir," she replies, trying to sound upbeat.

Lobart walks down the steps, letting the sunshine flood into the room and blinding her momentarily. Erin keeps looking away as he grabs the notepad. She starts walking towards her desk, expecting he's about to leave the room, but the rattle of his boots stomping on the wooden floor warns her he's following her instead. Nonplussed, she turns around to face him. "Listen, Erin ... I want to warn you ..." Lobart looks at her questioningly as if she should know what he is about to say. "About what?" she asks with a puzzled look.

"About your friendship with Sam—" "We've been friends for a long time now."

"Just friends, eh? You know that Pat and I disapprove!"

Erin instinctively backs away, not only because he has startled her but also because she cannot stand the whiff of old dried tuna skin coming from his dirty overalls.

"I will dismiss Sam from the farm"—he steps towards Erin until his pointed finger is wavering a few millimetres from her nose—"if you go out with him again!"

"Why?" she protests, struggling to make sense of his irrational demand. "I've no time for explanations now. Do what I say." Lobart sneers.

She feels the urge to confront him. But she soon composes herself and fakes total submission. "As you wish, sir," she says, nodding briefly and clasping her hands behind her back. She dares not mention that she and Sam had made plans to go out together this very evening.

"All right then ... you can call me Dad," Lobart drawls while walking towards the exit.

He stops sharply in front of the steps to give her a final warning glare before making his way out. She avoids his hostile gaze and focuses instead on his worn-out sand-caked boots. The second she notices he's about to trip on the uneven steps, she stops short of warning him, but Lobart safely jumps up and out of the door at the last minute.

Erin feels a bit guilty that she wished he could have tripped and fallen over. But she soon dismisses her guilt, recounting his threatening words. "Nothing will destroy my friendship with Sam," she reassures herself, talking under her breath, a steely glint of determination flashing in her eyes. "No one will stop me from seeing him, not even the Lobarts!"