

Big Guy

Orca soundings

Robin Stevenson

Chapter One

I'm whistling as I walk in the door, still buzzing from finding out I got the job. It's the only decent thing that's happened in months. Well—that, and meeting Ethan.

I haven't told Dad about either one.

He's home, but something seems odd. It takes me a moment to realize: the house is too quiet. For once, Dad hasn't turned on the television. Instead, he's standing staring at a picture on the wall of the three of us: himself, Mom and me.

I'm trying to decide whether to say hello or just sneak past when he turns. "Derek."

"Hi, Dad." I start to edge by, wanting to get to my computer.

He nods at the picture. "You still think about her?"

I stare at him. We don't talk about Mom. I nod, warily. "Sure. Sometimes."

"She'll be back," he says. "It's only been a couple months. She's been gone longer than that before."

"Sure, Dad," I say. *No, you idiot. It's been a year, she hates you, she's off chanting mantras with a bunch of orange-clad cult freaks in California.* I look around for a glass or bottle, wondering if he's been drinking.

He glares at me. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing," I say. I miss her like hell, but I half hope she doesn't come back. At least one of us got away.

I slip past him and into my room, turn on the computer. *Ethan*, I think. And my heart

speeds up, dances in my chest. He sent me a picture of himself a few days ago. I keep it under the mouse pad in case Dad snoops in my room. While the computer boots up, I slide it out and study it carefully, even though by now I can see it with my eyes closed.

Brown eyes, olive skin, straight dark eyebrows and an easy white-toothed grin. He's hot. I know I'm biased, but he really is. Even Gabi thinks so.

Yes! He's online.

*hey ethan
about time you got home
yeah. what's up?
missed u today*

I grin. I probably look like an idiot, sitting here by myself at the computer with this big grin on my face, but I can't help it. My fingers fly over the keyboard.

*missed you too
at least you have a picture of me. hint
hint*

My grin freezes on my face. I was half hoping he'd forget. But to be honest, I

knew he wouldn't. So I'm ready. I've been waiting.

sorry. keep forgetting to send one.

here u go

It's my favorite picture. My friend Gabi took it and I actually look pretty good in it. I'm leaning against the brick wall of the high school, wearing jeans, black T-shirt, leather jacket. My expression is kind of serious and my hair's a bit shorter than it is now. I'm squinting just a little and the sun is on my face. I've always been tall, always looked older than my age. I study the picture, wondering what Ethan will think.

My fingers pause, hover over the keyboard. Last chance to change my mind.

Then I send the picture.

Ethan is still chatting away, saying I look just how he imagined, but somehow I don't feel like talking anymore.

I type a quick reply, make an excuse.

eth? dad's yelling something. gtg.

I log out and walk down the hall to the bathroom. I slide the dead bolt, locking the

door behind me. Slowly, I pull my black T-shirt off over my head and stare at the reflection in the mirror. Rolls of fat, white slabs of blubber and misery. I grab fistfuls of it, dig my fingernails in hard enough to leave sharp red crescent-shaped marks.

That picture I sent? It was taken last year, before Mom left. Before I packed on all this fat. That was a good eighty pounds ago. You wouldn't even recognize me if you saw me now.

I barely recognize myself.