

KATE IN THE LAND OF MYTHS AND WONDERS

J. P. H. Tan

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*For Him who inspired me with dreams and visions
to tell this story...*

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1

THE WEALTHY GIRL

It was 11:47 p.m. Thirteen minutes to her birthday. Well, she wasn't exactly looking forward to it—going through another year of nothing, really. Besides being a genius and brilliant at her studies, she felt she really hadn't achieved anything else in her life. Nothing had changed since her last birthday—except for menstruation. She finally understood what *that* was all about.

She was considered a grown-up, by the way. Apart from that, she was still the same. Her friends found her strange because she tended to do things differently, and that made her appear weird. She also enjoyed being by herself—even talking to herself a lot. At least she could definitely get along with herself and didn't always have to figure out when or how best to say something before she said it. She liked to speak her mind, and it truly suffocated her if she couldn't say what she really felt and be who she really was. She found that keeping friends was such an effort, and she just couldn't seem to get it right. The parties, the social media,

the cliques and gangs—ooh...she simply couldn't catch up. She wondered if she was alone in this world and if there was anyone else who felt the same way.

Eight minutes to her birthday, and he hadn't called. She'd thought he would call; he'd said he would. But she was still waiting. She gazed out her bedroom window, and there they were: the tiny, twinkling lights from those same few humongous vessels that always lined up neatly along the horizon, far, far across from her window against the dark-blue sky. They appeared now and then, and she remembered also seeing them on her birthday last year.

"OK...happy fifteenth birthday, Kate," she said to herself. "One year older—and another year wiser." That was what her granny always said. To be honest, she thought she was far from wise. Her granny said that if you could have one thing in this world, it should be wisdom, because "when you find it, you'll find life." It seemed that Kate hadn't found it yet, because up till then, she hadn't really found life...except for school—assignments, exams—and more school. She often wondered if there was a purpose for her here on earth. Or was she living only because she happened to be alive?

Kate sat in bed with her laptop over the duvet, writing the last line in her journal that night. Then her sleepy eyes closed as she dozed off, holding her phone in one hand and a little stinky pillow over her nose with the other. It was the comfort pillow from her childhood that she had refused to discard—it was sentimental to her. The next day she would

be going to celebrate her birthday in Chicago with her best friend, Gus.

Kate Jenkins had been born into one of the most prominent families in New York. Her grandmother was known as a cosmetics magnate—a self-made millionaire since the 1960s whose beauty empire spanned the United States, Europe, and Asia. Kate’s father, the successor to the business, had been even more brilliant, since he had transformed their family business into a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate that encompassed manufacturing, retail, and property development. Kate remembered him as a flamboyant, handsome man in his early forties. He had loved to travel and hardly had time for his family. Whenever he wasn’t preoccupied with business, he would be golfing or trying his hand at the casino.

Kate’s parents had never married, since her father had always wanted to remain a bachelor. She had never lived with her dad until her mother had left the family with Kate’s little brother when Kate was six. Kate had not heard from them since, and she never knew why her family had broken up. The only thing she remembered vividly was her mom telling her it would be best for her if she moved in with her dad.

As a little girl, Kate had been cute and lovable. She had big, hazel-colored eyes and rosy cheeks and always had two pigtails tied right above her ears. Eloquent and highly intelligent, her father had been generally proud of her. She’d moved onto her father’s huge property, which comprised three bungalows on the same compound. One

was her father's bachelor pad, and another was the home of Kate's paternal grandmother. The arrangement was for Kate to move into the third, which was the smallest and had always been left empty.

Kate's bungalow was done up to resemble a dollhouse, its beautiful bedroom like that of a princess in a fairy tale. Everything was custom-made for a child, and the décor included cute, scaled-down pieces of furniture throughout the house, from the living room set of sofas to the dining table. There were fancy electric ponies to ride around. She even had an entire room of toys that could match the merchandise in any local retail shop. There was nothing she might want that she couldn't have.

Kate had two nannies who would rotate shifts; maids to cook, clean, and serve; a bodyguard; and her very own chauffeur to shuttle her around to lessons. She loved dance and art and all the children's activities at church into which her granny had instructed her nannies to enroll her. Her granny believed it was important to instill the word of God into Kate from a young age. Her nannies were also supposed to read her passages from Proverbs and Psalms in the Bible every day. There were thirty passages from Proverbs, corresponding with the calendar date for each day of the month. As for Psalms, there were 150 passages, and it would take her nannies about five months to complete them and start all over again. Given Kate's extraordinarily superior memory, it was easy for her to memorize all the passages from Proverbs and Psalms just by listening. But there were other enrichment classes Kate dreaded, like the grooming

and social-etiquette lessons her granny insisted upon. Initially she had often felt lost, but slowly she'd begun to accept and grow into her role. At least she found comfort in finally getting to see more of her dad. Basically, she had everything any six-year-old could ever have dreamed of.

However, she didn't find contentment in any of those toys or possessions. Instead, she often stood by the window that overlooked the quiet waterfront and imagined a prince climbing up to her bedroom to rescue her from her very lonely life—as she had read about in fairy-tale stories. She would read and chat to herself whenever she was alone, and she kept a diary to record her feelings, with drawings and simple words to say to God every night before she went to bed. She would then climb onto a chair and tiptoe to stick her little notes on the wall, for she believed that the notes would be more visible to God if they were higher up and closer to heaven. Kate had prayed for her mom and brother to return and hoped for her parents to be reconciled. She craved attention and love and for someone to always hug and kiss her the way her mom used to. She longed to hear the words, “Love you, baby,” which she had not heard since her mother had left. Whatever her nannies and maids were giving her wasn't enough. It couldn't fill that hole in her heart. Kate used to cry herself to sleep. She cried so much it sometimes blurred her vision and made it hurt to open her eyes. She missed her mom and brother so terribly that the pain became unbearable for a girl of her tender age.

She also wondered why her dad didn't yearn to spend time with her like she did with him. She got to see him

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only every Sunday or so, when she would be brought to his side of the house to lunch with him after attending church with Granny. But each time they were together, he would mostly be talking on the phone or reading the newspaper. In spite of that, she still relished that little opportunity to be with him, and it was enough to keep her so overjoyed afterward that she would relive the day and replay all their conversations to herself over and over again. Because Kate so desperately wanted her father's attention, she would seek his advice and opinion about everything. She had even learned to fake ignorance on many occasions just to get him to explain and spend more time talking to her.

By the age of seven, she was good with table manners and cutlery. She could eat escargots without sending the shells flying off the table, and she would impress her dad when she could artfully dry his tea bag on a spoon by winding and unwinding its string to remove the tea without dripping a drop on his saucer. Indeed, her father was pleased with her. Slowly and surely, Kate proved herself intelligent and quick-witted. She noticed that her father would become easily agitated if things didn't meet his expectations, and she was always quick to nip a problem in the bud when she sensed it. She would get very upset with herself if she thought she might have disappointed him, even becoming terrified to the point of tears whenever she did something wrong. On the other hand, Granny was easier to get along with and had grown fond of spending time with Kate after noticing how brilliant and capable she was for her age.

One day while painting on an easel by the window in her art room, Kate saw her dad get into one of his many exotic cars and zoom out of the driveway. He noticed her as he passed and waved good-bye. That made Kate very happy. She realized that her art room overlooked the carport, and from then on she would try to wait into the night just to catch a glimpse of her dad. But to her disappointment, he was never to be seen each time she expected him. She once waited for hours, playing with paints and crafts until disappointment finally overwhelmed her, and she cut into her left palm accidentally when her nanny dozed off on the sofa. Her palm had bled, and it hurt so much. When the wound eventually healed, it left a scar on her palm, and she would often look at it to distract herself whenever she felt down.

One cold, rainy night, she was awakened by frightening bangs of thunder. As she lay in bed remembering how her mother used to rush into her room to check on her on nights like this, she heard the sound of an engine vibrating down at the carport. She quickly rushed out of bed and headed toward her art-room window to see if her dad was back. There he was—inside his Ferrari, sitting with his eyes closed, as if he had fallen asleep while the engine was still running. She could feel the vibrations through the window, which stretched from the ceiling to the floor.

Kate waited for a long time, but he never got out of the car or turned the engine off. Then she saw their house guard approach the car and knock at its window, but her father seemed to be deeply asleep. The guard shouted for

help, and a few more men—the gardener, housekeeper, and chauffeur—rushed out from the staff quarters to see what was happening. Then the chauffeur ran to pound on the door of her dad’s house, apparently asking the maids for the spare key to the Ferrari. When they finally got to it and carried her father out of the car, he had lost consciousness. An ambulance arrived shortly thereafter, and she saw her dad being lifted onto the stretcher and into the vehicle by paramedics.

Kate was scared stiff. She continued to stand by the window long after the ambulance had driven off, wondering what had happened to her father and if she would ever see him again. She finally did—but it was at his funeral. Her father had apparently died of sudden heart failure that fateful night after driving home from his usual card game. And that was the end of the story between Kate and her dad. He had left her no real memories or anything sentimental to truly remember him by—except for a vast fortune he had willed to her. He had arranged for her to receive it in equal portions when she turned thirty-one, forty-one, fifty-one, and sixty-one. That arrangement was to protect her from squandering her wealth all at once or letting it fall into the wrong hands. Having been an absentee father the whole time she had known him, he might have surprised some people by the effort he had put into so carefully crafting his will to protect his daughter—or rather to protect his own wealth from being lavishly wasted. But at the time, those big sums of money didn’t mean anything to an almost-eight-year-old girl.

KATE IN THE LAND OF MYTHS AND WONDERS

After her father's death, Kate was told to move into the house of her granny, who by then had grown to love her dearly. At age seventy, Granny was still strong and healthy and swam every morning in a lap pool built inside her bedroom. She always wore a pantsuit with a nice scarf elegantly wrapped around her shoulders, and she traveled around with an assistant and a bodyguard in a chauffeured Rolls-Royce. Besides attending the usual board meetings of her companies, she would spend most of her time working with pastors from different churches and supporting them in their various causes.

Granny tried to give Kate anything and everything she wanted. Kate was her only living kin and, in fact, the obvious sole heir to their business empire. She would take Kate along to meetings whenever the opportunity arose. At the age of eight, Kate started to learn all about color pigments and the textures of cosmetic foundations, powders, and lipsticks. It completely piqued her interest, and she always begged to be part of those discussions. Kate seemed cut out for business and was highly gifted in math. She could easily process complex calculations in her head just by looking at a problem. After taking a Wechsler intelligence test, which rated her math ability equivalent to that of an adult over twenty years old, she was considered a genius.

Kate continued to attend church with her granny, although she wasn't as keen about it after her dad's passing. The usual Sunday lunches and chats with him she had always looked forward to no longer took place. This added to the pain of being abandoned by her

mother and her diminishing faith in God, whom she felt had disappointed her. How could He have allowed her parents to abandon her altogether? Nonetheless, Kate knew Granny was eager for her to learn more about the Bible. She believed that if Kate had a strong faith, she'd most likely be able to overcome any challenges should Granny pass away unexpectedly. In her nannies' stead, she would read biblical stories to Kate at bedtime nearly every night. Kate was always intrigued by the end-time phenomena, by how the world would come to an end someday and how everyone, dead or alive, would be summoned to stand before God to give accounts of all their deeds.

On one occasion, Kate asked, "Grandmomma...so, what will happen to the bad guys after the judgment?"

"They'll be thrown into a dark and scary place," said her granny, "like a big pot of fire, and they'll stay there forever."

"Oh, no!" Kate cried. "I don't ever wanna be burned in a pot! I promise to be good. And what about the good people? Will they all go to heaven?"

"Well, God will judge and decide when the time comes," Granny replied. "But there are some really special ones; they'll suddenly be brought up to the sky and meet God there."

"No!" Kate cried. "That's impossible, Grandmomma. No one can fly."

"Maybe they don't have to fly," Granny said, laughing.

"Huh? But...how?"

“Maybe they’ll just be up there without even knowing it,” said Granny.

“Like magic?”

“It’s called the rapture, sweetheart,” Granny said. “You’ll learn more about it in your Sunday school later.”

These bedtime stories went on for a few more years, until Kate turned ten. Although some of the biblical concepts sounded too far-fetched and abstract for the little girl, she was nonetheless fascinated.

Kate grew very close to her granny as time flew by, but there was something in her heart she always wondered about secretly—a question that never seemed to go away, a hidden thought that caused her heart to doubt at times. Had Granny taken to her only because her dad was gone and no one else was left in the family? She remembered that, like her father, Granny had seen her only once a week when she had first moved in, and it seemed that Granny had never really cared about her, leaving her to live in a house with only maids and nannies. So, whenever a situation arose in which Kate insisted upon doing something and Granny was against it, saying it was for Kate’s own good, doubts would inevitably surface.

By fourteen, Kate had become tall and slender, funny and quick-witted. She stood at five feet seven inches, and being an avid swimmer, she was shapely, with nice long legs that were always the envy of her friends. Her round hazel-colored eyes were bright and lively, and her lips were ever so naturally cherry red. Her skin always glowed with a sun-kissed tan that lasted through the winter months, and

her chlorine-bleached chestnut hair was long, flowing with loose, bouncy curls that reached down to her waist. Kate wasn't exactly the prettiest, but she was attractive in her own way. She was feminine, poised, and elegant in every way she spoke, moved, and carried herself. She was simple and casual in her style, usually sporting denim capris with sneakers and a white top.

Kate didn't enjoy the company of most people. Besides having heightened senses from sensory-processing disorder, she had other challenges. She avoided classmates who were too loud, friends who ate noisily with their mouths wide open, people who spent more than a few minutes talking about a subject that didn't interest her, and even those who merely had seriously crooked teeth or little flecks of foamy saliva accumulated at the corners of their lips. She found it too difficult to listen to, look at, or keep up a conversation with them. Their "differences" simply bothered her. She cringed when people blew their noses, as the sound burned right into her ears.

Basically, she was sensitive to almost everything and everyone around her, and most people thought she was a grinch. Kate always wished otherwise and attempted to overcome her shortcomings. On many occasions she tried to tolerate the irritations, but her efforts were mostly unsuccessful. The only two people in the world who could and would put up with her idiosyncrasies were her granny and her best friend, Gus.

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BIRTHDAY IN CHICAGO

Gus and Kate had been best friends and neighbors since she had moved into the estate when she was six. They were the same age. He was pleasant looking, with fair, freckled skin and dark-brown eyes, and he wore thick glasses. He was about the same height as Kate but skinnier. Gus was incredibly intelligent and well read. He was often called “the walking internet.” For Kate’s fifteenth birthday, he promised to treat her to a visit to Millennium Park in Chicago, where she could finally see “the Bean,” also known as Cloud Gate. She would be able to stand under it and take millions of distorted and crazy selfies, just as she had always imagined doing.

Kate was glad to be able to escape the big celebration Granny had been considering. She just didn’t feel up to it. Kate wasn’t particularly fond of mingling, making small talk, or getting acquainted with strangers in any sort of social setting. These were big challenges for her. She simply preferred and enjoyed quiet company. With Gus it

was always easy, because they had grown up together and could utter rubbish and laugh horrendously all night. And so, they had requested her granny's permission to travel to Chicago together, and Granny had decreed that they stay just for the weekend and return by Sunday. Her part of the treat was to book Kate and Gus two connecting rooms for that night at the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Chicago.

On the morning of July 29, 2017—Kate's birthday—just when she was about to set out for the airport, her granny sent for her. Kate was surprised, as the unspoken rule in the house each morning was that until Granny summoned, no one should attempt to even walk up to her corridor. It was her prayer time, and she wanted total silence. So, the maids instructed the chauffeur to wait, and Kate ran upstairs promptly, finding Granny all dressed up and seated on the sofa in her bedroom lounge. She was stirring milk into her cup of tea when Kate walked in.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," Granny said lovingly as she stood up to hug Kate. "I thought I'd have a quick word with you before you go. Come...sit."

"Sure, Grandmamma," Kate said, taking a seat beside her granny. "Sorry...I didn't come and say good-bye because I thought I wasn't supposed to—not during your quiet time."

"It's OK," Granny replied with a smile. "Don't worry about it. Here." She handed Kate a plain white envelope. "Go ahead. Open it."

Kate wondered what this was all about. As she held the envelope in her hands, she noticed it wasn't sealed. Lifting the flap, she looked inside, and her eyes lit up.

"Huh?" She slowly removed a check and then grinned as she read the digits aloud. "One million dollars?"

"It's your birthday present." Granny smiled and nodded. "Use it wisely."

"Thanks, Grandmamma. I can't believe it!" Kate said. She leaned forward to hug her granny.

"Well," Granny continued, mindful of her tone, "the office told me you'd maxed out your card shopping online last month." Kate was shocked and fell silent at once. She hadn't seen that coming. "I'm not lecturing you, but try to be more prudent with your money. It's OK to shop and spend, but do it wisely. You don't really need the same pair of Chanel sneakers in three different colors and five pairs of...I forgot what...Queen jeans and so many similar-looking handbags, do you?" Granny said, smiling, careful not to sound as if she were reprimanding Kate, especially on her birthday.

Kate remained stiff as she stared across the bedroom lounge to avoid her granny's gaze. "It's *McQueen*," she muttered under her breath. She didn't dare speak up.

"Anyway, sweetheart," Granny continued, "everything in this family will eventually be yours, and I think it's time for you to learn how to manage your money. Let's start with this million dollars, shall we?" She lifted her hand to gently stroke Kate on the back.

“How?” Kate asked, completely puzzled as she turned to Granny.

“We’ll talk about it after your trip.”

“OK, Grandmomma.” Kate nodded and looked at the clock on the wall. “I think I’ve gotta go.” She was afraid to hear more about her inadequacies.

“Right.” Granny said. “Just one more thing...you’re a big girl now, and you’ll be traveling alone with Gus. I know he’s a decent guy, and I trust him, but...you know, you should still be mindful...in every way.”

“What do you mean?” Kate didn’t understand.

“A moment’s folly could ruin your future if you end up an unwed mother.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Kate broke out laughing. “Grandmomma, you’re not serious? Gus is the last person in this world I’d ever be interested in that way. Not in a million years!” She’d forgotten all about her earlier apprehension.

“That’s great. I’m relieved to hear that.” Granny heaved a sigh and laughed along. “Let’s pray for your journey.”

Kate nodded. They bowed their heads and closed their eyes as Granny began to pray, but secretly Kate opened her eyes and glanced around the room. She didn’t want to pray. She didn’t see the need to pray, since God had never really answered her prayers. Although she still believed in His existence and had continued to attend church with her granny, she had made up her mind that she’d never allow herself to go through yet another disappointment. She would never attempt to seek or ask Him for anything again.

As her eyes wandered around the room, her gaze landed on the intricate designs of a customized console table that was right beside her. The table was made of chrome and fiberglass, and on it sat a vase full of tulips, an opened Bible, and a large, seven-armed, silver candelabrum handcrafted to feature the Garden of Eden with birds perched on fruit trees. The sides of the table were detailed with crystals in floral patterns accented with silver studs. Right at the front was a long, narrow drawer. The surface bore a fine inscription Kate hadn't noticed before. In an italic font was etched

*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.*

—Acts 2:21, NIV

Those words evoked childhood memories and emotions Kate no longer wished to remember.

"OK," Granny finally said. "You'd better get going. Call me when you touch down."

She hugged Kate and pecked her on the forehead. Kate nodded and flew out of the room. As Kate jumped into the car, she saw Granny by the window, watching as the car rolled down the driveway toward the guardhouse, past their towering gate, and finally out of sight.

Kate and Gus set out from New York and touched down at O'Hare International Airport feeling excited. It was a beautiful Saturday in Chicago, with sunny and cloudless

skies that were colored in radiant hues of blue. They jumped onto a train and headed for Washington Station right away, since they had a tight schedule to keep. They had planned on spending the whole day at Millennium Park, checking into the Four Seasons later that night, waking up early the next day, and being among the first to arrive at the doorstep of the Adler Planetarium when it opened at nine thirty. Both of them were always keen about anything related to galaxies, stars, and outer space, so they planned to make a thorough visit before heading back to New York the next day. They'd both traveled light, bringing only their backpacks holding minimal stuff.

In the subway headed for Washington Station, they read the park brochures with extreme enthusiasm, enthralled by all the advertisements about free concerts, movies, exhibitions, workouts, family fun, nature programs, and tours offering nonstop enjoyment. They tried to memorize as many things as they could, and each was responsible for different schedules at various locations to maximize their day at the park, ensuring they wouldn't miss out on any important events.

When they finally arrived at Washington Station, it was almost noon. They grabbed hot dogs from a street peddler, loaded them with relish, mustard, and ketchup, and eagerly headed east on foot. The streets were busy, mostly with families with kids and strollers. Kate and Gus darted this way and that among the people to avoid having to slow down. They kept pace with each other as they walked while devouring the hot dogs in their hands. They agreed to

minimize their liquid intake and shared a bottle of water so as not to waste time visiting the bathroom while watching their favorite shows.

When they arrived at the park, it was unexpectedly crowded. The weather had become uncomfortably hot and dry, with hardly any breeze. The place was crammed with a mix of people from all walks of life. Visitors of all nationalities, ethnic groups, and ages were everywhere, and it sure felt like an intercultural holiday. Many families with strollers and wheelchairs milled about, while others had brought along their pets. Tour buses queued up and lined the streets around the park as they rushed to drop off hordes of passengers that poured endlessly into the park. Ladies shielded themselves with umbrellas as they followed their tour guides, who led them around with flags held high identifying their travel agencies.

Millennium Park consisted of sprawling, landscaped grounds filled with lush surroundings, marvelous sculptures, water features, a magnificent lawn for grand concerts, and a lovely garden area—Lurie Garden. It was a lively and totally spectacular place for everyone. Kate and Gus planned to cover every inch of the park from north to south and east to west. They were overwhelmed with joy as they marveled at everything and photographed as much as they could. They had brought their own professional cameras: Kate had a Leica she had received from Granny on her thirteenth birthday, and Gus had a classic Nikon he had obtained from his father's collection. They had never attended photography classes or been professionally

trained, but they had learned a lot from self-help books and online tutorials. Together they had started an online library of scrapbook collages with their own collections and competed to see whose stock pictures were more popular among users who could use them for free. Kate favored black-and-white photography while Gus preferred his photographs bright and vibrant with color.

“Look! It’s the Beeeaaan!” Kate called out in excitement when they finally arrived at it after exploring the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, the Great Lawn, Lurie Garden, and the Crown Fountain for over three hours. This was their main subject of interest, since Kate thought it was the biggest and cutest sculpture she’d ever seen. They moved around the crowd and snapped over a thousand pictures of it from different angles, capturing fun, distorted reflections of themselves. But there were lots of other people in the background, and this frustrated them, for the crowd was something that couldn’t be easily removed using digital imaging. They felt they ought to take wider shots of the Bean from a higher angle and decided to head right up to the Nichols Bridgeway, which was close by. They held on to their cameras, which were strapped around their necks, and headed quickly for the pedestrian bridge.

It was less crowded up on the bridge, and they felt a sense of relief when they were able to move past everyone and locate an ideal spot to capture the best angle of the Bean. Gus quickly took out his zoom lens and mounted it carefully onto his Nikon. Slowly he removed the lens cover and slipped it into his back pocket. As he held up the

camera and looked through the lens, he thought, *Boy, the Bean sure looks a whole lot different from here.*

“Psst,” Kate hissed subtly to Gus.

“Shh,” he responded, signaling her to keep quiet.

“Check out those chicks behind us. They must be some crazy yogis,” she whispered.

“Where?” Gus lowered his camera immediately upon hearing the word *chicks*. A group of four girls who looked as if they were high school students had just finished a free workout class on the Great Lawn and, right there in the middle of the bridge, were taking turns attempting very weird-looking yoga poses for one another’s cameras. They were obstructing other pedestrians and must have appeared inconsiderate to many. Then one of them unexpectedly called out to Gus and asked if he would mind helping them with a group shot. Of course he wouldn’t, and he jumped at the opportunity, seemingly thinking hard about how he could keep in touch with them after taking the photos. Kate just rolled her eyes when she saw how enthusiastic Gus had suddenly become. She remained focused on taking pictures of the Bean, which he seemed to have forgotten all about. One of the girls lay on the ground and bent her knees at right angles so her friend could do a handstand above her. Then two others did the same on the opposite side. Gus got carried away just admiring them.

“Hey!” one of them called out to Gus. “Are we ready? Quick, please!”

“Yes, yes.” He adjusted his glasses immediately and began clicking the shutter endlessly, taking as many

pictures as he possibly could, smiling to himself all the while.

“Hey, are we done?” a third girl called out. “My knees are aching.”

Gus readjusted his focus and kept turning the camera lens to capture the most ideal shot. All of a sudden, people began screaming in the background. They sounded panicked. Something must have happened. At once, Gus shifted his camera in the direction of the commotion. The girls, all set in their poses, yelled out at him, and within moments they lost their balance and collapsed onto one another.

Kate and Gus saw that water was gushing rapidly into the park from every corner, and it was swelling up very quickly. Many people had been caught by surprise and didn’t know what to do. Some people wondered aloud if the major drainage system in the park had burst, since the sky was clear and it wasn’t raining. The waters could not have come from anywhere except the park itself. Visitors incessantly questioned the security officers on duty, and they simply could not provide any explanation.

From the Nichols Bridgeway where Gus and Kate stood, they could see that water was also swelling up on the streets outside the park. Through their zoom lenses, they observed that cars far away were all stuck in traffic, one behind another. The water had risen quickly to about knee height. Many drivers were anxious and sounded their horns endlessly for other motorists to get out of their way. Some sat stranded in their vehicles, swearing at the traffic.

Pedestrians along the streets and those waiting around bus stops raced to get onto buses and into taxis to escape the floodwaters. Some sought shelter inside shops and malls. Retailers and businesses that fronted the city streets rushed to shut their doors and lower their roller shutters to protect their premises and merchandise from further damage.

People panicked and pushed around to head for higher ground as water continued to pour into the park. The water gathered so quickly that within a span of thirty minutes, it had reached the waistlines of most people. The entire city of Chicago was being flooded and thrown into a state of chaos and confusion.

“What’s happening?” Gus murmured, turning to Kate after observing the situation for almost an hour. “Maybe something went wrong with their dams, or maybe it’s coming from the lake?”

He quickly clicked on his lens cover, removed the camera strap from his neck, and swiftly chucked his camera into his backpack and zipped it up. Kate followed.

Kate and Gus couldn’t see the paths and walkways of the park from where they were standing. Every corner and the entire surrounding area had been invaded by great gushes of water. People were screaming and yelling at one another in panic as they shoved one another about and climbed onto anything they could. Many waded forcefully across the flood, either carrying their toddlers on their shoulders or holding their belongings above their heads. Some struggled with having to carry more than one child. The sounds of cries echoed everywhere as parents and

children called out in search of one another. This was truly the most heart-wrenching experience Kate and Gus had ever witnessed. Everything had happened so unexpectedly fast that no one knew how to react. Groups after group of people, all drenched from their waists down, were rushing up the Nichols Bridgeway, and it soon became overcrowded.

“Should we get back down and swim before it’s too late?” Kate asked worriedly as she looked on.

“Oh, I know,” Gus said, still trying to guess what was happening. “Maybe it’s like the flood in 1992...or the effects of global warming!”

“Come on, Gus,” Kate said, growing impatient. “There’s no time left. I think we should go. Shall we?” Since they’d been much younger, she had always believed in Gus’s ability to make sound decisions. He had on many occasions proven to be the better leader.

“Go!” Gus replied. “Of course we’ll go. Move!”

They adjusted their backpacks and started pushing their way down the bridge as fast as they could, squeezing past the people who were rushing up. A tall, muscular man tried to force his way past Kate so furiously that his gigantic foot crushed her right foot, causing it to twist sideways.

“Ouch!” she cried out after hearing a loud crack from her foot.

“You OK?” Gus asked as he held her by her right arm, continuing to hastily help her down the bridge while shoving people out of their path.

“No,” she said. “It really hurts. I can’t walk any farther.”

They both looked down at her right foot and saw that her ankle seemed swollen.

“Oh, no,” Gus said. “It looks really bad. I hope none of your bones are fractured. Just hang on to me, and we’ll wade through together.”

“I can’t believe it. What a birthday!” Kate said, pouting and lamenting her misfortune. She then swung her right arm around Gus’s neck as he wrapped his left hand around her waist to hold her up. The pain was so excruciating that no way could she rest the injured foot on the ground. Kate then had to put all her weight onto Gus as he struggled to balance and continue down the bridge, carefully avoiding people.

“I feel so bad. Sorry,” she said as she noticed little drops of sweat dripping down his forehead like raindrops.

“Don’t be silly.”

“Let’s just head back to the hotel.” she said.

“I’m thinking,” Gus said, trying to analyze where the floodwaters could possibly be coming from. “No. The hotel is too close to the lake. Let’s go west, back to the airport.”

“Where on earth is west?” Kate said, panicking. She’d always been poor with directions, and being in a foreign place didn’t help.

“Don’t worry,” he replied. “You’re with me. We’ll go toward Washington Station.” They managed to squeeze their way down to the foot of the bridge, where the water was above their waists. “You ready?” he asked.

“It’s so dirty,” Kate complained as she frowned at the murky brown water filled with food wrappers and plastic

bags. She was obsessive and compulsive with anything that had to do with cleanliness and hygiene. Getting into the filthy water was definitely a challenge.

“Oh, c’mon,” Gus said. “You’re not serious, are you? The water will get worse if we don’t go now.”

Kate looked around and hesitated, knowing there was no other way out.

“Urgh!” she whined. “There go my white pair of jeans and the embroideries—and my shoes. They’re new!”

She clasped her right arm tighter around his neck as they waded out. Gasping slightly, she could feel the water rapidly soaking into her shoes and through her jeans. It felt terribly uncomfortable. Still, they moved slowly and clumsily away from the bridge. People were scattered everywhere, and many rushed about hastily to get out of the flood, not knowing where to go. Kate’s injury felt better moments after she’d started wading. It was intensely cold around her ankle. The water’s buoyancy apparently helped to relieve the pain, and it became more bearable.

“Gus,” she said, “my foot feels much better. I think I can try to move on my own.”

“No,” he replied. “It’s too risky. What if you lose your balance?”

“Then I’ll scream for you,” she quipped. “Just find me a stick or an umbrella so I can use it for balance. It’s faster that way. We’re too clumsy holding together like this.”

“You sure?” Gus asked as he panted for breath. Kate nodded. They then looked hard at the water, in which all sorts of objects were floating.

“Over there!” Kate cried, pointing. “That red umbrella—get it!”

Gus stretched out his right arm and grabbed an opened umbrella that was floating past, surprised his arm could reach that far.

“Yes!” Kate heaved a sigh when he finally got it.

“OK,” he said, closing the umbrella and wrapping its little strap around to tighten it. “Hold it with your left hand, and remember to move your right foot in tandem with the umbrella. *Comprenez-vous?*”

“*Oui*,” she assured him, feeling blessed that someone as caring and capable as Gus was always around her.

“Be very careful, yeah?” he said as he handed it to her. “And stay close to me.”

“I’ll be right beside you,” she replied.

Then Gus gently let go of Kate as she tried to regain her balance by holding on to the long umbrella under the water with her left hand. She tried to put her entire weight on her left foot. Carefully she waded through the floodwaters a little at a time, with Gus by her side, holding her right hand.

“Oh, no,” she whined. “There go our cameras.” Their backpacks were still strapped to their backs and were completely soaked.

“We’ve got waterproof bags, remember?” he reminded her. “Super air and watertight zippers. Don’t worry.”

“Wait,” Kate said, remembering that Gus couldn’t swim. “Can you manage? The water is rising awfully fast.”

“I’ll be fine,” he asserted. “I can just wade through or grab hold of things. Don’t worry. Just go.” As the water

rose around his chest, Gus had difficulty balancing himself.

“Urgh, the water stinks!” Kate complained, limping along next to Gus, holding the umbrella underwater. She was worried about his falling under, since he could not swim. He had learned swimming from books and had never succeeded, of course. Suddenly a boy appeared out of nowhere and swam across Kate’s path, causing her to lose her balance and fall backward into the water. She struggled a little before being able to get back on her left foot again. She choked and coughed and then spat out some dirt as she removed a tangle of long, wet leaves from her face. It felt sticky and had a foul smell. Kate rubbed her face quickly with the backs of her hands and ran her fingers through her ponytail to remove any remaining debris. She was completely disgusted at the thought of having just possibly dipped her head in drainage waste...and maybe even tasted it.

“Yuck! Yuck! *Urgh!*” Angrily she spat some residue from her mouth a few more times. “You silly little brat! Don’t you dare come close to me again!”

Kate felt sick to her stomach. She tried to reach for her backpack to get her bottle of water and rinse her mouth, but it was gone. She bounced on her left foot to regain her balance as she looked around for her bag, but it was nowhere in sight. Many similar-sized objects floated all around her, and she tried to sweep her hands in the water to see if she could find her bag. The umbrella was gone, too.

Then she thought she saw a familiar bag floating close by, and she quickly reached to grab it. It was multicolored with stripes. It looked like Gus's bag, and it had a school badge pinned to it. It was Gus's bag!

"Gus!" she cried out. "I think I got your bag!"

Kate turned around and looked everywhere, but Gus was nowhere to be seen. She then realized she had forgotten about him for the few seconds she had been under the water, and he was now out of sight. She began to shout, calling out to Gus frantically and repeatedly, but there was no response. The cries and wails around her added to her frustration, since they were drowning out her voice. Kate limped on one foot through the water as she swiped her hands in a circular motion to keep her balance. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she struggled to strap on Gus's backpack, imagining how he could have fallen under the water with no one to help him.

"Gus! Gus!" she called out at the top of her voice. "Where are you? *Gus!*"

By that time, the floodwaters had risen above her chest, and she decided it would be easier to swim than balance on one foot. Careful to keep her head up, she slowly bounced off the ground with her left foot and started treading water. Unexpectedly, the injured foot could also tread along. She used the breaststroke very slowly across every possible path around the sign poles, trees, and people in the flood to search for Gus. Each time her hands swept into the cloudy water that brushed against her chin, she'd remind herself

to ignore the stirred-up sediments and instead focus on finding Gus. Kate was also concerned about hazardous items under the water that could ensnare her feet. She was extremely careful each time she had to put her left foot down to rest. Kate had to swim very slowly and carefully to avoid people charging blindly toward her again and to avoid the countless things that kept coming at her face. All sorts of objects floated around: leaves, twigs, food packaging, empty bottles, kids' toys, plastic bags, and more. She hoped the water had not become infectious.

Some motorists abandoned their flooded cars and fled for their lives while others stood above the water on top of their vehicles, waiting for help to come. Several cars and motorbikes that had been parked on slopes were being swept off their paths. Great volumes of water swirled and surged across the park and its surrounding area as if eager to engulf the city. Those who could swim tried to get to the nearest buildings, but those who couldn't were left clambering onto trees and objects to wait for rescuers to get them out safely. People shouted and waved madly at the rescue crews in helicopters that were circling above the area and the paddleboats around them. They were desperate for help; their aged family members and their little ones needed to be safe.

Kate felt a little tap on her shoulder. She turned around excitedly and was disappointed to see a little boy instead of Gus. It was the same boy who had swum across her path earlier, causing her to fall backward and choke. He was crying, and he grabbed on to her shoulders.

“Mommy!” he called out. Kate held him at once, feeling really bad for having called him a brat. The little boy looked as if he were three or four years old and had been swimming around, looking for his mother. Kate held on to him as she treaded water with him. He was so cute and lovable. She liked him and was impressed by his swimming abilities.

“You’re looking for your mommy?” Kate asked. He nodded, tears streaming down his face.

“What’s your name?”

“Zack.”

“It’s OK, Zack. We’ll find your mom. What’s Mommy’s name?”

“Mommy,” he replied.

“I meant her *name*. What’s your mommy’s name?”

“Mommy,” he said again.

Oh, no, she thought. He doesn’t know his mother’s name. Then she asked, “How old are you, Zack?”

“I’m hungry,” he replied, looking tired, his eyes half-closed.

Kate hadn’t the slightest idea what to do. She looked around for any woman who could be searching for her lost child but failed to notice any.

Kate tried to see far ahead. Then she spotted something white and pointy that arched downward like an inverted canopy. It resembled the roof of a white marquee. She looked up at the blazing hot sun and felt sorry that the tender skin on Zack’s tiny shoulders was exposed and sunburned. She held the boy firmly in one arm, swiftly

loosened the straps of her backpack to ease her movement, and then swam slowly across to the pointy structure. Her right foot felt the added pressure and began to hurt again, but she had to ignore it. She needed to help little Zack. As Kate struggled past people across the water, she was relieved that the pointy top was indeed a marquee and that its height was within her reach. Gently she laid Zack down on the lower portion, which bent like a cradle. He was very tired and was already sound asleep.

Within moments, Kate heard someone call out, "Baby!" and a couple swam up to her. The woman reached to grab Zack from the marquee. She was in tears.

"He's my son," the woman said to Kate.

"He's been looking for you," Kate told her. "He said he's hungry. I think he's asleep now."

"Thanks so much!"

"What's his name?" Kate asked, wanting to be sure the woman was his mom.

"Zack."

"I'm Kate. And you are?"

"I'm Marni," she replied. "Thanks, Kate." The woman smiled at her gratefully.

"He's really cute," Kate said, relieved that little Zack's parents had found him. Marni was probably Mommy, she convinced herself. "Take care. I gotta go."

"God bless you," Marni said, waving good-bye as she held Zack in her arms.

Kate swam off to look for Gus again. For a moment, she felt really good about herself. She thought she should

quickly get to Gus as well and hoped he hadn't fallen under the floodwaters at any point. She continued to swim, relying on her arms more than her legs to keep herself afloat. She'd stop to tread water intermittently, calling out Gus's name. She'd then look out for anyone who could be waving back at her. But there was no one. She tried to imagine where he would have gone. Since he couldn't swim, he would have been holding on to some structure, or perhaps he could have been rescued. With his intelligence, he would have managed to find his way to safety, she thought, trying to console herself.

"Washington Station!" she then recalled him saying. "But it's underground, Gus! How could you be that dumb?" she exclaimed. People at the underground stations would be the first to drown in the case of a flood. "Or did you say *toward* Washington Station?" she asked aloud, trying to recall.

Kate stopped and hung on to a direction sign to see which way to go, but all the streets were completely submerged. Everywhere she looked was the same sea of muddy brown water. Dirt and debris accumulated, flowing swiftly about in rows as if orbiting the town.

The entire city of Chicago had been thrown into a megadisaster, swollen with water as if returning to the prehistoric Lake Chicago, the ancestor of Lake Michigan. No number of tunnels or brilliant engineering feats could contain the flood. It was frightening. People panicked as they saw the water rising inexorably, and nobody knew how to stop it. Rivers and canals had burst their banks,

electricity and gas services had been crippled, and airports and train stations had come to a standstill. Highways were closed, roads blocked, and streets jammed with vehicles as more and more of them became trapped by the rising waters. Shops and businesses were severely disrupted and forced to close. People were evacuated from their homes, and commuters on public transportation huddled together as they waited for help to come. The day truly made a mark in history.

Since Kate was unfamiliar with Chicago, the countless blocks of buildings surrounding her gave her no clue about which way to go. She swam and stopped to look around, and then she swam again, continuing to call out to Gus endlessly. Three hours passed, and she still hadn't found him. Her arms were sore, her left foot begged to rest, and her right foot felt completely numb. Kate was extremely tired, but she convinced herself she shouldn't stop. She was determined to find Gus.

She was tempted to take a short breather by lying face up and floating on her back, but the thought of immersing her hair for even just a second in the water that had become increasingly dark and turbid bothered her. She tried to persist in her search but was simply too tired. Finally she gave in. She told herself she would just cut all that hair away later, that it was no big deal. She then swam to a quieter corner, took a shuddering breath, and flipped over to float on her back. She lay with her eyes closed and tried to relax as the water soaked her back and into her hair. It felt really good. Kate was a strong swimmer with great stamina, but

that day, she was handicapped, dehydrated, numb, and cold. Her head was pounding with pain, and she could feel the pull at the back of her eye sockets. She was having a migraine attack again.

The migraines had started only recently, when she began experiencing hormonal changes. Her menstruation had begun during the last year, and each month, her head would be in so much pain that she would feel nauseated and be unable to completely open her eyes. Any contact with light would cause them to hurt as if her pupils had been pierced. She would have to miss classes and simply lie in bed, or if she needed to move around the house, she would wear sunglasses.

“Zomig!” she cried out. “If only I had one now.” It was the only painkiller that worked, and she couldn’t live without it. She remembered that her bag was gone, but it suddenly dawned on her that Gus could have it, and she had *his* bag! He would always carry a tiny box of her lifesavers with him since she was forever absentminded. Quickly she reached for his backpack, but the strap was gone from her shoulders. She couldn’t believe it! She tried to figure out when and where it could have slipped off. She was so mad at herself. She had lost Gus, and now she hadn’t even managed to salvage his bag.

Kate started to sob and continued to call out to Gus as she treaded water. There was still no sign of him. She felt totally hopeless, tired, and sick—completely nauseated and too weak to keep her legs moving. It was a lousy feeling of defeat, and she hated it. She closed her eyes again and

lay in the water face up. Totally disappointed with herself, she decided she wasn't going to swim on but would simply stay afloat until rescuers came for her. And if they didn't and she could no longer hold herself up, she would just let herself be washed away by the moving water. She just couldn't forgive herself for losing sight of her best friend, possibly causing him to drown.

She remembered how Gus had always been there for her. When she was six, he had lived next door, and Kate often saw him by his poolside whenever her swing flew fast and high above the fence that divided their houses. He wore thick glasses and was always reading. He reminded her of her dad, who always read the newspaper whenever they were together. And because she admired her dad, she wanted to become friends with Gus.

They became good friends very quickly and had grown very close over the years. It was as if they had found that someone, that sibling they both wished they had, who could know about everything that was going on at home, at school, and in the rest of their lives. They exchanged and shared everything with each other: food, books, pocket money, gossip, woes, and joys. They had no reservations toward each other, and maybe that was because they were just kids. They laughed, cried, and shared their innermost secrets with each other. They played their favorite games during sleepovers in Kate's room, when they would spend the night cracking jokes, solving riddles, snacking, and reading together under the duvet. But when Kate turned twelve and became aware of boy-girl relationships, she

decided sleepovers were no longer appropriate and made Gus climb back out the window and return to his own home when it was bedtime. Gus always confided in Kate. He felt she was the only person in the world who truly cared for him and loved him. She was the only one he could trust.

As Kate continued to float on her back with her eyes closed, she recalled Gus had said he had made reservations at a special place that night, a place that would surprise her. Then, as tears filled her eyes, she started murmuring the happy-birthday song to herself. Her legs began to lower themselves slowly into the water, weighing her body down. Every time that happened, though, her legs would subconsciously move to tread water and keep her afloat. No way would her unconscious mind allow her body to sink. That was probably because of her very natural survival instincts.

“Hey, miss!” said an old man swimming toward her. “Are you OK?”

Completely surprised, her eyes still barely open in order to avoid the glare, and her nose all choked, she replied, “Yes.” It then struck her that she could ask him for help. “Hey... Washington Station. Any idea which way I should go?”

He said that if she swam straight ahead, she would be near the station. Before swimming off in a different direction, he told her to take care. Kate felt grateful and found hope of seeing Gus again. She was sure that if he’d made it through the flood, he would be waiting there for her no matter what. He had never stood her up in all those years growing up.

She pushed herself to go on despite the fatigue and migraine. She would stop whenever she came across a structure or an object she could hold on to for a quick rest. Otherwise, she swam with her head steady above the water and eyes closed for most of the way to ease her headache. She would peep with her right eye half-open every few seconds to make sure she didn't collide with any person or thing.

"Just a little longer," she kept saying to herself as she struggled on. "Gus, stay put."

Kate finally noticed that she had distanced herself from the crowd. There were fewer and fewer people left around her. They all looked tired and swam lifelessly because, like Kate's, their energy had burned out. Kate continued to drag herself on, just a little bit farther each time, ignoring the discomfort of her injured foot. She wondered why the paddleboats and helicopters never came to rescue her and the others around her.

Kate spotted a tall red pillar in front of her and quickly stretched out her arms to reach for it. Her head was pounding hard, and she rested it against the pillar for a moment. It struck her that it looked like a typical part of the Chinatown Gate she had seen in the travel brochures. With her right arm wrapped around the pillar, she used her left to cover her eyes and shield them from the glare as she lifted her head up.

Indeed, between her index and third fingers, the words read, "Welcome to Chinatown." She thought about their walk from Washington Station to the park and didn't

recall passing Chinatown. She suspected she could have swum in the wrong direction. Completely drained of all energy, Kate couldn't think any further and only wanted to rest. Her head was killing her, and her right leg was numb beyond words. She tried to hold on to the pillar for as long as she could but was suddenly thrown into the water. She had dozed off. Kate began to cough and choke breathlessly when she realized what had happened. She felt cold and started to sneeze. She remembered that she must not keep still for too long, or she would soon catch a cold.

The surroundings had become dimmer, and Kate guessed it was probably near sunset. She hurried herself to move on before it became even more difficult to find her way. Bit by bit, she managed to slowly swim away from the pillar and go farther. Kate continued swimming until there was almost no one around her. She realized that the water had turned clearer and become a green-brown color. It had also gradually become shallower, since her feet were beginning to touch the ground. She smiled to herself, thinking that Gus, that genius, was always right. He had told her to head west, and there she was, probably where she should be. The water was only knee high here, and Kate could wade through the rest of the journey.

It was sunset, and the sky was softly cast in gradient shades of orange. There were barely any clouds, and it sure didn't seem as if a large part of Chicago had just been engulfed by water. When Kate finally limped her way to drier ground, she sprawled under a tree immediately and lay still to catch her breath. She felt dead. The muscles in

her arms twitched vigorously, her legs were numb with no sensation, her ankle ached unbearably, and her head still pounded with pain. She tried to bob her head up to catch a quick glance at her ankle. It had swollen up like a tennis ball. Kate dreaded the discomfort but continued to rest on the sandy ground, as there was nothing else she could do. She was soaked to her skin from head to toe. As chilly winds blew across the land, she began to shiver and sneeze.

Kate loved to swim. She had started swimming when she was three, and by the age of ten, she would swim two hundred laps in her twenty-five-meter pool every day after school. Whenever she felt miserable, she would plunge into the pool and swim her blues away. Lap after lap, as her arms reached out and pulled the water furiously back in freestyle strokes, she would scream and cry as loudly as she wanted, and no one would be able to hear her wail. When she somersaulted at the end of each lap, her legs would kick off the walls as hard as they could to vent her frustrations. It always made her feel better. The water would drown out her cries and soak her eyes red, and those were the only times no one would suspect or question if she had cried.

Although a strong swimmer, Kate found that her journey that day had simply been too overwhelming for her. As she rested on the ground, she was still worried about Gus and wondered if she were going to see him again. With much reluctance, she pushed herself to sit up, and she kneaded her arms and massaged her legs a little before trying to get back on her feet. The pain of her injured foot was back. Kate had to lean her weight back onto her left

foot and limp on. She reminded herself that she had to get to Washington Station before night fell, so she rubbed her eyes, determined to keep them open as she looked around to figure out her location.

She was surprised that the area didn't look anything like the business district where she thought she was headed. The skyscrapers and commercial buildings they had walked past from the station earlier were no longer evident. It was a quiet neighborhood, its streets lined with houses and a few shops and restaurants. She was feeling hungry but noticed that all the shops had their roller shutters down. She guessed everyone was afraid of the flood, and no one was about to take any risks. Kate tried to figure out which way to go, and as she looked everywhere, she thought she caught sight of a little house that looked like a chapel. She felt relief immediately at the thought of some kind Samaritan helping to ease her swollen foot. Perhaps she would even be offered some free food and drinks and even dry clothes. Excited, she limped hurriedly toward the chapel and soon found herself in the compound.

The little house had granite walls and was surrounded by a low white fence made of slim wooden planks about two inches wide. The fence was knee high, and Kate always questioned the purpose of such low security barriers. She was so exhausted that she swung her legs over the fence and limped expectantly up a path laid with circular tiles that led to a big wooden door. Without hesitation, she pounded with all her might, and her knock was answered almost immediately. Kate couldn't believe her eyes. It was indeed

a surprise. The person standing right before her wasn't a nun, a pastor, or any chapel worker. It was Claude, the one special guy in her life.

"Claude Spinelli?" She stared at him in disbelief.

"Kate?" He was surprised. "What are you doing here? Get in." He opened the door wide for her.

Kate was so shocked that she didn't know what to say. Upon seeing him, her face turned red, and her heart pounded quickly. She hadn't expected to run into Claude, especially at such a moment and in Chicago.

Outta all the places in the world, she screamed in her head, it has to be here and now with me looking like this? I can't believe it!

Claude was supposed to have spent the previous night with Kate, counting down to her birthday with her. But he hadn't called or sent any messages, and Kate had waited all night. She had been really mad at him but still wanted to see him, hoping he'd have a good reason for her. But now, after finally seeing him, she wished she hadn't. She became conscious of how she looked and worried that her hair was all messy and her clothes were soiled. She quickly ran her fingers through her hair, tightened her ponytail, and casually took a split-second glance down at herself. She definitely didn't look attractive.

"Thanks," she said as she limped into the house, feeling conscious of how awkward she must look with her swollen ankle. Claude closed the door behind him, hurried to grab his sofa throw, and placed it over her shoulders.

"You OK?" he asked. "Can I get you anything? Some dry clothes—oh, I meant a tee?"

“Yes, please,” she replied. “Any sorta T-shirt would be fine. And a drink with two aspirins, please. If you don’t mind.” Her hunger pangs were calling out, but she felt embarrassed to mention that she would also appreciate some food.

“Sure thing!” he replied. “You’re in pain? Please...sit.” He pulled out a chair at the dining table and walked quickly to the kitchen to fetch her a big glass of water with a few of his favorite almond cookies. He remembered that she loved them, too. He brought her the water and cookies and then turned around to the cabinet to get her two painkillers.

“Sorry, I can’t find the aspirin,” he said as he searched the cabinets. Kate was surprised and at the same time disappointed that Claude acted as if nothing had happened the night before.

“It’s OK,” Kate replied with a smile, careful not to let her disappointment betray her. She reached for the glass immediately and finished it in one chug. It felt so good, and she had never thought water could taste that sweet. Then she realized he was staring at her, and she felt embarrassed. She placed the glass down gently on the table and glanced away as she dried the corner of her lips with the back of her hand.

“I’m so dehydrated,” she added quickly.

Claude seemed to realize that his gaze had probably made her uncomfortable and excused himself promptly to get her the T-shirt. As he turned around and walked away, she observed and secretly admired him. He was in his usual polo shirt and jeans and looked so pleasant. She missed him, but she was also mad at him. She was confused about how she should be feeling.

As soon as he was out of her sight, Kate grabbed two of the almond cookies and stuffed them into her mouth. They were the best she had ever tasted! Looking around the house, she noticed there were no pews or an aisle leading up to any pulpit, as there would be in a typical chapel. It was just a rather small and old house, plainly decorated, with a touch of French country in its décor. The place was of deep earth tones and had classic oak cabinets with intricate arches around their corners. There were beautiful floral tapestries and furniture in toile fabrics, but the fabrics appeared worn and faded. This was definitely not a chapel as she had initially imagined.

“Here you go.” Claude was back in a flash and placed the white tee on the table for her. “So,” he said, “what are you doing in Chicago? Looks like you were caught in the flood. Is your leg OK?” He seemed shocked by her appearance but kept a straight face.

She couldn’t believe he had forgotten it was her birthday that day. He still hadn’t wished her a happy one! And he hadn’t kept his promise to count down with her the night before or even had the decency to apologize. But she wasn’t going to ask about it or even mention it. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that it bothered her or that she had waited till she fell asleep with the phone in her hand and laptop on the bed, waiting just for him.

“Oh, just a vacation,” she said. “It was...all so sudden... the flood. I still can’t believe it. And yes, it’s a really bad sprain, and I think there could be a fracture, too. And you? What are you doing in Chicago, and what’s with this place?”

She waited for a few seconds before picking up a third cookie to munch, mindful of her etiquette.

"This was my dad's house, and he left it to me," he said, as if she should have already known.

"Really?" She covered her mouthful of cookie with her hand. Claude nodded and pointed to a big mural on the wall that was a colorful mug shot of him. It had been created to resemble the silk-screen portraits by Andy Warhol. Kate realized he was probably telling the truth.

"Seriously?" she replied as she stood up and limped around the living area. "Why did I think it was a chapel? When I knocked on the door, I really thought it was."

"Yeah, you're not wrong. I think my dad mentioned this was once a chapel. Don't know what happened."

"I can't believe it," she commented. Kate had finished off all the cookies in her mouth. She walked over to rest on his plush white sofa, wrapping the throw he had put around her even tighter, keeping herself warm.

"So," she finally asked, "why are you back in Chicago?"

"Um..." he began, hesitating. "Well, I've got something I need to do here." After a brief pause, he said, "Kate, I don't know what this is about, but if you're here to express your feelings for me, please don't, because I'm not ready for it."

"That's crazy!" she snapped back quickly, completely floored. "I didn't even know you were in Chicago and that you lived here! I just swam and swam from Millennium Park, and honestly, I really don't know how I got here." Kate was taken aback that he would ever say that to her. She

felt stupid and humiliated. She decided it was time to go.
“Anyway, thanks for the cookies and—”

But before she could complete her sentence, they felt the ground tremble. It was as if a great force were moving it.

“What’s going on?” Kate asked.

“I’ve gotta pack and leave quickly,” he said in a panic. “It’s coming.” He rushed into his room to get his belongings.

The walls in his living room began to crack and pop with holes. Water began to gush in, and the room rapidly filled with water. The flood had finally found its way there. Looking on, Kate was at a loss about what to do. She hurried into Claude’s room to tell him about the situation, but he was busy grabbing things from different corners of his room and stuffing them into his backpack.

Then she saw that he had two bust-like artifacts he was very carefully placing into his bag. They looked scary and resembled real human heads. Both busts were bald-headed and looked like men in their sixties. One even had a pair of black shades over his eyes. Kate imagined the busts must be very valuable for Claude to bother carrying them along at such a moment.

As the floodwaters began to gather on the ground around Kate’s feet, chilly winds rushed through the window. She then remembered about changing into the dry T-shirt she was holding.

“Hey,” she asked, “where’s the bathroom?”

“Kitchen,” he answered abruptly. “Right there! Be quick.” He pointed to the guest toilet that was next to the kitchen as he continued to pack hurriedly.

Kate faltered as she hastily limped to the kitchen, hopped into the bathroom with her left foot, and shut the door behind her. She was having mixed feelings about what to do—if she should still stick around with Claude or leave and try to locate Gus on her own. She was fearful about having to struggle in the flood all by herself again, yet there was joy about running into Claude despite the odd circumstances. But she was also upset by the hurtful remarks he had just made. She couldn't really decide what she should be feeling.

Just before removing her wet T-shirt, she saw herself in the mirror and was shocked by her own appearance. Her eyes were covered in big patches of her own black eyeliner that had apparently smudged. Her hair was unruly and damp, filled with tiny debris from the floodwater.

"Oh, gosh!" she cried out, pointing to herself in the mirror in disbelief. "You mean you've been talking to him the whole time looking like that?" Hurriedly, Kate loosened her ponytail, brushed her fingers through her hair, and bent downward to shake the debris off her head. As she got back up, the top of her head hit a corner of the mirrored cabinet, causing her to squeal in pain.

"Why am I always so clumsy?" she asked, reprimanding herself as she held her hand over the pain. She didn't understand why, at such a pressing moment, when floodwaters were threatening their lives and Claude was waiting outside for her, she could still not get her act together, still handicapped by the shortcomings that had plagued her all her life.

“I’m sick of your spatial-awareness whatnot! I’m so sick of being me!” she cried, glaring into the mirror. Ignoring the pain, Kate changed into the dry T-shirt, quickly cleaned up her eyes with water, and neatened her hair. “This is no permanent eyeliner!” she chided their company’s new product line. Ready to go back out, she reminded herself to be agile from that point on and not cause either herself or Claude any unnecessary delay.

Kate reached for the bathroom door as fast as she could. The moment she pulled it open, she was taken aback. There was nothing out there except an empty white space. She couldn’t believe her eyes. What had happened? Where was the kitchen? She closed the door again and blinked her eyes hard. She thought about what she had just seen and didn’t believe it. She opened the door again, very slowly this time, convincing herself that her tears could have clouded her vision earlier. As she looked again, the space was still white, and nothing was out there. She was dumbstruck. There was no kitchen, no cabinets, no hanging pots and pans, no utensils of any sort, no refrigerator, and no oven or tables or chairs. Everything that had been there just before she’d walked into the bathroom had disappeared. The kitchen was no longer the same. It was an empty white space with only two big table islands in the middle.

“What happened?” Kate said to herself. “Why has everything disappeared?”