



Kobb's House



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Someone comes rowing through the bright summer night.

A girl is sitting in a small boat. The orange light of the midnight sun reveals that she has dark hair and is about the same age as me.

Where could she be heading in the middle of the night?

She's not very good at rowing. Actually, she's pretty bad. She keeps missing the water with one oar and can't keep the boat balanced. It jerks around, moving sideways as much as forward.

The sea is completely calm, but it still looks like the girl is really struggling.

I have to go to the bathroom. Three glasses of juice right before bedtime has forced me out of bed, but I can't take my eyes off the girl in the boat out there. Mom and Dad are asleep. I guess everyone else is asleep, too, since the neighbor's houses are dark and quiet. People are supposed to be sleeping right now, after all. But something is happening out there in the fjord.

Now, the boat comes to a complete stop. The girl stops rowing and stands up suddenly. One of the oars falls into the water. I take a step closer to the window.

What's going on?

The stern is sitting low in the water. The girl moves all the way to the front, looking around nervously. She's a few hundred feet away from land, maybe even more, but she doesn't have a lifejacket and the water gets cold at night. The stern is starting to get dangerously close to the water while the bow lifts.

The boat is going to sink!

What if the girl doesn't know how to swim?

I stand there, frozen to the floor, staring at the boat. Then it hits me: I have to help her! It's like something sets my body into gear. I yank open the patio door, leap over the railing, and run down to the shore. I untie the ropes at superhero speed and shove my boat out into the small waves. They bite at my toes with cold teeth. I can hear how quiet the night is

before I grab the oars, set course for the girl, and start rowing. Unlike her, I've rowed before. In fact, I've rowed every single day for the past month, ever since the motor broke down. I surge out into the fjord, glancing back at the dark house I just came from—no lights on in any room. No one heard me.

Then, the silence is pierced by a low but desperate scream. I turn around and see that the girl's boat is standing almost vertically now. She loses her balance and hits her shoulder against the gunwale before splashing into the water. I pick up the pace.

By the time I get there, the boat has gone under, and the girl is floundering in the water.

I meet her eyes.

Terrified, green eyes.

My heart is pounding like I'm about to take a penalty kick, but I feel strong as a gorilla. I lean forward and take one of her hands in mine. She's so cold. The girl grabs the side of the boat with her other hand and I pull as hard as I can. It's not long before she tumbles onto the deck like a big, weary cod. She clings to her arm and whimpers.

"Are you okay?" I ask breathlessly.

"Not really," she says. "But I'll survive."

She lies there with her eyes closed.

I look around. Her boat has been consumed by the dark sea. The two oars float like alligators on the surface, silently indicating that something unpleasant has occurred. Everything is quiet. My heart starts to slow down, and my breath, too. I row back toward shore.

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After a while, the girl sits up and looks at me.

"There was a hole in my boat," she says, her voice hoarse. "Perfectly round, like someone made it."

"The drain plug, probably," I reply.

She looks at me with those big, green eyes, clearly confused.

"I guess you don't spend much time around boats?" I ask cautiously.

She makes a grumpy noise. Then she lies flat on the deck again and closes her eyes. She whispers a few words in a language I've never heard before, but I'm pretty sure it's some kind of profanity.

I row slowly and silently.

"Where were you going?" I ask.

She thinks for a bit before answering. "I was going fishing."

Fishing? All alone, in the middle of the night? Her explanation is hard to believe, but I realize this isn't the time to discuss that.

"Could be some good fish out right now," I say instead.

We continue rowing in silence. The summer night doesn't say anything either, but it's chilly. The girl shivers.

"So you don't recognize me?" she says suddenly.

"Huh?" I say.

There *is* something familiar about the girl, I realize. But where have I seen her before?

The boat glides up onto the beach.

"My name is Daniela. You're Ask, and we used to play together when we were younger," the girl says. "My grandma lives there."

She points at the neighbor's house, which can just barely be spotted through the trees.

I scroll TikTok-fast through my childhood memories. Finally, I find something. Green eyes, yes. Brown skin. A treehouse. Rhubarb and sugar. A smaller version of Daniela looking for treasures on the shore with a smaller version of me.

"You moved," I respond. "Out of the country."

Daniela nods. "Egypt," she says.

We climb out of the boat and she starts walking away. After a few steps, she turns back toward me.

"Hey," she says. "It'd be really great if you didn't tell anyone about this."

We look at each other. Her dark, wet hair hangs disheveled over her face and shoulders. Her clothes are soaked, and she wraps her arms around herself to keep warm. Something in her big, green eyes convinces me.

"Okay," I say. "I'll keep it a secret."

Daniela nods seriously. Then she tiptoes toward her grandmother's house and disappears between the trees.

I turn around and still see only dark windows at home. No one has woken up. I'm freezing and I still need to go to the bathroom. As I head inside, a strange feeling spreads

through my body. It feels like I've stumbled upon a secret door, and I wonder if I dare open it.

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I lie awake, thinking.

Daniela. I remember her now. We must've been in preschool the last time I saw her. Maybe kindergarten. She used to come here during the summers and stay with her grandma and grandpa. Then her parents moved to Egypt and I never saw her again. Until tonight.

Why did Daniela suddenly show up now, six years later, in the middle of the night, alone in a rowboat? She couldn't row, and she didn't know about the drain plug. She could have drowned! I made it just in time.

I turn and stare out the window. There's an island with a black house far out in the sea. Kobb's house. A big, square block. With a tower, of all things. The whole set-up looks wrong somehow, like someone parked a tank in a grocery store parking lot or something.

Billy Kobb is the owner of the house. Billy was an adventurer who traveled around the world looking for treasures. He built the house on the island as a safe place for all of the nice things he found. Or stole. A lot of people say that Billy was a thief—a graverobber.

Then, a few years ago, he disappeared completely out of the blue. I've heard people say he was running away from all the people he'd stolen from. And no one has seen him since.

Billy Kobb was also Daniela's grandpa. He used to live next door together with Ingrid, Daniela's grandma. I guess she got sick of him because apparently, he was totally nuts. I don't remember much of the guy, only that he really liked animals, since they had goats, cats, dogs, and even a tame moose named Balrog. Billy moved out a long time ago, and then all the animals disappeared as well.

A thought hits me: was Daniela trying to get over to the island? To her grandpa's house?

No, that's impossible. No one goes out there, not without consequences, anyway. Apparently, Billy Kobb has made sure that something is always guarding his treasures. Late at night, you can hear strange sounds coming from the island. I've heard them myself. They come flying over with the wind. Loud roars. It's just seals, some of the grown-ups say. It's a monster, say others. A monster who guards Billy Kobb's treasures.

I don't know. But no one dares to go out and check. A few years ago, a group of treasure hunters from Germany tried. They didn't believe the rumors. Gossip and fairytales, they said. Big, tough guys with tattoos and long beards.

None of them ever came back.

I turn away from the window and pull the covers all the way up under my chin.

And then there's the black bird, too, the one that only flies at night. *That's* definitely not imaginary. It lives in the tower of Kobb's house, some say. It sees you. You can't go to the island without the island knowing you're coming.

Was Daniela trying to row out there in the middle of the night, all alone?

No. That wouldn't make any sense. Even though Billy Kobb *is* her grandpa. That can't possibly be where she was headed.

Or was it?

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I wake up to the first day of summer vacation. And what a day it is! The sun is flexing its muscles like an Instagram model and the air is practically Mediterranean. I convince Iris and Eik to play soccer in our garden even though they'd rather go swimming. I get that—it's definitely a beach day—but I have a plan.

Eik is my best friend, but he and Iris are twins, so she hangs out with us a lot. That's fine with me. Iris is teeny tiny, but cool and tough. Not like Eik. He's big and strong, but scared of *everything*.

Now he's standing in the goal. I shoot. I miss so badly that the ball flies into Daniela's grandma's garden.

We hear a loud bang, something shattering, and people shouting.

"I've never seen you shoot so badly before," Iris says.

I shrug.

"Come on," I say and climb into the neighbor's garden.

The ball has hit a table, which is now lying tipped over against the wall. I see the smashed remains of a water jug on the ground, and the yard is covered with pieces of waffles.

"Sorry," I say.

"It's fine," Ingrid replies. "I mostly feel sorry for your soccer team if that's how good your aim is," she adds.

Then I see Daniela.

She's sitting on a chair in a white dress that's covered in some pretty big splotches of jam. I recognize the dark hair and the emerald green eyes. She doesn't look all that pleased.

"Daniela!" Iris shouts all of a sudden. "Whaaat? Are you serious? I thought you were eaten by a crocodile!"

Oh yeah. Of course Iris and Daniela were friends when we were little. I realize that now.

Daniela smiles, runs over to Iris, and gives her a hug. Eik gets one, too.

"So you remember each other," Ingrid says happily. "That's great! You were so young the last time you saw each other. Daniela's staying with me while her parents are traveling."

"Cool," I say. "Do you want to come swimming with us?"

"Can you with your arm?" Ingrid asks, looking at her granddaughter with concern. "Daniela fell out of bed and hit her arm last night," she explains.

"Beds can be scary," I say, and to my delight, I see that Daniela is blushing.

"My arm's fine," Daniela says. "I'll come."

I notice her voice is warm and clear, not salt water-hoarse like last night.

She goes to get her swim stuff. We pass the time picking up waffles and shards of glass in the yard.

"Well, I suppose it was nice that you all showed up in the end," Ingrid says as she collects pieces of glass on a plate. "Even though my platter's broken."

"Why's it been so long since Daniela was last here?" Iris asks.

Ingrid strokes Iris's hair. "I really like going to Egypt, you see. It's so nice and warm there. And it's much cheaper for one person to travel from Norway to Egypt than for three people to travel from Egypt to Norway!"

Iris nods understandingly, looking like a 50-year-old aunt.

"But this summer, her parents had to go on an important work trip, and it worked out for her to come here to me," Ingrid says happily.

I put a piece of waffle covered in grass on the table. There's actually a snail on it, too.

Then Daniela comes back with a beach bag over her shoulder.

Ingrid smiles and waves as we leave.

"Have fun!" she says.