

“Come on, Abby!”

“Hurry up, squirt!”

Abigail’s older brother and sister called from the kitchen downstairs. For them it was easy to pack their bags with towels and bathing suits and galumph down to the car. For Abigail, the job was more complicated. She checked to be sure she had everything, especially her lucky rock, her beach ring, and her dark blue towel. Finally, she tucked the small wooden dolly into the outside pocket of her backpack and ran down to the car.

She scrambled into her place between her brother and sister and buckled in.

“All set?” asked Mom from the driver’s seat.

Daddy turned around and reached for each of the kids. Abigail grinned. Her daddy’s finger tickled her nose. Her brother squealed and ducked. “One, two, three. Yup, three noses.” He turned back to the front and tapped Mom’s nose.

“And four. Hey, aren’t there supposed to be five of us?”

All three kids shouted at him. “Your own nose, Daddy!”

Daddy crossed his eyes hard until he could see his own nose and looked quite started to find it there between his eyes. “Oh. Five.” He uncrossed his eyes.

“Yup, I found us all. Good to go, dear.”

Mom chuckled and rolled her eyes and backed the station wagon out, heading for the beach.

The ride took about an hour, and Abigail's brother and sister started in arguing before long.

“That’s my magazine, give it back!”

“No it is not, it’s the new issue of my magazine, they just have the same ~cover!”

Here they go, thought Abigail. She reached her legs down to her backpack and picked it up with her feet. She grabbed it with her hands and quietly opened the big section and pulled out her towel.

“Hey! There’s a graveyard on your side, you have to hold your breath until the next town!”

Abigail had begged her mom to let the old blue towel be hers. “Why?” her mother had wanted to know. “It’s getting kind of shabby, sweetheart, I’m turning the whole set into cleaning rags.” But Abigail had really wanted it, and now it was hers. She had noticed how closely the towel matched the upholstery inside the station wagon.

“Why do you like that ragged old towel, Abby?” her sister asked.

Abigail just shrugged and smiled and quietly spread it out over her, rolling the end up into a pillow for her head. Now she blended right in. Her sister and brother didn’t notice her for the rest of the trip.

Abigail was woken from her dozing by a wonderful smell. “The sea!” she cried and flung off her towel.

Her mom turned and grinned at her. “I knew the salt air would wake you, sweetheart.”

Abigail watched excitedly out her window for the last ten minutes of the ride, waving to the park ranger in the booth and bouncing when she got her first glimpse of the grey-blue sea.

The whole family piled out, and Daddy started calling out the usual instructions. “Sunscreen from Mom, hats on, stay within sight of one of us, no swimming until we’ve checked it out. Check in before you go off in a different direction.” They all shared the bags of beach toys and Mom and Daddy carried the enormous green lunch cooler between them.

In five minutes they set up what Daddy called the “staging area”, but it was really the tent and cooler and towels and beach chairs.

Abigail’s brother and sister slammed their hats on their heads. “We’re going to the tidepools!” they shouted, and ran off.

Daddy shook his head. “Why is it that cooped up in a car, they can’t go ten minutes without annoying each other, but with a whole beach and ocean, they stick together like glue?”

“Because they love each other,” answered Abigail.

Her Daddy looked at her and smiled. “I guess you’re right, Abigail. Are you going with them?”

Abigail smiled broadly. “No.” She picked up her backpack and put on her hat. She looked out across the broad beach, nearly empty in the very early spring. She pointed. “I’m heading for the point. I’ll stay where I can see you!” Abigail headed out, proud that she was big enough now to go on her own as long as she stayed in sight.

She heard her Daddy call gently behind her, “Watch the tide, Sweetie.” And then he spoke more softly, maybe he was speaking to himself, “On the gulls’ way and the whales’ way...”

Abigail touched her toes very, very barely to where the sand showed the last wave had reached and waited. It took one, two, then on the third wave, the water reached her toes, shocking them with icy coldness. Abigail squealed and laughed and danced backwards from the water. "Hello!" she shouted to the sea. She listened for the answering hello.

She knelt down where the dry sand warmed her knees and reached into her backpack. She felt around and found her lucky rock. She looked it over, all smooth and worn. The worn place in the middle exactly fit her thumb when she squeezed it. It was her first gift from the sea, and reminded her of the hot, crowded-beach day when she first began to make friends with the sea. For all the people and sounds and gulls wheeling in the air, the sea had seemed lonely. Abigail had sat in the surf near her mother, whispering, "Don't be lonely, I'll be your friend." Just a few moments later, that stone had washed into her hand, and Abigail had kept it afterwards as her lucky rock to remind her of her new friend. Now, she slipped the rock into her pocket.

Next she took the small wooden doll from the outside pocket and held it in her hand. It was a doll from the dollhouse in her room, dressed in a little dress

and jacket that she had made herself with her mom's help. Abigail jogged out along the point, making sure she could see Daddy.

She counted the waves until she saw a really big one. She watched it come in, break, and start rolling toward her. Then, Abigail reached back her arm and flung the doll just as hard as she could into the surf. The doll disappeared into the roiling water. No trace of it remained when the wave spent itself on the sand and retreated to the depths, so she knew her friend had it now. She looked up across the water to smile and feel happy in her friend's company.

Next, she felt for the beach ring. Abigail wasn't sure what it was made of. It was a pink brown color, covered with little holes and crevices. It definitely wasn't wood. But the special part was its shape - like a twig that branches, but the branches came back together, so she could slip her finger through it and wear it for a ring. After she got her lucky stone, Abigail had hunted for a gift to bring to the sea. On the last visit of last fall, she had tossed in a small mirror with a picture of Winnie-the-Pooh on the back. Just as she left the surf at the end of the day, she felt the beach ring with her toes. Now Abigail slipped the ring onto the pointer finger of her left hand.

Abigail looked up and felt her heart nearly stop beating.

There in the water, just beyond the breakers, she saw a young girl swimming, looking back at her.

The young girl lifted an arm, smiled, and waved to Abigail. Abigail smiled back, but her head was full of questions. Hadn't her family been alone on the beach? Wasn't the girl freezing cold so early in the year? Why was such a little girl out swimming by herself? The stranger seemed to be calling to Abigail, but the waves were too loud for Abigail to hear. She cupped her hand behind her ear to show that she couldn't hear and stepped toward the waves.

The girl dove below the surface in the direction of shore. The breakers seemed too dangerous to swim through, and Abigail watched anxiously. In a moment, the girl reappeared shoreward of the surf, holding her body up with her arms and trailing a long, fishy tail out behind her!

Abigail had met a mermaid!

"Hello, hello!" called the maid. "I knew you'd come!"

"Hello," called Abigail back, walking up to her ankles into the water. "You did? You... you're a mermaid!"

The maid laughed a laugh that sounded like water sparkling against the smooth shore rocks. “Yes, yes, and you’re a land maiden.” The mermaid held up the wooden doll. “You’re my friend.”

Suddenly Abigail understood how her special things had come to her from the sea. She held up her left hand to let the beach ring show. “Then you’re my friend, too,” she said. “I’m Abigail.”

“I’m Annia,” said the mermaid, for they were close enough now that they needn’t shout. “I’ve been waiting for you. I knew you’d come soon. I’ve missed you.”

Abigail didn’t quite know what to say. “I... I’ve missed you, too, I’ve missed the whole sea. Why did you know I’d come soon? Have you been lonely?”

Annia pointed out from shore, beyond the point. “I need help. Can you see the storm far away?”

Abigail squinted her eyes and looked. She could barely see a dark place on the horizon. “I think I see a big, black cloud. Is that it?”

“That’s it,” said her friend. “It’s a big, big storm that’s even reaching below the water and making a whirlpool.”



Abigail's eyes widened in alarm. "That sounds like a hurricane! But hurricanes don't start up here."

"That's the problem. It's not a natural storm. I think it's made by magic! That's why I need you!"

"Magic! You mean... What do you mean that's why you need me?"

Annia turned her huge grey eyes on Abigail. "Because you're my friend. No one can do magic all by themselves, magic is in the spaces between people. When you called to me not to be lonely and said you'd be my friend, I answered you with the rock. That's when the magic started. But it takes both of us together to do it!"

"Magic? Us?" Abigail felt as though her breath had been taken away for a moment. Annia was talking about magic, real magic, as though together they could do it. "But what can we do about the storm? What's so bad about it?"

"It's changing the weather, it's stirring up the bottom. Things like that have huge consequences. They have to happen in their natural course, or else thousands of plants and creatures will suffer out of order. The silt of the bottom is starting to stir up and cloud the water and harm the gills of fish!"

“Oh!” gasped Abigail. She hurriedly glanced back toward her Daddy. “How do we stop it?”

“We have to find out who’s doing it and why. We have to go into the storm and see what’s at the center!”

“That sounds scary,” said Abigail, “but I’ll try. I don’t know what to tell my Daddy, though, we’re not even supposed to go swimming this early in the season.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t worry. Does he believe in mermaids?”

“Not that I know of. This could all be pretty tough to explain.”

“Well, you have the ring, so the swimming won’t be dangerous.”

Abigail looked in surprise at the beach ring. “What do you mean?”

Annia pointed at Abigail’s feet. They were covered now in water. “Are you cold?”

“No, no I’m not, actually. Why are my feet not cold?”

“You have my gift of swimming when you wear the ring. When you go below the water, you’ll be able to breathe it, too. That’s the kind of thing magic between friends can do, make each other safe. The water’s not cold because you have the swimming of a mermaid. It doesn’t feel cold to me, either.”

Abigail touched her hands to the water, too. Smooth and tickly, but not cold. “But I told Daddy I’d stay where I could see him.” Abigail could not break her word to her Daddy.

Annia furrowed her brow for a moment. “I know! We’ll make sure you can see him no matter where you go! Quick, let’s build a sand-girl.”

The two friends found a spot out of reach of the tide and built not a sand castle, but a sand girl. From a distance, if Daddy only looked briefly, he would think he saw Abigail sitting down looking at a rock formation.

“Now we need something to cover her eyes,” said Annia.

Abigail didn’t quite understand, but she knew they were doing their magic together. “Hang on.” She raced back to Daddy.

“Can I have some sunglasses, Daddy?”

He set down his book and fished out a pair from his bag of supplies.

“What’re you doing, Sweetie?”

“Oh, I’ve made friends with a mermaid and we’re going to save all the fish from a magical storm.”

“Great. You take care of those fish, Honey.”

Abigail ran back to Annia, pleased that she had told Daddy what was going on, even though he might have thought she was pretending. They put the sunglasses on the sand girl, and Annia took the small mirror out of the pouch around her waist and explained to Abigail what to do. They held the mirror and the glasses between them and took three deep breaths together and Abigail spoke. “We want to keep my word that I’ll be able to see my Daddy.” They looked in the mirror. Instead of their own faces, it showed a view down the beach, just where the sunglasses were looking! Abigail would be able to see her Daddy by looking in the mirror.

“Now to work!” cried Annia and she rolled back along the beach to the surf. Taking Abigail’s hand, she led the land maiden into the world of the sea.

Abigail worried a little when her head ducked below the waves, but she found that she didn’t cough or splutter at all! She could breathe quite naturally under water, and see well, too. She smiled at Annia. “I really can! I really can swim with you!” she cried, and a great stream of bubbles flowed upward from her mouth, but the sound of her words carried to her friend.

On they swam, closer and closer to the darkness that was the storm. All the water about them was green and mysterious. Abigail could feel the pull of the

water where it make a great swirling whirlpool. “If magic is between people, don’t there have to be two people making this storm?”

“Sort of,” said Annia. “The people could be dolphins or water sprites or something like that, too. And sometimes the magic isn’t on purpose. Let’s look if we can see anyone.”

They tread water on the very edge of the swirling waters and peered through the murk. Abigail thought she saw the edge of a great blue cloth of some sort, but it was very, very big. “What’s that?” she asked.

“That’s it!” said Annia. “That’s the cloak of the Great Grump!” Annia explained to her friend that the Great Grump was an old and experienced magician who was known for her curmudgeonly temper. “I think she was once a mermaid, but she may have turned herself into something bigger and more grumpy.”

Looking deeper and deeper in the water, the girls followed the path of the storm to its far end.

“That whirlpool reaches all the way down,” said Abigail. “What’s at the very bottom of the sea?”

“Hmmm,” said Annia. “That’s where the Kraken sleeps. He’s a really huge sea monster. Really, really huge. Wait!” Annia thought to herself.

Abigail waited and wondered at the strange creatures and plants that drifted by her on the unaccustomed current.

At last Annia remembered. “The Great Grump and the Kraken are friends. They always make terrific magic together at the Midwinter Festival, lights, colors, kind of like your fireworks, but the sparks last and last and swirl away into the night-dark sea. But this year they didn’t do it. The Great Grump was there, but the Kraken never showed up. The Grump was very grumpy when she stormed out of there.”

Abigail caught her breath. “Did you hear what you said? Stormed out of there. Could this storm be what happens when one friend is mad at another?”

“Wow.” Annia hovered thoughtfully in the water. “So, how do we fix it? How do friends stop fighting?”

“Well,” said Abigail, “if I we had been mad at each other and I wanted to make up, I’d send you a letter or a present, like the mirror and the beach ring. But would the Kraken do that if we explained that the storm was hurting the other creatures?”

“I don’t think so,” answered Annia, “The Kraken is a pretty big and scary monster. And probably very annoyed if the storm has woken him up. He’d want a present from the Grump, instead.”

Both girls thought hard. If each of the great sea monsters, the Great Grump and the Kraken thought that the other one wanted to be friends again...

“That’s it!” cried Abigail. “It doesn’t really matter which friend makes the first step, right?”

“Right. It’s just getting one of them to make...” Annia’s face broke slowly into a big smile. “Bouquets,” she said, “great big bouquets of seaweed and anemones and coral.”

Both girls were grinning like the sunshine while they gathered huge armfuls of the prettiest things they could find. Annia even convinced some yellowfish to dart in and out of the arms of seaweed in the bouquets. She used a special crystal to write notes on oyster shells attached to the bouquets. The two girls worked out what to write to each one that would be true, but would leave the impression that it was from the other big monster. To the Kraken they wrote, “I missed seeing you at midwinter,” which was true, since Annia hadn’t seen him. To the Great Grump,

they wrote, "I'm sad that you're feeling extra grumpy." And Annia signed them both "Your friend."

"That should do it. Now to deliver them." Annia held her hands out to Abigail, they took their deep breaths, and said, "Let these bouquets of friendship go to both ends of this storm."

Quick as a wink, the water swirled and twirled the gifts in opposite directions, one up to the surface and one down to the depths of the sea. The girls waited a long moment. The fury of the storm seemed to be held back. Suddenly it slowed all the way down and stopped. Millions of particles of sand and mica glittered with the sunlight which now streamed through the waters.

Annia and Abigail quickly swam away, out of the way of the reunion of the Great Grump and the Kraken. When they reached the surface, they splashed and played across the newly calm sea to the beach.

"I wish I could stay and play all day, Annia," Abigail was feeling a little sad.

"I wish so, too. But we mer-folk need to be kept secret for now. Join your family for lunch before they try to talk to the sand girl." The two friends laughed at that.



Suddenly, Annia scooped a great handful of seawater, still glittering with particles and sunlight, and rubbed it hard in Abigail's hair. Abigail laughed and ducked, shrieking. "What was that for?" she giggled.

"That was 'thanks for the doll'," said Annia. "I think I'll name her Abigail. Will it be long before you come back?"

"Not long," answered Abigail. "As soon as I can get my parents to bring me."

They hugged, and Abigail walked out of the sea. She turned and held her hands out to her friend. They watched each other take three deep breaths, and Abigail whispered, "We need to keep the mer-folk secret for now, for their safety. My family can't suspect." And all the water magically dried itself out of her hair and her clothes. Except the bottoms of her pants.

All the way home, Abigail slept deeply, tucked under the blue towel. And each time the sunlight shone on her hair, it glittered as though it were full of mica and magic.