



NEW FRIEND

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Chapter 1

WELCOME HOME

Keep Out signs have never really stopped me. Even when my mom and I lived in the city, I would ignore them. I've always been drawn to places that are off limits. Those spots always bring new adventures. That was why I didn't think much about the rusty Private sign behind our new cabin. I hopped the fence and made my way into the woods.

Before I describe what I found in that forest, I'll explain why I was there. It had been a tough year for my mom and me. First, the newspaper she

was working for went out of business. My mom scrambled to find work, but good writing jobs were hard to find. In the meantime, we were spending her savings.

Then I got into trouble at school. Teachers have always said that I have an active imagination. I spend a lot of time doodling, and I had started drawing these funny characters. The problem was they looked a lot like my teachers. Okay, they actually *were* my teachers, but with modifications. For example, I drew Mr. Tallen as half-man and half-pig. The grumpy, pouty dragon I came up with looked a lot like Ms. Amber.

Other kids thought my drawings were hilarious. The teachers did not. Two weeks of detention was my punishment. Plus, my mom had to meet with the principal twice. Adding to her stress had been the worst part.

In June, we got a call that changed everything. My mom's uncle died. He had lived alone in a cabin on Bit Island. It was forty minutes by ferry from the

mainland. My mom hadn't talked to her uncle in years. Yet he'd left his little cabin to her, along with some money.

My mom and I had a heart-to-heart talk. We made the decision to move to Bit Island and live in Uncle Sherman's place. She planned to do some freelance work and write a novel. This had always been her dream. I would get a fresh start at a new school.

At first, it seemed like we had the best plan ever. From the minute we set foot on Bit Island, I didn't want to leave.

Most of the island was covered with dense forest. Cedar, fir, and spruce trees stood tall and cast long, cool shadows. Only one town was on the island. It was along the southern coast. Uncle Sherman's place sat on the eastern edge of that town. The cozy cabin was at the end of a quiet street that butted up against the forest.

My mom and I quickly moved in and got settled. Then I started exploring. I hopped over the fence near

our cabin and headed into the woods. It felt like the forest was calling to me. The island drew me deeper and deeper into the heart of it. I climbed over fallen trees and made my way through boggy patches. Meanwhile, birds sang and screeched around me.

Then I came to a clearing and found the most perfect swimming hole I'd ever seen. The water reflected the trees around it, making it appear a beautiful pine green. A smooth gray rock sat at the edge of the swimming hole. It was huge. What a perfect place to hang out and relax.

The water glittered in the sunlight. It seemed to say, *Welcome home, Derek. This place is all yours. Wonderful things will happen to you here.*

I took off my shirt and shoes and dove in.



Chapter 2

THE SWIMMING HOLE

That first week of summer on Bit Island, my mom and I got into a routine. She would make coffee and breakfast then disappear into her small office to write. I would pack my bag with a sketchpad, books, and a sandwich. Then I would disappear into the forest. After a hike up the hill to the swimming hole, I would spend the day swimming, reading, and drawing.

Was I lonely? Sure. Part of me wished I had a friend to share my oasis with. But mostly, I felt

lucky. The swimming hole was the most beautiful place I'd ever visited, and it was all mine.

One sunny afternoon, that changed. I was lying on my wide, flat rock, dozing off when I heard something moving in the bushes nearby. Deer, rabbits, and foxes often stopped by to drink from the lake. But these footfalls sounded louder than those of a woodland creature. This sounded like a human.

I sat up and looked around, shielding my eyes from the sun.

A boy was standing at the edge of the water. He looked about my age and had messy black hair. His jeans were cut off at the knees and made into shorts. The red-striped flannel he wore was about two sizes too big. His scuffed work boots had seen better days.

"Hey!" I said, waving at the boy.

The sun was blinding me. For a second, I couldn't see him anymore. It seemed like he had disappeared. Then the boy came back into focus.

"Hey!" he said as he walked over. "Isn't this

place great?" He scrambled up on the rock and sat next to me.

I nodded. "I love it so much."

He grinned. "I come here all the time."

"You do?" This surprised me. "My mom and I just moved to the island. I've been coming up here every day, but I haven't seen you or anyone else."

The boy nodded. But he didn't offer any explanation.

"Want to see something?" he asked. Before I could answer, he hopped off the rock.

I followed him to a tree on the edge of the swimming hole. Its exposed roots snaked into the water. The boy scrambled up the branches until he was about ten feet off the ground. He kicked off his boots, and they fell to the forest floor. They looked vintage. The deep red leather was old, and the thick laces were tattered.

The boy unwound a rope tied to one of the branches.

When I realized what it was, I let out a laugh. “Oh, that’s awesome!”

He smiled as he hugged the rope and pushed off the tree. The boy swung over my head and over the water. Then he let go and fell in with a splash. When he popped up to the surface, his wet hair fell over his eyes.

He flashed a smile. “Your turn!”

We hung out for the next couple of hours. The boy’s name was Jonathan. We played on the rope swing and shared my sandwich on the rock. I told him about how my mom and I ended up on Bit Island. He was easy to talk to. I even explained how I’d gotten into trouble at school. Jonathan listened closely to my stories.

“How long have you lived on the island?” I asked.

He looked around. “A while.”

“Who do you live with?”

“My dad,” Jonathan said.

I waited for him to say more, but he didn't. "What's the school like here?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's fine. Hey, do you want to have a swim race?"

"Sure," I said as he hopped up.

By the end of the afternoon, I realized that all I knew about Jonathan was that he lived with his dad on the island. On that day, it didn't bother me. Jonathan was just quiet. He loved the swimming hole as much as I did, and now I had a friend. That was all that mattered.

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After moving to a small island town, Derek hopes to make new friends. When he meets Jonathan, Derek is overjoyed. Is a summer full of fun ahead? Or will it be ruined by a dark secret?



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