

Chapter 1 – Nelson

It was the end of August, and the sky was clear back-to-school blue. Mariah's mother had parked on the bay side of the beach in the lee of the dunes to keep out of the steady sea breeze. The sand was warm and golden but a snap in the air signaled summer's passing, sending a shiver of goose bumps across Mariah Miller's tanned arms.

She was going into the sixth grade this year, into a new school, in a new town, in a new state, knowing no one. The first day loomed closer as the air got drier and the sun sank lower. She kept imagining that first day of school, being forced to stand up and introduce herself to the class. She had done it so many times before, in other classrooms, in other towns, in other states, each September of her life. Her cheeks got red just thinking about it.

Glistening sunlight sharpened the tips of beach grass as they danced in the breeze that swept Mariah's hair across her face. When she stepped over a mound of dried seaweed something crunched under her foot. It was the dried shell of a baby horseshoe

crab, all golden and crinkly. She hadn't noticed them before, hundreds of small crab shells strewn about in the seaweed like meatballs in a big pile of pasta.

She was collecting the golden shells along the edge of the marsh grass when she spied an interesting stone on the hard mud. It was flat and shiny, and had edges that came to a point. It was an arrowhead! She turned it over and over in her hand feeling how it had been smoothed by time. She ran to her mother's beach chair. "Mom," she said, opening her hand. "Look what I found!"

Mariah's mother sat back in the chair with the big fat novel she had been reading for the past few days. Since she hadn't lifted her head away from the page, Mariah thrust her hand between her mom's sunglasses and the book. "Hmm," said her mother.

"Mom," said Mariah, "it's an arrowhead! You know, from the Indians who lived here a long time ago!"

"Actually, it's a spearhead," said her mom, peering over her glasses and squinting at it. "Arrowheads are smaller. And we don't call them Indians anymore. Indians are from India; your spearhead belonged to a Native American." Her mother took the stone from Mariah's hand, inspected it for a moment, and handed it back. "Very nice," she said, returning to the book.

Mariah held the spearhead tightly in her fist as she explored the marsh. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw something moving down by the water. When she looked up she saw nothing out of the ordinary, just some dark rocks scattered in the muddy sand. The tide was low, so it wasn't the small rippling waves further out or the white glint of a seagull coasting in the distant sky.

Thinking how pretty they'd look all lined up on the mantle in her new bedroom, she gathered the shells until her hands and arms were so full she dropped one or two every time she bent down to pick up another. Combing the tide line for a littered plastic bag or some other container to put them in, she found the perfect thing half buried in the blackened heaps of seaweed. It was the hollow shell of a big, old horseshoe crab, strong and rigid, dark as ebony.

Wherever she looked, she saw more and more shells. But something kept drawing her attention back to the water. She left her crab bowl up on the beach and headed down to investigate. Splashing through a tidal pool she stubbed her toe on a rock, and the spearhead flew from her hand and landed on the wet sand. She limped over to find it pointing, like an arrow on a map. It directed her eyes across the sand to an upside-down horseshoe crab that looked like a jagged rock with ten wildly wiggling legs. It was rotating its tail, which was not long and pointed like other horseshoe crabs' but broken off at the end. It was attempting to flip over, and drawing a design in the damp sand that looked like a quarter moon.

As Mariah reached down to pick up her spearhead she heard a small deep sound coming from the animal. At first it sounded like bubbles popping. But then, she thought she heard it say, "Help! Help!"

She gently flipped it over. "Thank you," she heard it say. Or, did she?

Looking around to make sure no one was paying attention, she leaned down closer, inspecting the broken tail. "Looks like you broke your sword," she whispered. She always talked to animals that way, but never expected them to talk back.

"Not a sword," the voice creaked, "it's a telson."

Mariah smacked her forehead with an open palm. Oh my gosh, she thought. I'm crazy!

“Mariah!” her mother called.

She was so startled by her mother's voice, the spearhead popped out of her hand again. “Put your hat on, dear,” she said.

Mariah leaned down, and whispered to the crab, “a *what*-son?”

All she could hear was a bubbly sound. She must have imagined that it had talked. Silly, she thought, of course horseshoe crabs can't talk.

Her mom glanced up from the book and called down to the water again, "Your hat, please." Ever since her mom had read in a beauty magazine that the best way to keep from getting wrinkles was to keep your face out of the sun, she was always lecturing Mariah that it's never too early to start caring for your skin.

"Okay," Mariah said. Disappointed, she reached down and picked up her spearhead.

“A telson,” said the creature.

Mariah's eyes widened as she looked at the spearhead in her hand. She placed it carefully on the sand. “Could you repeat that, please?”

All she heard was the lapping of small waves. She picked up the spearhead again.

“It is a telson,” said the creaky voice, “That is what my tail is called.”

“Oh my goodness,” she said, shocked that she was actually talking to this animal, worried that she was crazy, but liking it so much that she wanted to keep the conversation going. She clenched the spearhead in her fist. “How did you break it?”

“Break what?”

“Your tail, your telson, I mean.”

“I didn't break it; I sacrificed it in an act of true selflessness to a beakless great blue heron who is now forever grateful.”

Mariah was flabbergasted. The crab went on about the importance of giving to those in need while Mariah shut her eyes as hard as she could, and then opened them slowly to make sure she wasn't dreaming. She stood there shaking her head in disbelief: A talking horseshoe crab, and a philanthropic one at that! Her mom had just said that word the other day, philanthropic. She said it meant showing concern for others and giving to charity. Giving half of your tail to a beakless heron certainly was philanthropic. She tried to imagine the heron, such a majestic bird, its long neck poised elegantly above the water, with a horseshoe crab's tail for a beak.

Well, if she was going to be talking to a horseshoe crab, she might as well ask. "How did you attach it to the heron's mouth?"

"I didn't," he said. "Some mussels pitched in, and the sandpipers helped. They are very helpful birds, you know."

Mariah listened in disbelief. It was too incredible! The horseshoe crab went on chatting as if he talked to kids on the beach every day.

“Sandpipers?” She had seen the small brown birds scampering about the shore, and now he was telling her that they were helpful? What next? She looked at the spearhead in her hand. “Wait a sec,” she said as she knelt down and put it on the sand. “Sandpipers?” she said again.

All she could hear was a bubbly sound. She snapped the spearhead up in her hand. "...very helpful animals," she heard him say. “They glued my half telson to the

heron's beak stub with the adhesive mussels use to stick themselves to rocks and each other. It is one of nature's strongest glues, you know. Then they tied it with string to hold it until the glue set. They found the string on a stale balloon that landed on the beach."

"Wow," was all Mariah could say.

"Now when he dines, Aaron, that's his name, stabs a fish with his prosthesis, flips it into the air, and sends it right down his gullet!" The horseshoe crab seemed happy to have someone to talk to, someone who listened attentively. He told Mariah that most creatures don't listen very well at all.

"Mariah, your hat, dear," her mom called from the beach chair.

"In a minute," Mariah said impatiently. She didn't want to move. She was afraid to take her eyes off that animal for fear it would crawl back into the bay and disappear forever.

"Now!" the voice behind the book said. Sometimes Mariah thought her mom must have x-ray vision, always seeing everything but never seeming to look away from her book.

She told the crab to please stay put; she'd be right back. There were so many things she wanted to ask him. As she trudged through the soft sand up to the canvas bag, she began to get a greedy, impatient feeling. It was like rushing to get in line for something, and not knowing if there might be any left when her turn finally came. She wanted to find out everything that crab knew. She didn't care if she was crazy.

The stiff breeze raced from the ocean over the top of the dunes, and the waves crashed hard on the other side. It was chilly standing up there in the wind, and the length

of her shadow reminded her again that school was starting in a few days. Quickly, she pulled her sweatshirt on and headed back down to the water.

"The hat," her mother said.

Mariah pivoted on her heel and sent a plume of sand flying off behind her as she marched back to the bag for her blue baseball cap. It was a Red Sox hat her dad had given her when they moved. He said that now that they lived near Boston again they could be real Red Sox fans. Mariah didn't care either way, but she liked the cap because her dad had given it to her.

She plucked a little crab shell up by the telson and twirled it between her fingers as she ran back to her big, live, *talking* crab as fast she could.

What a relief! It hadn't moved an inch. She looked from the little dead one in her hand to the sturdy, dark brown creature. He, she assumed he was a he just by his tone, had a few barnacles growing on his shell and a small piece of green seaweed attached to the base of his broken tail.

Holding the spearhead was like holding a wish, a wish that the magic was still working. "Looks like you've got a few guests here," she touched his shell lightly. "You've got three barnacles and a nice piece of seaweed growing on your shell." She crossed her fingers on one hand and clenched the spearhead in the other, hoping he would talk again.

"Do I?" he replied to her delight. "Well, I'm happy to have them along for the ride. Anything that wants to attach itself to my carapace is certainly welcome."

"Carapace," she repeated. "That's your shell?"

"Indeed," said the horseshoe crab.

She didn't want to seem nosy, but she was very curious. He seemed so wise. "If you don't mind my asking...are you are boy or girl?"

"I am neither. I am an adult male *Limulus polyphemus*, probably one of the most misunderstood creatures on this earth."

"Misunderstood?"

"Just look at me! Humans somehow think we, with our sharp telsons and full suit of armor, are evil or dangerous. The truth is, we *Limulus* are among the most pleasant creatures on earth!"

"I agree," said Mariah. "You sure are a pleasant crab."

"And, then you go and call me a crab! I am an arthropod; I'll admit to that, but not a crab at all."

Mariah was dumbfounded. The horseshoe crab went on and on. "I'm more like a tick or spider, only a distant relation to the true crustaceans, those crabs and lobsters and shrimps." He heaved a bubbly sigh. "But we're all brothers and sisters in this watery world. You too, young human."

Mariah knew what he meant. She could feel the whole round world under her feet, and the liquid home of her new friend flowing full circle.

The crab made a noise, *abble bidle*, interrupting her dreamy thoughts. "What? I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"Have you a title?" he repeated.

"Title?" She wasn't sure what he meant. Nelson seemed to use some pretty fancy words. "Oh, you mean a name," she said using her best manners. "My name is Mariah Miller, and I am very glad to meet you, sir."

"You can call me Nelson, Nelson Telson."

"You are named after your tail?"

"It follows," he said wryly.

Mariah giggled, and then giggled some more when she realized she was actually joking with this dark brown, tank-like creature who impressed her with his fine sensibility and rich vocabulary. She glanced around the beach. All the late season sunbathers and picnickers were at a safe distance. Her mother was deeply involved in her book.

She lowered her voice. "How do you defend yourself, now that your telson is broken?"

Nelson answered thoughtfully. "We have no natural enemies. A telson serves no purpose as a weapon of defense or offense, which is why I could share part of mine with Aaron. My only armament is this tough old shell, but even this cannot save me from an inconsiderate human, such as that little one on this beach who accosted me."

Mariah looked down the shore to see a kid waving a red plastic shovel and chasing a small flock of seagulls that he had just fed the crusts of his sandwich to. "Oh, is that how you got upside down?"

"Indeed," he scowled, "and if I had been just a little less generous and kept a half-inch more of my telson, I would have turned aright and been gone from this beach some time ago. And we never would have met!"

That was unthinkable. She really liked Nelson. He was easy to talk to, and she didn't feel the least bit shy with him. She felt she had finally made a friend in this new town.

"Mariah," her mom called, "it's time we got going."

She looked up to see that her mother had not closed the book yet, which meant that she must be near the end of a chapter. Mariah knew she had at least another minute or two before she really had to start moving.

"I wish I could stay and talk to you more. There's so much I want to ask you. Will I ever see you again?"

Nelson gave a small laugh. "You really don't know much about horseshoe crabs, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"We *limulus* never travel more than a few miles from our spawning place, the place where we were born. Sometimes the tides and rough waters take us for a ride, but generally, we stick around."

Mariah was flustered thinking of her friend Nelson going off a couple of miles into the bay. Why, he could end up in Kingston, or Plymouth! She'd never find him.

"But, but how will I ever get to see you again?"

"We'll just make a plan," he said. "I'll meet you right here at low water."

"How about tomorrow?" She was anxious. She could ride her bike, and her mom would be happy she wasn't moping around the house. Then she remembered that she was going sailing with her dad and had a dentist appointment in the afternoon. She looked up to see her mother put the book in her beach bag. "No, that's no good. How about Friday?"

"Friday? What's that?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Two suns," Nelson said.

Mariah understood. "Yes, the second sun. Low tide, Friday," she said excitedly, holding her spearhead tightly. "It's a date!"

"A date?" Nelson was confused. "Hum," she heard him mumble as she skipped off, "maybe she thinks I like fruit."

Mariah shook out her beach towel sending a glimmering mist of sand into the breeze. She scooped up her horseshoe crab bowl, and headed for the Jeep.

As they bounced along the sandy road towards the bridge Mariah's mom glanced over at the bowl of shells. "So," she said. "What was so interesting down there at the water today?"

"Oh, nothing," said Mariah. She held the spearhead in her hand and her secret close to her heart. Nobody would believe her anyway; they'd just think she was making up one of her outlandish stories.



That night Mariah opened the journal her mother had given her when they had moved. She was almost afraid to write. What if somebody read it? They'd think she was nuts. But when her mom had given it to her, she had said that a personal journal was a sacred thing, and nobody will read it unless invited. She opened the cover and uncapped the nice pen that came with it. She wrote:

Private Property Keep Out

in big bold letters on the first page, flipped to the next and began her journal.

Today was the weirdest day of my life. I found a magic spearhead from the Indians and then a horseshoe crab talked to me! I'm not kidding.

When I was holding the spearhead I could hear the crab talk, but when I dropped it I couldn't hear him. He is a very nice animal and he told me a lot about being a horseshoe crab. He gave part of his tail called a telson to a heron. I'm not kidding. That's why he couldn't flip over which is really lucky because if he had a longer tail I never would have met him. I'm going to the beach on Friday at low tide. I hope I can find him and he'll talk. Maybe I'm crazy but this really happened.

Chapter 2 - The Kite

Mariah stepped quickly to keep up with her dad as they headed down to the end of the lane. His life jacket swung from the oars on his shoulder, back and forth with each step of his long legs. The Swiss army knife she had found in her Christmas stocking last year dangled from the clip on her belt loop. She patted her pocket where she had put a safety pin to make sure the spearhead wouldn't fall out.

The *Kite* rocked gently at the mooring, early sun glinting off her shiny parts, and little waves of clean white reflections radiating from her hull. Mr. Miller flipped the dinghy over and dragged it through the eelgrass to the water. He groaned and rubbed his back. "You okay, Dad," she asked.

"Just a little backache, honey," he said, holding the dinghy's stern while Mariah got in with the oars. When she was on the seat, he pushed hard and jumped in all at once lifting Mariah up as though she were on the high end of a seesaw. She rowed carefully, turning now and then, and when she got close enough, she pushed one oar forward and pulled the other back to swing the dinghy alongside. "A perfect landing," said her dad.

Mr. Miller hoisted the sail while Mariah climbed onto the foredeck and tied the dinghy to the mooring. The *Kite* was a pretty little catboat, a Beetle Cat, that they called a “Bug.” Mariah’s dad and her Uncle Joe had raced her in the bay when they were boys. Whenever the Millers had moved, the *Kite* had come along with them on a trailer. When they were on the road back to Massachusetts, Mariah’s dad said the *Kite* was happy to be going home, and so was he.

The sail flapped impatiently, pushing the boat back and forth like a compass needle pointing to the wind. Her dad watched as Mariah prepared to cast off. She studied the wind just as he had taught her. She looked at how the other boats were swinging on their moorings, checked the yarn telltale tied to the stay, and then, with a very serious look on her face, she stuck her index finger in her mouth to wet it and then held it up in the air, feeling the breeze. Her dad chuckled.

“Out of the east,” she said, “onshore.”

Mr. Miller nodded in agreement. Once he had taught her something, he sat back and let her take charge. That spring as they put a new coat of salmon pink paint on the boat’s deck, he ceremoniously handed over command of the *Kite* to “the next generation,” which meant Mariah was now the skipper and she steered the boat.

“Let’s go around Clark’s Island,” she said.

“Good idea,” said Mr. Miller as he dropped the centerboard.

Mariah cast off the mooring, hopped down into the cockpit, and pushed the tiller hard. “Dad, you take the main.”

”Aye Aye,” he said, reaching for the thick line and pulling it in while Mariah pushed the tiller back and forth a few times, filling the sail with air and sending them off

toward Eagles Nest. Her dad trimmed the sail as Mariah headed the *Kite* higher into the wind.

They sailed along until Mariah called out, “Ready about, hard to lee!” and pushed the tiller to starboard. Her dad ducked as the boom swung over the top of his head, and the *Kite* headed for the Big Bridge. She looked over at her dad who was scrunched in the cockpit, his long legs bent at the knees like he was trying to fit in a bathtub. The steady wind pushed the sandy hair from his forehead and made him squint.

The basin of Snug Harbor was filled with boats of all shapes and sizes. The two church steeples poked up through the trees, their whiteness reaching high into the blue sky. The wind began to build and turn as they sailed across the bay, right for the spot where she had met Nelson the day before. She imagined him out there under the water doing horseshoe crab things, crawling along the muddy bottom, eating worms. And then she thought about how nice it would be to not have to go to school on Monday.

“Animals have all the luck,” she said.

“What’s that, honey?” her dad called over the wind.

She raised her voice. “I was just thinking about how nice it would be to just be an animal and not have to be a person. I said, ‘Animals have all the luck.’”

Her dad squinted at her. “What do you mean? Some animals have a pretty hard life.”

“No,” she disagreed, “they just *are*. They don’t have to do all the silly things people do. They just *are*.” A gull was riding the breeze above them. “Look at him,” she said pointing. “He’s just being a gull.”

Mr. Miller laughed.

“They don’t have to go to school. They don’t have to wear clothes. They don’t have to move all the time...”

“Mariah,” said her dad, “I told you this was our last move. And I’m sorry we had to move so often, but that was part of my job. I promise you, this time we are staying put.”

She hadn’t meant to make him feel bad. “I know,” she said, only half believing it.

“And besides,” he said, “animals move around all the time. Birds fly south in the winter and north in the spring; salmon go upstream to spawn; deer move all over the place to forage for food, even monarch butterflies migrate.”

She conceded; he was right.

They had almost reached the beach. The wind was blowing harder now, and the waves were big and sloppy. “Ready about,” she commanded, and they ducked into the cockpit as the boom came over. Mariah’s dad slacked the main while she headed the *Kite* on a broad reach along the beach.

Her dad pointed out the landmarks telling her about the snowy owls at High Pines, and the lazy summer afternoons swimming in Gurnet Creek. He had grown up there, so everything wasn’t quite so foreign to her as when they had moved to other places. Whenever they had gone sailing or driven around in the car, Mr. Miller acted as tour guide, naming the streets and places, and telling her tales of his childhood.

The boat lurched ahead in the stiff breeze towards the tip of the island. “Used to be a big gull rookery on this end of the island. Now they’re all gone. Foxes,” he said.

Mariah held onto the tiller with both hands, struggling against the forces of wind and waves. She was too busy trying to steer to chat about gulls and foxes. Just then the

boat fell down a trough, burying the bow and sending water washing over the deck. Her dad offered to take over, but Mariah refused. Now that she was the skipper, she was going to steer no matter how hard it got. The boom lifted and fell, shooting the *Kite* forward with each wave. Her father showed her where to make landfall so they could reef the sail to make it smaller so the boat might be easier to handle.

“Jibe ho!” she hollered as she ducked down and pushed the tiller, feeling the wind cross behind her, readying herself for whatever might happen when the sail slammed over with all of its power. Her dad didn’t seem worried at all as he skillfully trimmed the main and then let it out slowly, taming the wind, and making her feel safe.

Now she had to figure out how to land the *Kite* without crashing into the island. She wanted to show her dad that she was capable. She wanted to ask him what to do, but even more, she wanted to show him she could do it. She had to make up her mind quickly as the boat was flying straight for the island.

She steered as far downwind as she could without jibing, past the sandy landing place, and when it seemed the right moment, she yelled, “Rounding up!” and pushed the tiller hard to bring the *Kite* up into the wind, to land sideways on the shore. Her dad let go of the main, and the boat glided onto the beach. Mariah let out a big sigh of relief.

“Good job,” Mr. Miller said, jumping out and pulling the *Kite* ashore.

Everything seemed so still now that they were on land. Mariah used her jackknife to cut a clean end on the reefing line so it could fit through the grommet on the sail. They were working together rolling the bottom part of the sail and tying it down, when a man came strolling towards them from an old white clapboard house. “Is that you, Mike Miller?” He reached out and shook hands. “Long time,” he said.

Mariah's dad introduced her to the man, Jeff, an old friend of Uncle Joe's, and then they went on talking about old times when they were kids. Mariah stood by half listening.

"Hey," said Jeff, "Remember that time Joe and Tim and I got all those horseshoe crabs?" Mariah's ears perked up.

She didn't want to ask but she had had Nelson on her mind, and she couldn't help herself. "Got all those horseshoe crabs?"

"Yep," he said. "There was a bounty on them, and we got a nickel apiece for every crab we collected."

"A bounty?"

"Yep, they were everywhere. They were considered a nuisance. But people have learned better. They're real valuable now."

Mariah couldn't imagine it. How could a horseshoe crab be a nuisance? "What did you do with them?"

"We brought them down to the harbor master in wheelbarrows. We must have done about six loads one day."

"What happened to them?"

"I'm not sure," said Jeff scratching his head. "But it was a lot of money for us kids to make back then. We bought a lot of ice cream that summer!"

Mariah felt sad all of a sudden. In fact, the whole business made her uneasy as she imagined wheelbarrows full of Nelson's relatives being carted down to the waterfront. She didn't want to hear anymore about it so she moved off, looking around at the old houses, windblown lawns, and paths leading to places she had never been.

“Can I go exploring, Dad?”

“Sure,” he said, “go up that path until you find the graveyard I told you about. The Pulpit Rock is just on the other side. But don’t be gone long. We need to get underway soon.”

Mariah ran off up between the cool cedars. The stout trees sheltered her from the wind, and she felt as though she had entered a new world. A red fox trotted into the path ahead of her. “Hello,” Mariah whispered excitedly under her breath. The fox turned, saw her, and darted off into the underbrush. She ran after it hoping to get a better look, but it had disappeared.

She slowed her pace as she reached the cemetery. It was dark and shady, surrounded by tall trees. The clayish dirt was hard packed from the footsteps of many years. Unclasping the safety pin, she brought the spearhead out of her pocket. I’ll bet the Indians liked it here, she said to herself, “the natives,” she whispered, remembering what her mother had said.

“They did...” said the fox in a soft, matronly voice as she stepped cautiously out from behind an old gravestone. She eyed Mariah and added knowingly, “for the most part.” Her fur was tawny, just a little redder than the dried tufts of grass along the edge. The fox met the girl’s surprise with a bold gaze.

Mariah gasped. Yesterday, a horseshoe crab, and today, a fox! She was speechless. Maybe she really was crazy.

The fox didn’t seem to care. “This is a sacred place.” She put a delicate paw forward and tipped her muzzle to the ground as if to genuflect. “All places are sacred.”

Mariah thought about that. Yes, all places are sacred.

”The settlers used this island not only as a place of worship, but later this sacred place was a prison for the People of The First Light, a prison for those who tried to feed their hungry by sharing bounty held by white men over harsh winters. People of The First Light know not of ownership, only of sharing.”

“People of The First Light,” Mariah repeated. “Who are the people of the first light? Can I meet them?”

“Most died from the plague that the settlers brought with them in their ships; some were sold in slavery; few remain today. They shared this land and all of its gifts.”

Mariah looked at the spearhead in her hand, and a wave of understanding washed over her. The idea of owning land made no sense at all. It certainly wouldn’t make sense to a creature that moves around to find food. The natives moved around to find food. It surely wouldn’t make sense to a migratory bird, a fish or horseshoe crab. If a storm can wash away land, then how could anyone own it? “All of the earth belongs to all of the creatures,” Mariah blurted out.

The fox nodded agreement, and trotted off. Mariah followed her through a shaded path to a huge granite rock in the center of a sloping field. Cedars and oaks stood around the field like sentinels. Four little foxes stumbled into the clearing, nipping and chasing each other.

“Oh,” squealed Mariah, “they’re so cute!” She knelt on the ground and held her hand out as if to befriend a dog, but the kits just ignored her. “May I touch them?”

“Please, no,” said the fox politely. “You are a fine and honorable creature yourself, but your species in general cannot be trusted.”

“I know,” she said, embarrassed to be a human, associated with Uncle Joe and Jeff, and the dreadful things they had done to all of those horseshoe crabs just to get ice cream money. She patted the big rock with her opened palm. It was at least three times her height and almost as big as a house. The stone had warmed under the morning sun. Mariah climbed up on it and peered down at the fox. “How is it that you can talk to me?”

“It is you who speaks to me.”

The sound of her dad’s shrill, two-fingered whistle came over the woods and echoed in the clearing. The little foxes stopped playing and stood at wide-eyed attention, waiting for direction from their mother. Mariah stood up high on the rock and yelled through cupped hands, “Coming, Dad!” When she turned back to say goodbye, the fox and her kits had disappeared.

Chapter 3 - Weather

Mr. Miller was relaxing in his easy chair. The evening news was on television, but he couldn't see it because he was reading the newspaper. Mariah went to the bookshelf and got the H book of the encyclopedia. When she walked by his chair, he tossed his newspaper onto the hassock, patted his knee, and invited her to hop on.

“That was quite a sail this morning, eh?”

Mariah nodded. “Wasn’t so bad after we reefed the sail.”

She was small for eleven, almost twelve, and happily still small enough to sit on her dad's lap. He squeezed her tightly and said, just as he had ever since she could remember, "Maariiiiiaahhhh..." stretching her name out so it sounded like a cat's meow. He sang the same old song he always did, a song she'd heard on an old cartoon. *Mariah, Mariah, I'm waiting for you...* And then he made up a silly rhyme. This time he sang, "...to tell me a tall tale about the first day of school!"

"Oh, Daddy, you know it doesn't start until Monday," she tried not to whine. "Did you have to remind me?" Just the thought of it gave her a bad feeling all over.

He asked her what she was looking up. "Horseshoe Crab," she answered

"Oh," he said, "those ugly things with the pointy tails that stick up in the mud? You wouldn't want to step on one!"

"No, I wouldn't. I might hurt the poor thing," she said all persnickety. She leaned against him, opened the book, and found the entry with a picture of a horseshoe crab just like Nelson only it didn't have barnacles and seaweed attached to it, and its tail wasn't broken. The caption read: horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*). She whispered to herself, *lim-u-lus poly-fee-mus*, just like she'd heard Nelson say it. "They eat small mollusks and worms." She wanted to tell her dad about Nelson, and the fox, but thought better of it. Maybe it had been all in her imagination.

Her dad pointed at the picture. "That tail looks dangerous to me."

"Well, it says here that they only use the telson, that's the tail, to move around in the mud, dig nests, and hitch a ride with a partner to mate in the spring and summer." Mariah perused the article thoughtfully. "But they left something out."

She checked her dad's eyes to make sure he was paying attention. Sure enough, he was looking at the TV weatherman pointing at a map of the region and talking about an approaching tropical depression and gale warnings. Nelson was right, most creatures aren't very good listeners.

She tapped the book to get his attention. "They use their telson to flip over when they've been turned upside down. I saw one do it yesterday on the beach. Well, he tried to do it but his telson was broken off, so I helped him."

Mr. Miller pointed to an old scrapbook on the shelf. "Grab that for me, please." Mariah got the album and hopped back on her dad's lap. He winced. His back hurt.

"Remember Jeff, on the island?" Her dad opened the scrapbook and leafed through the crumbling black pages of photos and clippings stuck on with deteriorating Scotch tape until he found what he was looking for. He pointed to the picture. "There used to be a lot of horseshoe crabs around here when I was a kid. Too many. That's why Jeff and your Uncle Joe collected the bounty. A nickel apiece, big money back then."

Mariah stared at the yellowed newspaper clipping. The smiling summer faces of her Uncle Joe and his barefoot pals looked out at her, with their tanned shoulders and sun-bleached hair. They were standing with their wheelbarrows in front of a mountain of horseshoe crabs. "They were a nuisance," her dad said.

"Oh, Daddy," she cried. "They are not!" She was aghast.

"What did they do with them," she asked, hoping against hope that they took them somewhere else and let them go.

"I think," her dad replied, "they were buried in a big pit."

She had read in the encyclopedia that in some coastal communities horseshoe crabs had been ground up for fertilizer. The thought of the slaughter of all those innocent, helpless horseshoe crabs made Mariah so angry and sick she could hardly speak. She fought back tears as she imagined somebody carelessly tossing her friend Nelson onto a pile of writhing horseshoe crabs bound for a fertilizer plant! How could she ever like her Uncle Joe again?

"Did a horseshoe crab ever hurt you?" She didn't wait for his reply. "No! No wonder there are so few of them now," she said in a huff. "People are *so stupid!*" She

knocked the scrapbook to the floor as she jumped off her dad's lap, ran up the stairs to her room which she hadn't gotten used to yet, and slammed the door.

Her new room had old wallpaper with pink rosebuds on it. It must have been the daughter's room, of the family that lived there before. There was something about the pink color that bothered Mariah. Just then, in her mood, she had decided that she hated that fake pink color of those stupid wallpaper roses. She had to admit though; there was one very good thing about her new room. It had a fireplace in it. It was a real working fireplace from the olden days, with an iron arm that swung from two eyelets sunk into the mortar. Her dad had promised to teach her how to use it when the weather got cold, and her mom said she'd buy her a kettle so she could make tea in her room.



Mariah picked up her journal and wrote furiously.

Today we went sailing and it got very windy. We stopped on Clark's Island to reef the sail. Dad met up with an old friend, a horseshoe crab killer. He and Uncle Joe got tons of them and they were killed. I hate Uncle Joe. I can't believe that people can be so mean and stupid. I went to the graveyard and the pulpit rock where pilgrims had church. You're not going to believe this but a fox talked to me! Really. She talked about the people of the first light and how they shared and how all places are sacred and all places belong to all creatures. When I hold the spearhead I can hear animals talk to me. This is the second time. Tomorrow I'm going

*to the beach. I hope Nelson will talk to me again. I hope I'm not just
crazy.*

There was dampness in the air, and as Mariah dozed off she smelled the smoke of all of the fires that had burned there over the past two centuries.



She dreamed she was in a symphony orchestra, playing a triangle in the percussion section. Next to her, the booming kettledrum demanded the audience's attention. The piece was one she had heard in music class at school, a piece the teacher used as an example of music's imagery. Deep in her sleeping mind she knew it was Friday, and she had to finish up there at the symphony and ride her bike to the beach to meet Nelson. She was dreaming of her bike wheels rumbling over the wooden planks of the big bridge as she heard the louder rumbling of a car approaching from behind. Suddenly an earsplitting crash woke her.

She sat bolt upright in her bed as a flash of white light fell across the wallpaper roses. Waves of rain pelted her windows. She smelled the smell of the old fires and heard the wind whistle in bursts down her chimney. Lightning cracked so loudly it shook the house. Thunder rumbled and boomed. The tropical depression that the TV weatherman had been talking about had arrived as a big and powerful storm. Any other day she would have welcomed the wild weather, but not today. She had plans, and she wasn't going to let a little bad weather get in the way. Her alarm clock read 7:30; she planned to wait until ten o'clock and leave just before low tide. Hopefully the storm would have weakened by then.



Mariah crept past her mother towards the mudroom. She had never lived in a house with a mudroom before. When they had just moved into the house and her mother had told her to leave her jacket in the mudroom, she had laughed because the name sounded so funny. "I mean it, young lady," her mother had said sternly, thinking Mariah was being a smart aleck.

"Why is it called a mudroom?" Mariah giggled at the thought of having a room just for mud.

"Because, that's where you leave your muddy boots and wet clothes. Farmhouses had them and this was a farmhouse. So, kindly hang up your jacket in the mudroom." That was just two months ago, and now the mudroom was filled with the family's jackets and sweatshirts and hats and beach towels and tennis racquets and golf clubs and shopping bags and sandals and boots and rain gear.

She heard her mother turn the page of the new book she had started yesterday, a big fat one with fancy curlicue lettering on the cover. Mariah felt the front pocket of her dungarees to make sure she had the spearhead. She wanted to show it to Nelson. As quietly as possible, she lifted her yellow slicker off the hook and slipped into a pair of too-large rubber boots.

So far, so good, she thought as she opened the back door slowly and tiptoed out. Just then a powerful gust of wet wind grabbed the screen door from her and slammed it against the side of the house.

"Mariah dear," her mother called from behind her book. "Where are you going?"

"Just out for a little while," she called as she closed the door.

"It might be too stormy," her mom called.

"The storm is clearing," said Mariah. Lucky for her that her mother was so involved with the book she wasn't paying attention or she might have told Mariah that she couldn't go.

The thunder and lightning had stopped and the rain seemed to have diminished. Mariah hoped for a clearing sky as she pedaled the mile to the bridge. The houses along the road were wet and shiny and dotted with shards of green leaves that the wind had torn from the late summer trees.

It began to rain again as she coasted toward the head of the bridge. Now that she was out of the shelter of the trees and houses along the street, it was difficult to pedal against the strong wind that blasted across the Back River and over the bay. The rain started coming down so heavily she couldn't even see the other end of the long bridge. Her face was drenched, her feet were getting wet, and chilly water had begun to trickle down the back of her neck.

Pedaling with all of her might, Mariah had gotten halfway across the bridge when a huge gust of wind knocked her off her bicycle. She tumbled and skidded along the planks. Her boot flew off, and her bare ankle was scraped raw on the edge of the wooden sidewalk before she finally slid to a halt. Rumpled, and stinging, she gathered herself up from the slippery planks. Water and wind drove beneath her under the bridge and out into the bay.

She limped back to the rail to retrieve her bike. Getting back on, she noticed that her front tire was nearly flat. It must have been damaged when it struck the sidewalk's planking. Now how was she going to get across the bridge?

She looked across the angry water to where Nelson should be waiting for her. The strong wind swept spume over whitecaps. Her ankle really hurt as she pulled the boot back on. Both feet were numb and soggy.

Crushed, she sat down on the wet sidewalk, getting her pants all the wetter. She put her face in her hands and started to cry. Tears warmed her cool cheeks for a moment before they got mixed up with the storm on her face. She reached into her pocket to make sure she hadn't lost the spearhead; the warm stone felt like comfort in her wet hand. Hard rain pelted the back of her yellow slicker, tap, tap, tapping on her shoulders and telling her to turn around and go home.

Clenching the spearhead so as not to lose it through the cracks between the planks, she got up to assess the damage. She heard a tiny peeping sound beneath the howling of the wind. There on the lower rung of the wooden railing, blinking rain from her eyes, was a disheveled little sandpiper.

"Oh my goodness!" she whispered. "You must be lost. Are you all right?" Mariah was concerned for the little brownish gray bird clinging to the rail, its tiny feathers blowing every which way.

"I should ask you the same," the bird exclaimed in a bossy little voice. "What on earth are *you* doing out here?" Mariah was beyond shock.

"I have an important meeting with a horseshoe crab," she said, thinking how silly it was to be making excuses to a little bird, but the bird commanded respect.

"Meeting with Nelson Telson is canceled due to inclement weather," peeped the bird. "Rescheduled for next sun at low water. Please respond at your earliest convenience...which is now." The bird tapped a tiny talon impatiently.

"Oh, yes, yes! I'll be there for certain," said Mariah. "Next sun at low water."

The little bird took off. "But wait," Mariah called. "I didn't catch your name."

"Peep," said the bird as it darted away under the bridge.

