

Untitled Chapter One

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A cold wind whooshed up from the Pacific and swirled around my feet. I shivered, peering down at the steel gray ocean. The path to the water looked too steep. Suddenly a car driving past me slowed. I jerked my head back into my hood like a scared turtle. If Mom caught me here, I was toast. A fifth grader grounded for eternity..

Matty had already started down the path. She turned and beckoned. "Come on, Zee. Get your butt in gear."

Biting my lip. "I...I don't know if..."

"Aw c'mon. Just sit down and push off. Pretend you're on the playground slide."

"Slide? You kidding? These are designer jeans. They cost two hun....."

"Jeeze," Matty broke in, "Your parents must be crazy spending that kind of money on your school clothes. Now c'mon."

Slowly I eased my body over and onto the dirt path that twisted down the steep hill./The rocky beach looked a million miles away. How did I get into this mess?

A week ago my life was normal. I was Zenith Lincoln, eleven years old. Zenith Lincoln, smartest kid in my class and headed for an Ivy League college..

On that day Ms. Ross asked me to hand back yesterday's math tests. She always folded them in half to hide what she'd written, but I peeked. My grade was the highest --- 98. Evan Hu, my number one competition, only got a 95. When he saw me smiling, he scowled.

"What'd you get?" he asked.

Before I could answer, someone said, "Hi there." I turned and saw a new girl sitting behind me. She had a goofy grin on her freckled face.

"What's your name?" I said, checking the papers in my hand.

"Martha Segerstrom. Matty to my friends,"

There was no paper for Matty. I reached across the aisle to hand one back to No-Hoper Nora. Even folded, I could see the big red 70 scrawled on the top. They should never have put Nora in our class. She couldn't keep up.

The new girl grabbed my sleeve. "What's your name?"

"Zenith Lincoln." Lifting my chin so she'd get the point, "Zenith to my friends." Not that I had time for friends, but that was none of her business.

"I'll call you Zee," she said and smiled like she didn't notice me freezing her out. She whispered, "Wanna do something after school?"

I shook my head. "After school, I have fencing lessons."

Her eyebrows went up. "You...?"

"Zenith." Ms. Ross tapped on her desk.

I scurried down the aisle handing out papers. Mom was going to be stoked when she heard about my 98.

Matty Segerstrom spent the whole morning passing me notes and poking me in the back. I tried to ignore her, but she acted like a word in last week's vocabulary list — persistent. When Ms. Ross wasn't looking, I passed her a note that said, Quit it with the notes. Talk at lunch.

I always bought lunch, but Matty had brought hers in a paper bag. She sat next to me on a bench in the lunchroom. Usually I sat alone and did work for extra credit. "Every little bit helps," Mom liked to say.

"So,.." Matty reached into her bag and pulled out an egg salad sandwich and some chocolate chip cookies. If Mom were here, she'd shake her head because of the calories, but my mouth was watering. Especially when I looked down at the blah veggie taco on my plate.

Matty took a big bite of her sandwich and said with her mouth full, "What about doing something tomorrow?"

"Can't. On Tuesday I have Chinese lessons."

She blinked. "What for?"

Just to shut her up, I explained how all four of my after school enrichment classes — fencing, Chinese, calligraphy and Latin would look really good on my college applications.

"But you're a fifth grader," she yelled, her freckled face turning red, "You've got years and years and years before college."

Was it my imagination or was the whole lunchroom turning to stare at Matty's fuzzy braids, her plain yellow tee shirt and her baggy jeans turned up at the bottom? Someone

started laughing. I felt like moving away from her, but I was curious. What did she want me to do after school? Nobody had asked me to do anything for a long time.

Matty leaned close. "So, what days don't you have lessons?"

I didn't answer. I was thinking how much my fencing class sucked. Leaping around pointing a fake sword at another kid. And I was the worst one in the group. Mom thought fencing would make me graceful, but it wasn't working. Yesterday, after two years of lessons, I tripped on the edge of the rug in our living room, crashed into a table and broke some fancy china dish she bought on Ebay. Why can't Mom accept that even if I'm smart, I'm still a klutz?

"Okay, Zee, " Matty crumpled her paper bag and threw it into the trash. She stood up. "There's other kids I could invite, you know."

I kept looking at my plate. Whatever she wanted me to do, Mom wouldn't let me. I thought about going behind Mom's back. That made my armpits feel sweaty. I shook my head.

Believe it or not, Matty didn't give up. She kept passing me notes .She sat beside me at lunch, dropping crumbs all over the the table. Once, she ate a whole bag of Cheetos without even offering me one. She licked orange dye off her fingers and yakked about how much fun we'd have if I'd change my mind.

Got to admit she was wearing me down. The next time my boring fencing class rolled around, I said, "Okay I'll go," Was I crazy or what?.

"Deal." Matty jumped up grinning.

"So where do you want to go?"

Matty didn't answer, just smiled. One of her front teeth overlapped the other. Her parents must be really poor if they couldn't afford braces.. But if they were so poor, how could they afford to live in Pacific Estates? My mom was in real estate so I knew what houses cost here. A lot.

When the last bell rang, I hurried outside. I'd already checked my daily schedule, the one Mom printed out for me. At 3:00 I had to catch the bus sent by the Five Arts Building for kids taking after school classes. Their yellow bus was parked in front of the school. "Zenith Lincoln's not coming today," I told the driver. Then I called my fencing teacher to say I was sick. He was okay. Probably glad his worst student wasn't coming..

Matty was at the bike rack, holding a bright pink sidewalk bike. "Wanna ride on my handlebars or sit behind me?"

This girl was seriously nuts. "Get real. You can't ride without a helmet and neither can I."

Matty rolled her eyes, but started walking her bike.

"Hey, where are we going?" I asked.

"To the beach."

An excited shiver ran down my back. In third grade my class went there to study the tide pools. I'd always wanted to go back, but Mom said seeing it once was enough..

As we got near the ocean, the air began smelling like fish. Now we were standing on a high cliff looking at an ocean the exact color of Mom's antique platters. Above us birds sailed in circles. Matty hid her bike and her backpack behind some bushes.

. "Want to put your stuff in with mine?"

"No way, " I hugged my backpack, "This goes with me. It's got my Ipod, my phone and my wallet in it."

Clutching my pack, I stood on the cliff, praying nobody in the passing cars would recognize me.

Matty had started walking down. She yelled back, "Hey, want me to come up and give you a push?"

"No!" I placed my butt exactly in the middle of the path. Holding my breath, I shoved off. I bumped down the hill, crashing from rock to rock, grabbing at tufts of grass trying to slow myself . Finally I reached the bottom. I stood up, feeling achy and bruised. But I'd done it, I'd actually done it. And survived. I smiled as I brushed prickles and dirt off my jeans, pulled the fox tails out of my socks and looked around.

The rocky beach could have been a hundred miles away from Pacific Estates. From here you couldn't see a single house. The only noise came from small waves hissing as they broke on the beach. On my left a clump of black rocks poked up out of the water.

"Let's go see the tide pools,." I said pointing.

"Unh uh." Matty grabbed my hand and tugged me along, "We're going to go explore that cave." She pointed to a point of land that stuck way far out in the sea. In the middle was the cave. From here it looked like a scary monster with a black hole for its open mouth.

I cleared my throat. "Uh...I think I'll just stay here. The anemones and those little crabs are really cool."

Matty shook her head. "Zee, this is supposed to be an adventure, not a boring science trip."

She'd just called me a nerd. Still I hesitated.

"Hey, you got this far," Matty argued, "don't quit now."

"But why do you want to go in that cave?"

"For fun, dopey, for fun! Don't be a spoilsport."

"Okay," I said, dragging the word out real slow.

We trudged along the beach in silence. Me wondering if Mom had checked in with my fencing teacher. Did he tell her I called? I slid my hand into my pack and turned on my cell phone. Whenever I don't answer, Mom goes ballistic.

As we got nearer the cave, I saw a narrow ridge of rock leading to the dark entrance. It was just wide enough for one person to sidle along. Right in front of the cave, the waves banged into a big rock and splashed high in the air. Anyone trying to get past that water spout and into the cave was going to get soaked. If you tripped on the ridge, (and I'm a big tripper) you'd lose your balance and fall..

Matty shaded her eyes and took a step forward. Over her shoulder, she said, "You coming?"

I shook my head. "Unh uh, it...it looks...dangerous,"

Matty laughed. "Of course it is. That's the point. Stick with me, and you'll be fine."

I knew she was trying to shame me into following, but my jeans were already wrecked and my backpack felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. If I fell into that cold water, I'd probably get pneumonia. Worse, I'd have to explain to Mom why I was soaking wet. I shook my head again, wondering why I'd agreed to come on this crazy trip.

"Okay, just sit and watch then," Matty clambered onto the ridge. Her cheap sneakers slipped on the wet rocks. For a moment, she teetered there, her arms windmilling. Her eyes went wide and her face turned white. She grabbed the rock wall and steadied herself.

"Matty, come back, "I yelled, "It's not safe!."

"Safe is for parents," she yelled back, "Fun is for kids."

MI muttered, "Not in my house it isn't." Matty disappeared into the cave's blackness. A part of me, the crazy part, wished I'd gone in with her. I moved a little closer to the water, in case she yelled for help or something.

Two noisy seagulls landed on the beach, screeching and fighting. I squinted at the mouth of the cave and wished Matty would come out.

So far no phone calls from Mom. If I could get back to the Five Arts Studio before five, maybe she wouldn't find out I'd ditched fencing. I sure hoped so.

She was going to kill me when she saw my jeans. Suddenly it felt like Mom was sitting beside me on the beach, droning one of her mantras into my ear. "Time is money, Zenith. Don't waste yours." Sighing, I pulled my notebook out of my backpack and started memorizing words for the next spelling test.

I gasped when cold drops of water splattered on my bare neck. Looking up I saw Matty dancing around shaking a bottle that jingled.

"Ha ha, I scared you" She capered back and forth, rattling her bottle and looking totally pleased with herself. "Hey Zee, it was awesome in there. You should have come."

I pursed my lips. "Your shirt's soaked. I can see everything through it."

"Who cares? There's nothing to see." She flipped up her wet tee, exposing a bare chest blue with cold except for two pink nipples. "Flat as a pancake."

"You're gross." I put my book away. "Hey, I gotta be back by five or I'm in big trouble."

"Don't you even want to see what I found?" She shook the bottle.

"Looks like a bottle full of pennies."

"Oh no, it's genuine pirate treasure."

"Pirates collect pennies?"

Matty sighed and gave the bottle another shake. "Zee, don't you have any imagination?"

I got to my feet and started toward the path. "Sure I do. Right now I'm imagining my mother getting home and not finding me there. She'll have the cops out in two seconds."

Matty caught up with me. "Does your mother have to know where you are every minute?"

"Basically yes." That's part of our plan for getting into a good college.

I went first climbing the cliff. As my head cleared the top edge, the first thing I saw was Mom's Manola Blahnik pumps. Shocked I looked up. Her fists were bunched on her slim hips. She was yelling so loud the whole world could hear.

"There you are! My friend Kathy thought she saw you, but I said she must be mistaken because you were at fencing. I checked with your fencing teacher who said you called in sick. You weren't there and you weren't at home. I panicked. What....whose bike is that?" Her bright red fingernail pointed to Matty's pink bike sticking out from behind the bush.

"Uh...it belongs to this girl I met at school....uh....her name's Matty. I'm sorry, Mom."

"You're sorry? I nearly had a heart attack. Where is this Matty anyhow?"

Good question. Matty had been right behind me all the way up the path. I could hear her bottle of pennies rattle with each step. I couldn't hear it now. All I heard was screaming seagulls. I went to the edge of the cliff and looked over. No Matty. I scanned the right side of the path and the left. Matty was nowhere in sight.