

Chapter 1

Karina

To dispel her nerves, Karina concentrated on the first question she wanted to ask her grandma: Why was there no longer a swimming hole near her grandma's house? Grandma told stories about it all the time during hers and Karina's video chats. Karina particularly liked to hear about how Mom used to be a swimmer, just like her. She thought it'd be awesome to swim in the same place her mom did as a kid, but apparently, that was no longer possible. Why? Had it dried up? Been filled in? Depending on the answer, the swimming hole might not be completely gone. Karina had never been without a place to swim before, so the fate of her summer hinged on this question. This was no time to get tripped up.

Karina stood with her dad on the tired front porch of a small, white, two-story house. The floorboards squeaked in protest under their weight, as if it didn't have enough to support already, with all the flower pots and gardening tools around. Dad drummed his fingers against his leg. Karina reached out and took his hand, as much to relax him as her. The anxiety in his face dissolved into a small smile. He met her eyes and squeezed her hand. Some of her butterflies went away, too, but she tucked in her toes. Swimming. Swimming was more important than being nervous.

"Oh my goodness, come in, come in," a high-pitched voice exclaimed.

Beyond the haze of the screen door, a ghostly figure appeared, hunched and bobbing from side to side. The old woman had thick, white hair pulled back into a bun, as tight as it could be except around her face, where fly-aways stuck out like a fluffy halo. Her bun and her lips were the only tight things about her. The rest of her wobbled a lot. Karina hadn't realized her grandma walked with a cane, but it made a lot of sense.

Grandma reached out a shaky arm and pushed open the screen door. Dad jumped forward to relieve her, opening it the rest of the way. It clicked and squeaked like a dolphin. Grandma's lips spread into such a thin smile that they all but disappeared. "Karina, my dear, how are you?" she gushed. She shuffled forward for a hug. Karina let herself be enveloped. "I'm good," she replied.

So, this was Grandma in real life. She sounded the same as the Grandma on Karina's computer screen, which was a relief. Grandma was squishy around the middle and had a musty flower smell, which wasn't all bad. It was weird to be able to touch her, now, but Karina thought she could get used to it. Her back pats were gentle and not unwelcome.

"I missed you so much, little one. Look at how big you are. I can't believe you'll be in sixth grade this year. You look so much like your mom."

Karina forced a little smile. That was definitely something Grandma would say. While Karina appreciated the compliment overall, it was also a slightly sour reminder that she did not have her mom's pretty, blue eyes. She had inherited Dad's brown ones.

That was OK, though, in the grand scheme of things. Thinking of Mom tended to get Dad down, so it was better that Karina wasn't a perfect look-alike.

Grandma turned to Dad. "Richard," she exclaimed, reaching up to hug him next.

Dad put on his fake stranger-smile. "Hi, Claire."

Karina wanted to cringe as she watched this reunion unfold. She knew Dad was nervous, but geez. He didn't usually pat backs when he hugged, and he looked afraid to even touch Grandma.

“Now, when was the last time you called me that?” Grandma said. “You’re family, you know. Been that way for a long time.”

“I...appreciate that,” Dad replied.

“Don’t act like a stranger. Now, come on inside and see your new home.”

“Oh, I know it well.” Dad saluted, backing down the steps. “Go on inside, Princess. I’ll start unloading the car.”

“Now, wait a minute, you’ve been driving for hours,” Grandma protested. “Come inside and rest, now. You can at least wait till the moving truck comes.”

Dad seemed not to have heard her.

Karina crossed her arms. That looked like a wiggling-out if she ever saw one.

“Karina, you come right in,” Grandma said. She beckoned with her hand so closely that her fingers brushed against Karina’s arm.

Karina peered past her into the house beyond and stood, frozen, just inside the door. She let her mouth fall open.

There were far too many things to look at—shelves filled with all sorts of figurines and knick-knacks, pictures crowding the walls. The kitchen, to Karina’s right, displayed a variety of cooking tools and appliances on all the counters that she’d never seen before, a library of recipe books, and a cuckoo clock. Down the hall, she could see into what looked like a big family room, which had an overstuffed bookcase, a dining room table covered in stacks of magazines and half-opened mail, and a glass-front cabinet filled with more keepsakes and figurines. Karina suspected she knew why Grandma sent her figurines as presents every year. At least Karina’s weren’t angels and chubby-cheeked children.

“The kitchen’s in here,” Grandma said, already crossing the room. “And this room back here is the family room.”

Karina followed Grandma to a large doorway that opened into a sunset-pink room practically glowing with sunlight. It streamed through the gauzy curtains of all the windows, and especially through the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. This room was a couple steps lower than the rest. On one end was the wooden dining table and the bookcase. On the other side of the room were an armchair and a couch surrounding a coffee table covered in a lacey cloth. More pictures and flowery artwork hung on the walls. The TV was on some news channel, muted.

How did Grandma get all this stuff? Karina opened her mouth to ask, but then she remembered what she really wanted her first question to be.

“Grandma, the swimming hole,” she blurted, making for the back door.

“What’s that?” Grandma replied.

“You talked about a swimming hole near here, where your kids used to swim,” Karina explained, scanning the backyard. It was hard to see anything beyond it, as it was just as busy as the house, filled with plants and lawn ornaments. “Where is it? What happened to it?”

Grandma’s face fell. “Oh, I’m sorry, sweetheart. I wish I had good news for you. No one’s been allowed to swim there for almost ten years.”

The news did not daunt Karina, yet. The swimming hole was still around, wasn’t it? “Why not? Is it dangerous?”

Grandma’s frown deepened. “I don’t know about that. But it belongs to our neighbors, and you don’t want anything to do with them.”

“Why not? Which neighbors?”

Grandma motioned to the TV wall. “At the end of the street, there. Before that man moved in, we had the nicest neighbor, friend of the family, who’d let us go out there whenever we wanted. But this one has no interest in sharing. And yet he’s the rudest busybody I’ve ever known. Hmph.”

Karina craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of that neighbor’s house, but all she could see from the back door was an empty backyard with some bushes. Hope was not lost. She wondered if she could win the heart of this “man next door” and get him to let people swim again. Only one way to find out.

She dashed back toward the front door with the intention of marching to that house to find out more, but she stopped short as Dad came back inside, a suitcase in each hand.

“Dad, there’s still a swimming hole,” she exclaimed. “Can I ask the neighbors about it?”

“You don’t waste any time, do you?” Dad smirked. “I know how important it is, Princess, but can I ask you to wait just a bit? I don’t want you going by yourself, and I want to be here when the truck gets here, all right?” He slid the smaller, turquoise suitcase toward her. “We have some work to do, first.”

He claimed to like swimming as much as Karina did. She pouted but grabbed the suitcase.

“Come, Karina. I’ll show you your room,” Grandma said, cheerful again.

Karina hauled her suitcase up the stairs, while Grandma followed behind in a chair attached to a track on the wall that brought her up without her having to move. Karina thought it a marvel—a way to bring heavy things upstairs without carrying them—until she saw how slowly the chair moved. Fifteen seconds was a long time to climb to the second floor.

She briefly examined the old pictures on the wall while she waited, scanning them for Mom. Being the only girl in her family, Mom wasn’t difficult to spot. In one photo, her arms were tight around an older man with glasses, probably her dad. Karina found her in another one, too, beaming between two boys both older and taller than her—her brothers. Karina had seen them in Grandma’s videos once or twice, but they intimidated her. They didn’t strike her as super nice and loving like Grandma.

“Go ahead in. It’s the first one on the right,” Grandma said as the chair leveled out over the landing.

Karina obeyed. Two steps in, she let her suitcase fall forward with a thud. She blinked a few times to make sure she wasn’t dreaming, to adjust her eyes to the brightness of this space. The walls were a light pinky-purple, and they matched the color of the flowers on the frilly curtains and lampshade on the bedside table. The bed was also covered in flowers. There was an ornate vanity mirror across from it. There was no carpet. It was all hard floors.

Dad had told her it would be like this—that she might have to live with things she didn’t like for a little while, until they found a new house of their own. Karina had understood. She thought she’d be OK with it, but looking at the difference between the colors in the room and the color of her suitcase brought on a tightness in her throat. Her old room had been set up to look like the ocean, with blue walls and a sandy-colored carpet. Dad had even put up marine animal stickers so she could feel like she was sleeping under the sea. He took them down and brought them along, but they couldn’t go up in this room. This room was a disaster, and Karina did not want to live with it when she used to have something so much better.

"I know it's a bit busy in here, so you just let me know if there's anything you want rearranged," Grandma said, coming up behind her. "This is your room while you're here, so you can fill it with whatever you want."

Her words hardly made Karina feel better. Karina followed Grandma through the rest of the tour, but she was no longer interested. Dad had the best room, of course. It still had lots of stuff in it, but it was fishing- and sailing-related—and it wasn't pink.

Karina trudged back down the stairs, reminding herself that this move was good and necessary. Dad had a new job, at a new aquarium, no less. When he first came home with the news, the two of them had danced around the whole condo. Karina almost never saw him so happy. She was happy, too, because she'd be one step closer to her goal of visiting every aquarium in the world. She was excited for something new.

However, the excitement died down every time she was reminded of something she had to give up as a result of the move, and the list got longer and longer: the couch that was perfect for snuggling (now in storage), her summer swim team, her wall stickers, her friends, and now, even a room that looked like the ocean. Karina and Dad had spent the whole weekend putting important things away, driving hours, moving those important things into storage, and finally arriving at this new place that was nothing like the old. Karina was overwhelmed by Grandma's house, and there was no ignoring it, even if Dad was super happy about his new job.

Once the moving truck arrived, it was back to work. Karina emptied her boxes out of the car, since those were smaller and easier for her to carry. Even so, her legs and arms became noodles after all the back-and-forth, up-and-down. She never had a straight shot to her room, either. She always had to step aside for Dad or the moving men following the same path. She groaned as she slammed the car door shut for the final time.

That's when she noticed the boy with the bug-eyed stare at the edge of the driveway. He had a mess of dark curls and large, light eyes that Karina wasn't prepared for. He wore a black t-shirt and jeans despite the summer heat. He was taller than her but otherwise looked about her age.

She blinked in surprise. "Hello," she said.

He blinked back, eyes growing even wider.

"I'm Karina. I just moved here. Do you live here, too?"

The boy shook his head. He finally looked away and started shrinking between his shoulders. "My uncle does," he mumbled. "I'm visiting."

"What's your name?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Stuart."

"What grade are you in?"

"Sixth."

Karina relaxed a bit. Same age as her and some harmless kind of weird.

"Wait. No. Uh, I finished sixth. I'm going into seventh. In the fall."

Well, that was a different story. Karina didn't usually like older kids. All they liked to do was play rough and loud and brag about how much bigger and smarter they were. She crossed her arms.

"What about you?" Stuart asked.

"I'm going into sixth," she answered, the admission making her feel small.

“Oh.” Stuart stared at the grass for a long while. Then he pointed past her. “Are you...moving into this house?”

Karina turned to Grandma’s house, then to the moving truck. Then she raised her eyebrows at him. “Yes.”

“I thought an old lady lived here.”

“Yeah. She’s my grandma. And me and my dad just moved in with her today.”

“You’re related?” The boy’s eyebrows shot up into his long bangs.

“Yes.” She just said that.

“Do you know anything about Catherine Fields?”

“No? Who’s that?”

“She...uh...” the boy trailed off.

“Well, well, what’s going on out here?” Dad asked, approaching. “Do we have a stowaway?”

Stuart rapidly shook his head. “I’m from next door.”

Karina straightened so quickly, her feet almost left the ground.

“Ah, a new neighbor.” Dad smiled—for real—and offered his hand. “Or, should I say, we’re your new neighbors. I’m Richard Wilson, and this is my daughter, Karina.”

The boy took Dad’s hand. “I’m Stuart.”

Forget any hang-ups about him being older. He was now crucial to Karina’s mission. “Which neighbor are you?” she gushed.

Stuart motioned to the house behind him. It was tall, dark blue, and surrounded by bushes. “I mean, my uncle is your neighbor. I’m just visiting.”

Karina drank in the house. This was the one Grandma mentioned. It was the farthest apart from all the houses on the street and up on a shallow hill—a reclusive old man’s house if there ever was one.

“How long’s your visit?” Dad asked. “Just a quick one, or are you gonna be here a while?”

“I’m usually here till August,” Stuart answered.

“Does your uncle own a swimming hole?” Karina asked.

Stuart’s jaw went slack.

Dad plopped a hand on Karina’s head. “Don’t mind her. She’s a little too nosy for her own good sometimes.”

“How did you know?” Stuart asked.

Karina brushed Dad’s hand away. “My grandma said she and her kids used to swim near here and that their neighbor owned a swimming hole. But now the man next door owns it. That’s your uncle, right?”

Dad wrapped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her near him. “Sorry to put you on the spot, Stuart. Don’t feel like you have to answer. We can ask your uncle later.”

“It’s, uh, it’s OK,” Stuart replied. “There is a pond, in the woods.” He motioned to his left to a big chunk of forest behind all the backyards on this side of the street. “You’d have to ask my uncle about swimming.”

Karina scanned the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of some water, but all she saw was a mess of brown and green. Well, that was OK. She was already one step closer.

“Well, we’ll be over to introduce ourselves at some point,” Dad said. “But, for now, we have some work to do.”

Karina looked up at him. “Dad, please? What if we go with Stuart right now and just ask? Just to get it out of the way.”

“No, we don’t want to show up there unannounced. That would be rude.”

Karina frowned.

“I can ask him,” Stuart offered.

And the frown was gone.

“We appreciate that, but we don’t want to make you the go-between,” Dad said.

“It’s OK. I can tell you when would be a good time to talk to him.”

“Really?” Karina exclaimed.

Stuart nodded. “Sure.”

“Thank you!”

“That’s really nice of you, Stuart,” Dad admitted. “It doesn’t have to be right away, though. In fact, we still have a lot of unpacking to do. You’re welcome to stick around, but we’d have to put you to work.”

“Uh...” Stuart backed away. “I don’t want to be in the way. See you later.” He turned and made for the house on the hill.

Chapter 2

Stuart

Stuart returned to his uncle’s house with a subtle pep in his step. Awkward as he had felt, striking up a conversation with strangers, that interaction had gone amazingly well. He had good news for his uncle, which meant he was going to learn more magic this summer. He entered the house through the side door, next to the garage, took the basement stairs two at a time, and crossed the stuffy, pristine living room to his uncle’s office.

Uncle Gregor’s office looked like it belonged in a completely different house. Bookcases stuffed with books and papers and fantasy figurines towered over an elegant wooden desk with a dozen maps spread out over the top. Any part of the walls not blocked by shelves were covered with some old paintings or references of creatures both real and imaginary. Under the window was a row of overstuffed filing cabinets. Uncle Gregor sat just in front of these, jotting something down in a worn, black notebook.

“Well?” he asked, as Stuart knew he would.

“She looks just like Catherine,” Stuart said, still reeling. “And the old lady is her grandma, and she asked about the pond right away.”

Uncle Gregor stopped writing. His dark eyes slid over to a picture frame on his desk. Stuart couldn’t see it from this angle, but he knew who was in it.

“What about the pond?” his uncle pressed.

“They want to talk to you about swimming in it.”

“They?”

“Karina and her dad.”

“Karina is the girl?”

Stuart nodded.

“Hmm. Pretty name.” Uncle Gregor closed his journal and adjusted his glasses. “They didn’t happen to mention a reason for their interest in the pond?”

Stuart shook his head.

“No, that would be a stretch.” Then Uncle Gregor smiled. “Still, what a fortuitous turn of events. The wheels of fate are turning. Very good, Stuart.”

Stuart allowed himself a small smile.

“Of course, we must let them swim.”

Stuart tweaked an eyebrow. “Both of them?”

“You think her father is going to let her go off on her own?”

“No,” Stuart acknowledged. “But what do we tell them, then?”

“Nothing, for now. As exciting as this is, let’s not be too hasty. We botched a relationship with the grandmother, so we have to be extra careful—especially when it comes to our friend in the pond.”

Stuart nodded, and his heartbeat quickened. For his whole life, there had been a giant fish in the pond in the woods that did nothing but sleep. It was Stuart’s job to check on him every day, but every day was the same. If Karina was the one the fish was waiting for, Stuart would get to see it in action. What was he really like?

“Karina’s about your age, yes?”

Stuart snapped out of his head. “She’s a year younger than me.”

“Perfect. As she just moved, I suspect she’s rather lacking in the friends department. You will fill that role.”

Stuart shrank back. “What?”

Uncle Gregor frowned at him. “Don’t give me that. It’s obvious we need her trust. And I’ll have much less success getting it than you.”

“But she’s a…” Stuart trailed off. He frowned and stuck his hands in his pockets. He dealt with girl stuff enough at home, having two younger sisters who hardly ever left him alone.

“Oh, get over it. Valuable experience for when you’re older, hmm?” Uncle Gregor stood. “We’ve had quite the vacation because that fish has had no one to talk to, but our job is not always going to be so easy. It’s time to step up. If it makes you feel better, you never have to speak to the girl again once this is over.”

That seemed even worse—unless Uncle Gregor was implying what Stuart thought he was implying. Even that thought turned his stomach. “Fine,” he said. It was his duty to see this through, as Grandpa always said.

“Good. Now, they are welcome to stop by at their earliest convenience. I will send you over to tell them such when I am ready to speak with them.”

“I don’t suppose you could teach me some more magic, yet?” Stuart asked.

“Let’s keep our focus on the girl and the fish for now. Once things get settled over there, we’ll talk about magic.” Uncle Gregor ushered Stuart out and shut the door.