

A brown bear with thick, shaggy fur is the central focus, standing in a forest. The background is filled with trees and foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green, suggesting an autumn setting. The bear is looking directly at the viewer with a slight, open-mouthed expression.

Sammy and the San Juan Express — Presidential Bear

A Young Adult Novel
Nickolai Vasilieff

Set in Glacier
National Park

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Chapter One

Salt water spray brings tears to my eyes as I crest a twenty-foot swell, my sixteen-foot kayak holds. In the distance, I see the vanilla dome of Mt. Baker north of Seattle, but I'm nowhere near Seattle. The nose of my kayak crests, and drops off another peak, surfing the far side of the wave.

I left two hours earlier, angry at the world after being stuck in my room for weeks. The cold crisp air lets me know I am alive as I paddle out of Loon Song Harbor, on the southwest corner of Orcas Island. It's fantastic to be back on the water, but the weather changes fast in the San Juan Islands and in minutes, what was clear and cold becomes high winds and a blanket of fog so thick I can lick it.

I squint hard through occasional breaks. Only once do I spot Loon Song Harbor—a misty ghost in the distance. *You know better, Sammy, I tell myself, Uncle Teddy told you never to go out on the water alone,* especially after the last incident.

I hate talking about it, but my mother died earlier this year. On top of that, my brother, Loren, and I were shipped off to live with our Uncle Teddy on Orcas Island. And, on top of that, I was kidnapped (another story) when I tried to save sea lions and seals. For months after my mother's death, and weeks after the kidnapping and my own near death, I paced my room like a caged bear, ready to explode. I growled at anyone or anything that got in my way. This morning I woke at four, and by five I snuck out of the house and tip-toed to the docks. My gear was in our locker and my red kayak sat like a magic carpet, ready to take me away from my thoughts.

A wave breaks over the bow. I tip my right hip and lean into my paddle to hold the nose straight. My pulse pounds like a drum in my temples. The kayak skids into a trough between two massive rollers. Jaw clenched, I push my anger into the paddle as the enraged sea rolls over me. For a second I'm a sock tumbling in a giant washing machine. Sea foam smothers me. I rise up, gasping. My arms scream in pain as my paddle fights through the green-black ocean attacking me from all sides. The half dome compass spins past north. I reach another crest, and a wall of deep gray collapses around me. My mind freezes on the realization that I paddle blind.

Am I near rocks on my left that smash kayaks to smithereens, or am I in the narrows to my right with currents that sink even large ships in the San Juan Channel? What would Scooby do?

A gust of wind and a wave the size of Mt. Everest crashes over me. I breathe in a ton of salt water, cough and gag. Snotty water streams out my nose. Wind and surf turn my boat, and the next wave slams me sideways. The kayak tips to the left. I push the flat of the paddle onto the water to brace against rolling, but the kayak rolls anyway.

In the best of waters, paddling a kayak straight is exhausting, especially for a fifteen-year-old. Not that fifteen is young, but hey, give me a break, right now a straight course is impossible.

Lost and out of control, I prepare for the worst of all worsts—a total upside down dunking in some of the most dangerous water in the Northwest. One thought creeps through my mind:

I'm gonna die—either by drowning or Uncle Teddy's gonna kill me.

After my last excursion, four weeks ago, in a rental kayak, I pleaded with Uncle Teddy to buy me one. Okay, yes, I'd had some bad luck. A massive storm and strong currents carried me and my kayak out of Roche Harbor into the Spieden Channel. And yes, as strange as it sounds, rogue fisherman did kidnap me and try to kill me. But hey, look, I survived, and aside from the near-death experience, the kayaking was awesome.

After I recovered from the kidnapping and poisoning (yet another story), Uncle Teddy's response was, "No."

I don't mean kind of no, or even a maybe. I mean his face turned purple, his nostrils expanded like a caveman and his head almost spun off. He worried that after a near drowning in rough seas, a kayak of my own would mean more trouble.

"What can happen?" I asked. Wrong question. My ears burned from the list of a thousand things he yelled at me.

He must have said no a million times before he raised his hand above his head, slammed his San Juan Express cap on the dock, and yelled, "Okay, but only if you take classes, and never take the kayak out alone." I nodded in agreement as I danced with excitement. When he thought I was out of hearing, he added, "Teenagers!"

Now, I'm not in a class, but out on high seas with only a paddle, life vest, and my kayak. I roll far to the left and my instructor's words about capsizing ring in my ears.

"When you go over, lean forward and pull the loop at the front of your spray skirt. I call it the 'Oh Shit Loop.'" She said with a smile. "You'll find out why someday."

I lean forward and grip the loop as my shoulder dips into the icy water. One last deep breath, ready to go under for a butt-up dunking. Eyes scrunched tight, I think, *oh shit!*

Chapter Two

Air explodes in my lungs, but before I can pull the OS loop, I roll back and a waterfall gushes over my face. I wipe hair from my mouth and eyes. Instead of swimming with sharks, I'm sitting upright, and in the depth of my panic, a calm washes through me.

I know this place. It is a place of survival, like an infant must feel in the arms of its mother. I remember it from my last kayak adventure—the one Uncle Teddy warned me against—never go out alone. Only just like the last time, my friends are here to save me.

Beneath the dense fog, I spot a familiar white and black back along the left side of my kayak, and a four-foot-high dorsal fin cuts the surface. On my right a whiskered head pushes up with a snort. Oh my gosh, I've never been so happy to see my salt water friends, an Orca whale and a sea lion.

We rise and dip in twenty foot swells. The rollers keep coming. Salt spray and waves whip around me, but now, as I paddle, my two guardians guide me. Ocean fingers grab, push, and pull at my kayak, but my saviors shoulder the hull between their backs and keep me heading north. Exhausted, I lay back and relax into their sweet embrace.

My thoughts drift, and then Mom returns. She died a few months ago at our home in Portland Oregon. I helped take care of her and spent lots of time with her. I still can't believe my mother's gone, and in some ways, she's not. Since her death a million things have happened that I'm sure are from her. I don't know anything about afterlife or what happens when we die, but sometimes I hear her voice, and she reminds me that I'm special. Not important special, I don't mean that. I mean that I have, what she called, my special sensitivity. I feel animal's emotions. Not everyone believes me, but my friend Simone, a Marine Biologist, says I'm an empath. Sometimes I can even communicate with animals. They like me—what can I say?

Within minutes we reach the protection of Loon Song Harbor. My hair still whips my face, but the surface smooths to a windswept chop and the kayak knifes forward with ease. Ahead, Uncle Teddy's sea plane, Angie, rests on her moorage, perched like a giant cormorant, wings spread, at the end of the dock. Moving closer, the harbor comes into focus and so does the image of Uncle Teddy standing with binoculars focused on me. I wave. He does not wave back.

As if sensing the upcoming fireworks, my escorts lower beneath the surface and, more like stealth chickens than the ocean's greatest creatures, disappear.

Go ahead, run away. At least you could let him see you.

"I'm fine," I say, as I pull next to the boat mooring.

No response.

"I've been out for a half an hour or so. No big deal." I lay my paddle across the kayak and the dock to brace myself, then push up from my seated position and slide my butt onto the dock.

No response.

"When I left, the sky was clear, and then the fog rolled in. I came straight back. Really, I'm fine," I say forcing a smile.

Uncle Teddy stands frozen, arms crossed, eyes ice cube blue. "I thought we agreed you'd only go out with someone else?"

I struggle to twist my arm from my life jacket. "Yeah, but," *think quick Sammy*. I pull my kayak skirt over my head and feel the OS loop. "I had my friends with me. An Orca and a sea lion escorted me back."

Uncle Teddy looks into the water behind me, as if he expects to find a witness or something. He shakes his head, "I know with all that's happened you've been under a lot of stress, but this is not acceptable. I love you, Sammy, and I worry about you."

The ice cubes melt into a single tear that drips to his nose. He wipes his face, as if swiping at a fly. "Now isn't the time, with us leaving and all," he continues, "but we're going to have to figure out an arrangement to give you what you need, and keep me from having a heart attack."

I smile. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'll be more careful. I promise."

He pauses. "I know you do. But promises don't mean much if you don't keep them."

His words sting like a slap in the face. I stare at my kayak, not wanting to look him in the eye. A spider of guilt crawls up my neck.

"We'll figure this out when we return," he says. "We have to leave in about an hour. Why don't you go change and grab your bags, while I get Angie ready."

In silence, I slide my kayak onto the dock. The plastic hull scrapes across the concrete deck, and I secure it with two straps. Uncle Teddy's the sweetest man I know. He loves me, and only wants the best for me, but I hate being judged. It's all I can do not to yell at him. Since my younger brother, Loren, and I were sent to live with him, I've been boiling. Like a volcano, I have this huge pit inside with magma building, ready to explode. Someone looks at me and I feel judged. When anyone asks how I am I just want to scream. One minute I can't sit still and the next I can't get my

face off the pillow. And now, we're going to make a delivery to someone. I don't know where, and I'm not sure I even want to go.

Uncle Teddy reaches out to give me a hug. I start to pull back, but force myself to step forward. I rest my chin on his shoulder as he squeezes and pats my back. "It will get better," he says.

"What am I packing for?" I ask, without acknowledging his comment.

"Need to know," he says with a twinkle in his eye. "Just pack some warm clothes and make sure you have your boots. I'll fill you in as soon as we're in the air.

I swallow my flash of anger and turn on my heel. "I need to know everything," I say.

Chapter Three

Fishing boats bob in the harbor. Wind whips huge white sails coming and going, and the clanks of rigging on masts reach up the hill to my bedroom. Mixed in are stinkpots, Uncle Teddy's name for motorboats. Most of the boats are owned by locals, but every day a string of tourists pass through. They fuel up, buy supplies at the Loon Song Harbor Marina, and head out. From my bedroom, I see the tops of masts, taller stinkpots, and several islands across the San Juan Channel. Sometimes, like today, a wind so fierce it knocks you over will race across the strait, pulling up waves and thrashing boats and birds alike. On others, it's warm and calm and you can see for miles.

I slam my bedroom door and kick a pillow across the room. Why do I have to keep explaining myself? Just because no one else understands my empathic sensitivity doesn't mean animals don't help me. I jerk out two pairs of jeans from my dresser. They unfold, and one flops to the floor. A quick turn and I throw the other one at my roller bag. It slams into the headboard. I pull open a second drawer and grab a handful of underpants and socks. A quick flip and they fly around my bag like flower petals in a storm.

Simone, the Marine Biologist on San Juan Island who ...