

ALICE
IN
EVERMOOR

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ALICE IN EVERMOOR

KAREN HUSS

For Christy, Eric, Melissa, Taylor and all the grandchildren

“In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



The river doesn't look right. It's too brown. Too dreary. Too toxic. Too un-Evermoor-ish.

I nudge Laney with my elbow. "That's water, right?"

"Of course, it's water," she says. "What do you think it is, Alice? Hot chocolate?"

"There's the melted marshmallow." Jeremy points to the white, dead-fishy froth that swirls beside the houseboat.

"Yum," I respond.

Even though I know it's not real, the sludgy, slow-moving water sets me on edge. It looks like something that could suck you in and make you disappear.

"It's supposed to be muddy," says Laney, at the helm. She expertly steers around a floating log in the water as the houseboat continues on against the current. "That's what's so great. I've been studying the Mississippi in my environmental history class, and this is like the real deal."

She points to a low, sprawling, gray house that hugs the steep riverbank. "Don't you love the wall of windows on that house? That's mine. I designed it in the new virtual reality game I was telling you about. Have you tried EVR yet? It's completely mind-blowing."

What blows *my* mind is the sketchy new friends that she plays

EVR with. But I only say, “No,” and leave it at that. It’s the first time in a month Laney has asked to hang out, and it’s not like I’ve got other best friends. Laney doesn’t even know about Jeremy and me, but maybe she’ll guess after today.

Laney gestures around us. “*This* doesn’t come close to how real EVR is. But I wanted you to see the house at least. It’s got the most amazing view of the river off that big deck. Mia and I have our breakfasts out there. It’s so awesome.”

“Mia?” asks Jeremy.

“Oh, never mind. It’s a long story.”

It is a little surreal to be discussing a new form of virtual reality, while already *in* virtual reality, but that’s life in Evermoor. No doubt, the confined space fuels our longing for more realistic ways to pretend to be somewhere else.

Laney shakes her wavy blonde hair from her face. A curl catches in her mouth and she pulls it out. Jeremy, leaning back on the low lounge chair next to mine, gazes intently at her, as if he’s completely forgotten she dumped him back in ninth grade for a junior with access to rated-R games.

Laney is irresistible, like a gorgeous, impulsive puppy bounding everywhere, or like a star bursting with light.

In comparison, I’m more like a frozen, distant planet. Maybe Pluto, if Pluto were even a real planet. But with Jeremy, maybe there’s hope for me yet.

The hairs on my arm closest to his prickles with electricity. My eyes take a covert pass over his wide shoulders and bulging freckled biceps. Not sure when all this happened, but he’s hot. I’ve liked him as more than a friend for months, even before he was available.

And with our recent kiss behind the stage curtain, getting him out of my head is impossible. My only hope is that he actually likes me too. Didn’t he say so? But I’m also petrified he’s already bored.

Watching him watch Laney doesn't help. I'd thwack him over the head, except that might not increase my desirability factor.

Instead, I shake it off.

Then, in a "what-would-Laney-do?" moment, I adjust my pony high on my head and begin to rub coconut oil over my tanned arms, legs, and stomach. For Laney it would totally work, but to me, the move screams trying-too-hard or desperate-for-attention. And maybe I am. As I fumble to close the coconut oil cap, the whole greasy thing slips out of my hands and clunks on the boat deck.

Jeremy picks it up, smiles, and our hands touch as he hands it back.

"Thanks." My face burns. I keep a good grip on the bottle and focus on putting it back in my bag.

A minute later, Laney hands us anti-nausea bands to wear on our wrists as we enter the wider Lake Pepin. She smiles as she says, "It's rough today."

Then she snaps a pic, or two, or three and shows them to me. The bright blue towel sets off my light brown skin and orange bikini.

"Not horrible," I say, as Jeremy looks on too.

"Not horrible at all." He lets his sunglasses drop back on his freckled nose.

A warm sense of well-being flows through me with the compliment. This time I laugh, close my eyes, and lie back again. The hot sun feels like it'll burn right through my eyelids, though the breeze off the water makes it bearable, delicious even. I finally begin to soak it all in while the boat bobs up and down over low waves, like a rocker rocking me to sleep. Water burbles and slaps against the boat in a perfect symphony of white noise.

Who cares if it isn't real? With the sun, water, Jeremy, and Laney, I could pretend forever.

But Jeremy says, "Is this all there is?"

I groan. "C'mon, Jeremy. Just do nothing. It's amazing."

"Why don't you fish?" Laney asks.

Laney and Jeremy discuss what fish he might be able to catch in the Mississippi: bass, northern, walleye, catfish, perch.

Taps and clicks sound over their voices as they prepare the rod and reel, and I drift in and out of sleep.

Sometime later, a gull cries overhead. I snap awake, my skin no longer warm and toasty but covered in goose bumps. The sky has become steely gray. We've apparently left the open waters of Lake Pepin and re-entered a narrower section of the Mississippi. Thorny brush covers the banks, and the tops of the trees sway in a wind that suggests a coming storm. The motion sickness wrist bands should have tipped me off. Laney just loves to throw in a storm if she can help it.

Next to me, Jeremy appears to have drifted off too, though he's still got a fishing rod clutched in his hands.

I turn to Laney on the other side of me. She's put a sheer white cover-up over her white bikini. She appears unnaturally still, despite the up and down bobbing of the boat.

"Laney," I say.

She doesn't answer. I'd think she was asleep, except she brushes a strand of hair from her face, and her eyes are open.

"Laney!"

She doesn't even turn her head.

The boat startles an immense gray bird that takes off from near the bank. Its bizarrely huge wings beat the air.

Jeremy wakes then, jumps a little. "What was that?"

"A blue heron, I think." I can't even marvel at it. "Something's weird with Laney."

With eyes fixed on the billowy gray clouds, he stands, steps around me, and shakes Laney's shoulder. "Hello! Earth to Laney."

"We're going to get wet here."

The sky grows darker as he speaks. A couple fat raindrops plop on my bare belly. I rise from the chair and wrap my towel around myself.

Laney keeps staring blankly ahead. But somehow, she continues to steer with incredible accuracy. I see her delicate fingers shift on the brass wheel as the boat corrects just a hair to the left.

"Laney!" Jeremy tries shaking her shoulder harder, but as he does, something tugs hard on the pole in his other hand. The fishing line screams out. Jeremy grabs the rod with both hands before it is ripped away, then turns to the water, reeling hard. His rod bends in a giant U, the end pointing into the dark water. "Man, this is something big."

"Forget that. Something's weird with her," I say.

"Snap her out of it."

"I would if I could!"

"Where's a knife? I'll cut the line," Jeremy says.

"I don't know!"

We both freeze for an instant as the sky blackens, like a shadow passing over us that has decided to stay. Then the low rumble of thunder startles me, and I turn to Laney, leaving Jeremy to figure out the fishing line himself. Lures rake the bottom of the tackle box as he searches for the knife, and the reel screeches in his hand.

I grip Laney's face and look directly into her eyes. For a second, I see a flicker of recognition, then she looks back over the water.

"Laney! Wake up!"

Again, the barely-there flicker.

Suddenly, a splash, a thud, and a scream sound behind me. I whirl around. An enormous, shiny, black creature hangs from Jeremy's arm. The creature's tentacle-lined mouth is clamped down on his entire forearm.

“Get it off me! Get it off me!” Red oozes onto the cuff of his rolled sleeve above the monstrous fish.

I scream.

It isn't until Jeremy shouts, “Turn it off!” that I remember I can. The red emergency shut off is right on the console with everything else.

But it's like that; you forget it isn't real.

Before I can do anything, Laney inexplicably snaps out of whatever trance she was in. She reaches to her left wrist, taps the lighted pink center of her shaded purple rose tattoo, and everything fades to black.



When the lights come back on, there is still a houseboat, and we're on it, but the boat is clearly dry-docked, resting on a web of straps and strong support bars that rock the boat gently—or not so gently. Underneath that is a blue padded floor. The walls are blue too, as is everything beyond the interior of the boat. Now that the sun lamp has long since clicked off, I'm freezing, and pull my towel even tighter around me.

Jeremy still sits on the deck of the boat, his right arm, perfectly whole and blood-free, clutched in his left. A rod lies beside him, the line attached not to a fish, but to a mechanical arm on the floor beyond the deck.

"I knew you were up to something with the motion sickness bands." Jeremy pulls off the stretchy bracelet and drops it on the deck with distaste.

A slow smile grows on Laney's face as she wobbles unsteadily, then reaches out to grab the steering wheel.

Part of me is still back on the choppy Mississippi, too, and an even bigger part of me has some major questions that need answers.

But it isn't until we're back from the dressing rooms and in the small waiting room for *Water Adventures*, that I finally say, "What happened in there?"