Jupiter, Florida

A golden ball of fluff and an ambitious seven year old balanced at the front of the kayak. Daddy paddled out through the mangroves to watch the evening sun cast shadows through the mangled branches across the ripples. As a child Nella would think to herself *this is my home–my favorite place on earth–here with Giff and Daddy.* She snuggled up into the soft puppy fur with a view of the sky ablaze with warm orange tinges as the sun fell to the horizon; this moment with her father, Jamie, often glows in her memory.

A bungalow sits on the beach-side of the mangroves whose roots tangle allowing them to handle the daily wash of tides. Nella May lives here between the trees with her mother, Mandy Lewis, and their two dogs. It’s a peaceful surrounding, but bogged by fear, sorrow, and displacement. Nella is seventeen years old. She has lived her whole life next to the ocean, but not always in it. She and Gifford explored every inch of the surrounding mangroves. Nella knows every tree name and every fish that swims below the water's surface. Nella’s mother Mandy is a biologist in the next county over, and is often gone on trips from time to time, leaving Nella home with the ocean and the dogs.

Nella dips her paddle edge into the glassy water with an anxiety of the ocean since it swallowed her reason to love it. She guides her kayak through the hidden underwater branches of the mangroves. Nella feels her fathers presence while out on the water; while fearful, someday she wishes she won’t be.

 She kayaks out into the trees with Gifford aboard just to listen to the birds above. The migrating northern snowbirds mingled with the native seabirds drifting wondrously overhead. She paddles out and out into a part of the thickness where she and Gifford regularly revisit a memory of sitting with her father in the wide opening of the mangroves. As they sit and watch the birds quietly land on the thin pecan colored branches, her eyes wander to where the water surface meets the mangrove roots. Her eyes flickered to the dark red color among them. No one is ever out here–or alone in the trees. She dips her paddle towards the motionless red blur in the branches. As they approach she begins to realize what it is and that they are not okay. As she does she gets a flashback of her father the last time she saw him.

 The Atlantic Ocean: The last place Nella’s father Jamie had a heart attack while scuba diving at work, an incident that no one had expected. She was not an ocean goer without him. He connected her to the ocean. He died doing what he loved. Everyone says he was a great person and a great father. Nella knows it all. She knows her father, afterall he was her best friend. Maybe someday the two will be reconnected and process sorrow.

Everything is wrong. The tears begin to roll down her face as she paddles back home; away from the formation that begins to tear her apart. When she sees the pier she jumps out of the kayak and runs straight to the phone. She has no idea what she saw in the mangroves but she needed someone to know. She calls the police department and explains what she saw: red blur, tree roots, body.

Later that day, Nella sits in their bungalow not moving with Gifford and Gilly by her side on the couch. A face red and puffy from the tears that ran that morning, a soft sniffle from her nose every so often. Her mother arrives later that day and is frightened at the sight of her daughter in distress, though Nella says nothing is wrong. Nella had mentioned her kayak out that morning and her mother was so proud of her.

Mandy was out in town earlier that day on her way home from business, and she had seen that a boy was found in the mangroves where Nella had mentioned kayaking that morning. Mandy did not want to mention it because of her late husband and Nella’s interrelation with coping. After Jamie’s passing, weeks went by without a word from her daughter. Nella would go to school, and chose walks instead of kayaking, not talking much. *I guess that is what she needs,* Mandy would think to herself.

Emotionlessly reading, Nella’s mind drifted for weeks after her senior year had ended. Summer has begun and is drifting past. Nella is deep in another reality, until a knock on the door. A young girl stands outside, a sun kissed face with platinum hair. The breeze is blowing her flat bangs around. Mandy opens the door.

“Hi sweetheart, can I help you?” Mandy asks.

“Does Nella Lewis live here?” the frail nervous girl answers. She is wearing a thick strapped tank top the color of bubblegum pink. She has converse on her feet slightly smudged with soil.

“She does. Would you like to talk with her?”

“Yes.” The girl says as she brushes her flat bangs out of her face.

Mandy walks to the couch where Nella is reclined reading a science book about birds in Florida.

“Nella, there’s someone here that wants to talk to you.”

“Me? Who?” Nella responds.

“Just come to the door sweetheart, it seems important.”

“Okay.” Nella unravels herself from the blanket and strolls to the doorway.

The girls’ eyes meet when the door opens. The blonde straight haired girl is sitting on the top concrete step just outside the door.

“Hi, I’m Nella. My mom said you wanted to talk?” Nella asks gently.

“My name is Kara Edwards. I'm from the next county over. I don’t mean to bother you but I wanted to say thank you.” The girl responds as she wiggles in readjustment from discomfort.

“Thank you? For what?” Nella questions. Nella thinks–*Kara looks nervous and I have no clue what I did.*

“You found my brother.” Kara said in a low tone.

Nella’s eyes grow wide. She crumbles to the concrete stairs seated next to Kara. “It was you wasn’t it? They said you would be the only one out there who would notice things like that, that you knew the mangroves so well.” Kara continues with tears growing in her own eyes.

“I'm so sorry.” Nella apologizes, yet she has no idea. Kara reaches over with her arms stretched wide. Nella leans into the embrace. As the two strangers hug for the first time.

Kara continues, “Kirby. That was my brother's name; my twin brother. He had been missing for a few days then. He was my best friend. Honestly, I don't know what to do without him.” She pauses and lets a deep breath go.

“I know what that feels like.” Nella replies without context to what she would mean. She grabs Kara’s hand and squeezes it in support as she thinks to herself *it may be important to me, but right now she is struggling more than me*.

Sitting in silence Kara curiously asks “Will you teach me about the mangroves?” with tears drying to her splotched colored cheeks.

“Yes. I would be happy to.” Replies Nella.

Two months drift pass and flash into the next. Gifford and Gilly are resting on the grassy waterside watching Nella and Kara paddle from end to end of the canal. Brown pelicans weigh the trees down with egrets and warblers communicating around them. The water swallows the sadness with laughter from the girls who tip the kayak and fully submerge in the glassy blue water. A bond, formed from sorrow, but with harmony for who they have become. Spending every waking hour of the day together Nella is less afraid with Kara’s courageousness by her side.

The girls sit floating in the water, forms surrounded by the trees where life begins and ends for them. Their heads above the glassy surface with their eyes shut. Nella glances at Kara to see her deep sapphire eyes staring back at her above the waters glare from the sun. Breaking eye contact Nella locks her stare on the sky above and confides, “I imagine someday it will be different. I imagine someday we will be back together. I imagine a moment without sorrow.” She pauses to catch her breath while keeping her body level, “I imagine us. A new beginning for both of us. I imagine someday we will be with them again.” Sometimes sorrow swallows us whole; but someday it will set us all free.