

THE OTHER SIDE OF WATER

ERIKA
ESPINOZA

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*This book is dedicated to the best beta readers I could have
asked for—Monica and Sophia.*

*A special thank you to my children and husband
for giving me the time to write this story.*



CHAPTER ONE

Hope Lake

ZEKE WALKED DOWN THE STREET TOWARD HIS HOUSE. Well, his father's house. It was still hard for him to think of Sequoia, Illinois as home. His backpack hung over one shoulder, heavy with schoolbooks.

The breeze was icy, and snowflakes danced in the sky, twirling in a kind of dance. It wasn't a lot of snow, just a few flurries, but to Zeke who wasn't from the Chicagoland area, it was surprising. Snow in October was unheard of back home. In Black Rock, Arizona, the balmy 80-degree weather was a big change from this. Over there, shorts and a T-shirt were considered overdressed. Here, his winter jacket, hat, and gloves were still not enough to keep him warm.

He supposed he would get used to the cold. Not like he had a choice. After his mother's death in June, he had to move in with his father—a father he hardly knew except from the stories his mother told him and a picture to remember him by.

James Grayson had always been larger than life in Zeke's mind. A great lawyer from Chicago, a city he had only read about on the internet. When he was old enough to know what a lawyer was, he imagined his father a hero.

A lawyer who championed people's rights. Or a lawyer who protected the environment through important court cases. But James Grayson was a corporate lawyer—somebody who made sure corporations got the best deals they could get to make more money for their investors.

Zeke huddled into his coat as the wind howled more loudly. His father would be angry for sure. Zeke had gotten into another fight at school. And it wasn't his fault this time, but his father wouldn't even care about that. He would just assume it was his fault for "not putting in an effort to fit in." He could almost hear the words.

Despite the cold, the little bit of sun that peeked through the gray clouds was comforting. Zeke veered from the path that led to his house and headed in the direction of the lake instead. He was in trouble anyway, so what was a little more?

The path led through the forest preserve. Golden leaves swirled down from the oak trees to the ground to join the heap that was already there. Squirrels were running around, trying to get enough food to see them through the winter.

Zeke felt his frustrations melt, replaced by the soothing feeling that always came over him as soon as he stood near the edge of the lake. After a while, he sat down on the ground, placing his backpack next to him, not caring that the ground was freezing. The soft waves

lapping at the shoreline landed near his feet, not quite touching him. He didn't want to turn into a Popsicle either.

He watched the migrating geese flying in their perfect V formation. Every so often, a flock would detour to eat or rest. They dotted the surface, bobbing like buoys. Zeke tilted his head up as a cloud drifted away and a ray of sunlight fell through. He closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sunshine on his cold skin.

A soft sound like music made him open his eyes. The wind and the autumnal leaves almost seemed to be orchestrating a concert. As he listened, the wind rose in pitch, the leaves providing the rhythm. A steady pulse, like the pounding of drums, came from the lake, drawing Zeke's eyes to it. As he looked into the depths of the stream, he saw the ripples, like stones bouncing off the surface of the water. There was a light from beneath that kept getting brighter as the music's intensity increased.

Zeke rubbed his eyes and looked again. The wind seemed to die down, and the music Zeke had heard was gone but the light was still there, a reflection of the sun's rays. The flurries had stopped altogether, and the clouds had moved on, making the day a bit less dreary. The reflection of the sun's rays was too much, and Zeke's eyes began to water. He blinked a few times, directing his attention away from the shimmering light.

Zeke's eyes found a familiar sign—he'd only read it a million times. The lake was called Lake of Hope due to a local legend, but locals shortened it to Hope Lake.

The official story printed on the sign stated that an Ottawa princess, from the Ottawa Tribe native to Illinois, sat on the shore every day waiting for her love to return. The young man, a warrior, had been lost in a battle but the princess knew in her heart that he would return to her, beside the lake, because that's where

they'd promised to love one another for as many days as the sun would rise.

The princess made her daily pilgrimage to the lake to await the warrior's return. So much was her pain at the end of each day—when the sun gave off its last glimmer before it disappeared into the night sky—the lake finally took pity on her. One day, just as the sun was setting and the last rays of sunlight faded over the horizon, a stream of glowing water reached the shore where the princess was sitting and engulfed her. When the stream of water receded, the princess was gone, never to be seen again.

The lake, the sign stated, was said to have strong magic by the ancient native inhabitants of the area. That the waters had healing properties to cure ailments. That the grief-stricken would find relief from their grief. Even now, some people attributed strange phenomena to the lake or to the spirit of the grieving princess.

Zeke, who had Native American heritage on his mother's side, was used to hearing such stories which were passed down from generation to generation. His mother's family were Mexica descendants that had made their home in the Sonoran Desert near the US-Mexico border. His grandfather had always told him stories that he loved. Stories about how humans had emerged from the ground and were tasked to take care of Mother Earth. Stories about how the stars were placed in the sky. But his favorite stories had always involved the mischievous Coyote. He didn't know if Hope Lake had magical powers, but the truth was that he felt less burdened when he spent time there, and that was good enough for him.

Zeke shook his head, letting go of the thoughts about the princess and the strange noises and lights he thought he saw. The cold was probably getting to him and making him hear things. His ears were numb, and his fingers hurt from the cold. It was about

four in the afternoon but the days were getting shorter now, and the sun would be setting soon. Zeke might as well go home and face the music. If he was lucky enough, his father would still be in Chicago working or on the Metra on his way home. He might have a little while to himself before his father got home.



AS ZEKE OPENED THE FRONT DOOR, HE COULD HEAR THE NEWS on the TV coming from inside. Zeke winced and stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath. He sighed and walked in, but his father wasn't in the living room. Sound coming from the kitchen gave him some comfort. Maybe he could make it up to his room without being noticed.

He softly walked across the living room toward the stairs, but his father appeared in the hallway that led to the kitchen.

"Hey," Zeke said lamely, "you're home early."

"I got a call from the school again. I'm sure I don't have to tell you what it was about?" James Grayson asked but it sounded like a rhetorical question, so Zeke bit his tongue. His father's eyes glowed with rage, and his nostrils flared. He continued through clenched teeth. "Do you know I was in the courtroom when the principal called to tell me you were in another fight?"

"You always take their side. Do you even know what that fight was about? Did the principal even tell you?" Zeke raised his voice, not being able to hold in his frustration any longer.

"It doesn't matter what it was about. You have been out of control, and I don't know what to do with you anymore." James raised his voice too, his own frustration clear on his face.

James tried to be patient. He tried to be understanding. Zeke's mother's death had been hard on him too.

He and Celeste Red Cloud, Zeke's mother, had agreed to separate when his work had led through paths too dangerous for the budding family. He had gotten mixed up in a case that involved corruption on too many levels. But James had thought he could handle it. When the threats started, it had shaken James to the core. At all costs, they agreed to keep Zeke safe. Celeste had decided that the best thing for Zeke was for her to move back home with her parents who lived in Black Rock, Arizona. So, she moved from Chicago, where she had just completed her degree in social work, with an infant barely five months old. The case had taken many years to resolve, and even now, James wasn't so sure that old enemies wouldn't reemerge.

James had been comforted by the fact that Zeke and Celeste were safe. He had only dared to take a few trips to Arizona, that he hoped would not raise suspicion, to see his son. Those few times he had been able to talk to Celeste, she would always talk about Zeke, knowing how much James craved to know his son. However, that information had not been enough to really know him. What comforted him when he was sick, or when he was sad, or when he was scared? What would make him angry or upset? What things brought him joy? Plainly, James did not know his son.

And worst of all, he did not know how to make this better for Zeke. How to comfort him now. But his habit of trouble at school needed to stop, if nothing else, because otherwise, he'd get himself expelled. James, who gave some of the best arguments in court, had run out of words and patience. He just didn't know how else to reach Zeke anymore.

"I have been patient, Zeke, but you have got to get over things already."

Get over things? Get over my mother's death? Is that what he means?

Nowadays, it didn't take much to get Zeke angry. He went from feeling numb, like he couldn't feel anything inside, to explosive rage in less than two seconds. The moment he opened his mouth, he knew what he said would not be fair. But he said it anyway. "I hate you. I wish you were dead instead of her!" He stood, hands balled into fists, shaking. He felt nauseous and remorseful for wishing his father dead.

James sighed and turned away. "Just . . . go to your room. I can't deal with you right now."



ZEKE WATCHED HIS FATHER WALK AWAY, THOSE LAST WORDS ringing in his ears. *I can't deal with you right now.* As his father returned to the kitchen, Zeke threw his school bag onto the couch and walked out the front door.

Zeke stomped down the path to Hope Lake. He needed to slow down and allow himself to feel something other than rage—sadness and grief for his mother.

The night was freezing but at least the wind had died down. The moon was high in the sky, bringing enough illumination that he could see the soft waves lapping calmly near his feet. It was too cold to sit on the ground, so he stood and struggled to let the serenity that seemed to surround the lake soak into himself.

Perhaps there was something to the legend of the Ottawa princess. If he wished hard enough, would the lake grant him his wish and return his mother to him?

Zeke picked up a pebble and skipped it across the lake. It bounced three times before disappearing below the surface. It was then that he saw a soft glow beneath the water, brightening as he stood there. Even though the air had fallen still around him,

he could hear the soft rustle of leaves. Zeke rubbed his eyes and looked at the lake, only to see that the light hadn't disappeared as it had earlier. And there was no sun, so where was the light coming from? He looked all around him, but this deep into the forest preserve, there were no sources of light, not even streetlamps. The steady pounding of drums joined the rustle of the leaves, giving Zeke goosebumps.

He felt something tugging at him. Something or someone calling to him. Like a whisper in his ears saying something Zeke couldn't quite make out. As he listened, the wind picked up; the leaves rustling in rhythmic harmony with the drumbeats, the steady pulse building. As he looked into the depths of the illuminated lake, he saw ripples coming from beneath the water to the surface, just like the ones formed by his skipped rock, one after the other. The light intensified with the music.

What is that?

Zeke wasn't so much alarmed as he was curious. Without thinking, he walked toward the rocky shore, the cold water lapping at his ankles, stinging his skin. A soft whisper, like someone talking quietly in his ear, was telling him it was alright, that it was safe to follow the light. Still fully clothed, he ran into the lake. The light seemed like a beacon, urging him forward. The music surrounded him.

At first, he moved with ease, but the closer he got to the light, the farther away it appeared. Zeke didn't know how much time he had spent trying to reach the light. But the burning in his lungs from the lack of oxygen and the cramping in his muscles from the effort it took to swim in his clothes told him it was time to resurface to catch his breath. He turned around to swim back toward the shore.

However, the light brightened and began pulsating to a rhythm like a heartbeat. The light seemed to come from every direction, and he no longer knew which way was up and which way was down.

He was beginning to think he was an idiot for jumping into the lake. What had gotten into him? Never had he been this afraid in his life. Not even the terrible day when he got the news that his mother was dead. That day, he had felt numb. No feeling at all. Zeke hadn't even been able to cry.

As he struggled in the water, Zeke became aware that he wasn't alone. He was surrounded by huge snake-like creatures. Zeke didn't know what they were but they were gigantic. Could they be crocodiles or alligators? Not in Illinois. It was too cold here. Zeke desperately looked for a way out of the water, but he couldn't find it. He needed to breathe. Desperation clawed at his chest as he swam this way and that. He panicked as he felt himself moving but not getting anywhere.

It felt like one of those nightmares he often had in which a monster was chasing him. No matter how fast he ran, he didn't make any progress. He stayed rooted to the same spot. And just as he felt the hand of the monster on his shoulder, he would wake up screaming.

These snake-like creatures were very real and they were everywhere. He'd turn one way, then another, and there they were, moving through the water with ease. Surrounding him. Dread shot through his spine when he saw that the slithering bodies had faces. Scowling human faces fixed their gazes on him now and moved in his direction, scaly bodies gliding toward him more quickly than he could move. He screamed, panic overwhelming everything else.

This was it for him then. Zeke had never imagined his death but dying in a lake surrounded by monsters didn't make sense at all.

He was going to die in Hope Lake, the only place that had brought him any sense of peace he'd known since his mother's death.

The scream cost him all the air left in his lungs. Water filled his mouth. He tried to close it but found he couldn't even manage that. He kept swallowing, unable to stop. A whisper in his ear told him it would be alright. That help was coming. Zeke had to be having a nightmare. He kept thinking he'd wake up any minute now. That was his last thought before everything faded, and then there was nothing but darkness.



ZEKE FELT PRESSURE ON HIS CHEST—LIKE AN ELEPHANT HAD decided to sit on him and would not budge no matter how much he flailed. He gasped and panted, desperately trying to fill his lungs with air, but the water in his lungs wouldn't let him breathe. His lungs were aching. He tried to reach out to get the darn elephant off, but his arms felt so heavy, he couldn't move them.

There was a sharp pain in his head, like a hammer was pounding at his temples. Bright lights exploded like fireworks behind his closed eyes. Again, he tried to move his arms, to block the bright light, but his arms were like lead. Then he felt pressure on his chest, like the elephant had decided to tap dance on him while Zeke laid there, defenseless. Something was pounding down on him causing a different kind of pain. Blindly, he threw a punch at whatever was causing the pain. But his feeble attempt at a punch was slow and reached nothing. The bright lights behind his eyes dimmed, and, for sure, he thought he was dying.

The light swirled in his head, like a black and white kaleidoscope. Water gushed out of him until he felt the sour taste of bile. He couldn't stop coughing, someone helped him to his side, and finally,

the water was all out. As the water left his lungs, he could feel the air rushing back in. He opened his eyes but the world kept spinning. The kaleidoscope transformed from black and white to fragmented earth brown and green colors. He gulped; sweet air filling his lungs.

Slowly, the swirling stopped. Still panting, he looked around, eyes wide. The fragmented pieces slid into place like a jigsaw puzzle, giving him the whole picture. He was lying in the opening of what looked like a cave. A waterfall, flowing like a curtain, blocked the entrance. A girl was standing next to him.

Zeke did a double take. He stopped scanning the cave and focused on the girl. She looked down at him with a curious gaze, as if she were trying to decide whether to run away or hit him with something. The girl had soft black hair that flowed over her shoulders, almost reaching her waist. Her large brown eyes, bright and perceptive, stared deep into his. Her olive skin had a glow to it that made her shine. She seemed young, about his age, Zeke thought. When she spoke, her voice was soft with a melodic quality to it.

“Are you all right?”

Zeke kept staring, unable to speak. He was not sure if the girl was making him nervous or if his vocal cords had been damaged somehow. The uneasy feeling in his stomach was not reassuring at all.

The water dripping into his eyes made it difficult to see. He brushed his hair from his forehead, wiping the water away. He got his hands under him and pushed himself slowly into a sitting position. This helped to keep the room from spinning too fast again. His lungs still burned, but at least he was able to breathe now.

Zeke tried to make sense of what was happening, trying to put the fragmented pieces together. The cave and the waterfall, he could see clearly, and the sounds of the rushing water were all too

real. There were no caves or waterfalls near his home. Well, his father's home.

There had been water, too much water. Water everywhere and no way out.

I almost drowned!

After a few startled moments, he was able to speak. "Who are you? Where am I?" Zeke's voice cracked, rather embarrassingly.

He was beginning to remember but his head still felt foggy. He'd had a fight with his father and had gone to Hope Lake; the lake that had been his only safe haven in Sequoia. He had sneaked away, not telling his father where he was going. Not his best move. Zeke vaguely imagined how angry his father would be once he got back home.

Firstly because of the fight at school. He knew his father was still upset about that. Now, he would need to explain why he was dripping wet on a colder-than-usual October night. Zeke wanted to roll his eyes but stopped himself.

Zeke also remembered his ordeal in the water. His skin crawled as he remembered those nasty creatures circling all around him. A cold shiver ran down his spine. He tried to let go of the fear but failed miserably. When he remembered the girl was standing there, Zeke felt his face warm, and he just knew that his cheeks were turning a bright shade of red. He felt slightly embarrassed that the girl might be able to tell he had been afraid. Still afraid, if he was being honest.

With patience, and a bit of amusement that didn't seem to fit the time or place, the girl replied, "My name is Naya. What is your name?"

"I'm Zeke." Despite still feeling nauseated and completely drained, he pressed on. "What happened? Why am I in a cave?"

Naya looked at the boy. He was wearing strange clothes that were not familiar to her. Compared to her soft cotton tunic, his pants seemed rough and uncomfortable. His shirt was black with a picture of an animal on the front, although she was not quite sure what kind; maybe a wild dog? His shoes seemed constraining to her.

She glanced at her own uncovered feet, feeling the cool earth beneath her toes, grateful that her feet were bare. She had shoes made of soft leather at home but she preferred to go barefoot whenever she could. The contact with the ground always made her feel closer to the world around her. Well, whenever her father or Anya weren't around to scold her.

Zeke still showed a bit of fear; Naya could see it in his dilated eyes. They reminded Naya of precious stones. At the moment, they were almost charcoal black at the center with a thin sliver of silver. How beautiful, Naya could not help thinking. His dark brown hair was long enough to fall over his forehead in wavy sections that might have looked messy on someone else. But on Zeke, it made him look handsome. His tan skin made his eyes pop even more so, especially now that his eyes were almost back to normal, showing the full silver irises. Naya felt bad for her sidetracked thoughts. She would be as concerned as he was if she'd almost drowned.

"There is much for us to talk about but this is not the place for conversation," she said. "We must move quickly. Follow me, and I will take you to my kin. Then, we will talk."

Looking him over, she wondered if he was able to walk on his own. After such an ordeal, she wouldn't be surprised if he was hurt. Zeke looked thin but strong. He could probably keep up with her, she thought. She turned and started walking toward the back of the cave. With a quick indiscernible glance behind her, she saw that the

boy had gotten up and was following her. Naya couldn't help but smile as Zeke tripped.

Naya had moved so quickly that Zeke did not have time to think. For a moment, he heard a whisper in his ear telling him to follow her. He doubted his instincts but there was no one else here. There must still be water in his ears making him hear things. He gently tipped his head to the side and then the other to get out any water left inside his ear. He brushed away any fears and after stumbling for a bit, began to follow Naya. His shoes squished out water with every step. The moss-like material covering the cave floor was soft like a plush bath mat. He had expected the moss to be slippery, especially with his wet shoes, but he found he could easily walk on it.

The cave was illuminated with a kind of soft glow, but he couldn't tell where the light was coming from. The cave turned into a tunnel that should have been dark, even pitch black. Zeke couldn't see any openings, anywhere that let sunlight through. Where was the light coming from? Zeke was seriously freaking out over everything, even though he tried to hide it from Naya. Every time she turned around to see if he was following, he pretended to be fine, perfectly normal. Nothing to see here, folks. He hoped he was selling it anyway.

Zeke lost all sense of direction. The path had split several times and he did not know where he was in the elaborate cave system. If he had to make his way back to the entrance on his own, he had no idea how he would manage it. All he knew was that the path followed a downward slope.



ZEKE BLINKED, LETTING HIS EYES ADJUST TO THE BRIGHT SUN-
light as he and Naya emerged from the tunnel. His eyes watered

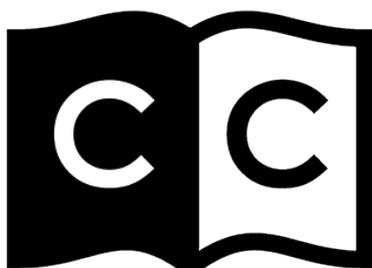
for a minute but as they adjusted, he took in the beauty that surrounded him.

Majestic mountains that reached into the sky and disappeared beyond the clouds were breathtaking. There seemed to be a river nearby that Zeke could hear but not see. Lush vegetation, as magnificent as it was overwhelming, stunned him with the graceful displays of foliage in olive greens, pine greens, and lemongrass greens that gently swayed in the warm breeze. There were plants with huge leaves that seemed longer than his arm. Vines climbed from the dark, rich soil and disappeared into the tree canopy. Flowers as large as his hand seemed familiar and alien at the same time. Some he recognized—definitely the creamy white ones were orchids jutting out of tree trunks or atop rocks. The hibiscus flowers in varying hues of yellow, red, and pink he recognized from trips to the botanical gardens with his mother.

This place was like a jungle. The overgrown vegetation covered everything as far as the eye could see. As he followed the foliage, contours of the land became more visible. Far below, a valley was nestled at the foot of the mountains. The bright sunlight shined in Zeke's eyes. How was it possible that the sun was still out? Zeke had seen it go down the horizon long before going into water but it was high in the sky indicating it was about midday. Zeke furrowed his eyebrows as he tried to make sense of everything.

Naya looked sideways at Zeke's face. She could tell that he was pleased at the sight of her ancestral home, but his expressions amused her. It was strange to see his face contort in different ways that surely matched his emotions. Right now, his mouth was agape, his eyes were wide, and his breath caught just for a second before he exhaled. Naya was enjoying the show of Zeke's emotions, though one could not tell from her own expression.





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HE LOST HIS MOM. HE WON'T LET THE SAME THING HAPPEN TO HIS FRIENDS.

Zeke Grayson feels so alone. He lost his mom and his home in Arizona's Sonoran Desert after a hit-and-run. Now he's stuck living with his estranged father in wintery Illinois, where he has exactly zero ties to his Mexica heritage and the only family he has ever known.

Furious with his dad for thinking he should just "get over" his mom's death and stop causing trouble at school, Zeke runs away to a local lake. Watching the water has helped him calm down before, but this time his grief for his mom is too much. It unlocks a magic he didn't know he possessed, and he passes into a world on the other side of the water.

This secret world is at war with a slithering serpentine race known as the Gyrazú that can track people through rivers. Against them, Zeke joins forces with teens who already know how to use their magic. To help his newfound friends prevent a cataclysmic attack, he'll have to navigate both his grief and his magic—or else risk drowning in both.


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