

# HEATHER VOGEL FREDERICK

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## Prologue

There's a mermaid tail hanging in my closet.

And it's all my cousin Mackenzie's fault.

Look, I love anything to do with water—especially swimming. I've been on a swim team since I was five years old, and my father likes to tease that H<sub>2</sub>O is my native element. But mermaid lessons? That would never have occurred to me in a million years. Maybe a billion. Mackenzie, though, was all over the idea the minute she spotted the brochure at the library.

I should have known that a place with a name as lame as Sirena's Sea Siren Academy could only spell trouble. Which I've had my fair share of ever since we moved to Pumpkin Falls, New Hampshire, and I accidentally became a middle school private eye. This time, however, I found myself way over my head in that department as I tangled with pirates onstage and off, suffered a very public wardrobe malfunction, and embarked on a near-disastrous spelunking expedition while hunting for long-lost treasure.

(I didn't know what "spelunking" meant either, until it was too late to turn back. It's a good word, well worth looking up.)

But before any of this happened, and before anything remotely resembling a mermaid tail showed up in my closet, I had one major hurdle to face: the annual Gifford Family Reunion.

## Chapter 1

"Smile like you mean it!" My grandmother clapped her hands, trying to attract the attention of the seven adults who were lined up on the steps of the Pumpkin Falls

Public Library, talking and laughing. She turned to the woman behind the tripod beside her. “Aren’t they something?”

The tripod, and the camera attached to it, belonged to Janet Foster, ace reporter for the Pumpkin Falls Patriot-Bugle. If it were possible for a newspaper as teeny as the Pumpkin Falls Patriot-Bugle to actually have an ace reporter, that was.

“They certainly are,” Janet replied, peering through her camera lens. Janet moonlighted as a professional pet photographer. I had no idea how she was with people pictures, but in a town the size of ours, you took what you could get. And my grandmother had done exactly that, hiring her to take our traditional family reunion photos.

Grandma Gifford beamed. “All my beautiful babies!”

My brother Hatcher let out a snort. Our grandmother slipped her arm around him and squeezed. “Just you wait! Someday you’ll have kids of your own, and then you’ll under-stand. Your babies are always your babies, no matter how old they are.”

I gazed skeptically at the half dozen men and one petite woman who were being photographed. It was hard to imagine any of my big Texas uncles as babies. Or my mother, for that matter. She stood at the end of the lineup like the period at the end of a sentence. Or rather, an exclamation point. Dinah Gifford Lovejoy didn’t have much to offer in the height department, but she wasn’t lacking in spunk.

“So these are all your kids?” Janet asked, pulling a small notebook and pen from the back pocket of her jeans.

My heart sank as I watched her switch into reporter mode. Janet may have been hired to take our family reunion photos, but she clearly knew a story when she spotted

one. Not that we were hard to miss: thirty-seven Giffords in matching T-shirts parading through Pumpkin Falls were a sight to behold, as my grandmother would say.

“You bet your sweet cowboy boots they’re my kids!” Grandma G replied, her voice brimming with Texas sugar and sass. “A boy for every day of the week and a girl for Sunday.”

I looked at my mother, wondering how she’d survived growing up with six brothers. Six! And I thought two was bad. Hatcher and Danny were a handful, but my mother had had to deal with Uncle Teddy, Uncle Lenny, Uncle Craig, Uncle Rooster (his real name was Richard, but no one ever called him that), Uncle Brent, and Uncle Scott.

Then again, she’d had our grandmother’s example. Grandma G was petite like my mother, but she had a voice like a bullhorn and backbone to spare. There was no mistaking who was boss when my grandmother was around. She’d had to be strong to raise seven kids by herself after my grandpa died.

I’d never met my Texas grandfather, but I still felt like I knew him. He was practically a legend in our family—the penniless cowboy from West Texas who’d pulled himself up by his bootstraps, swept our grandmother off her feet, and built a ranch near Austin with only his own two hands. Theodore Roosevelt Gifford. My uncle Teddy was named after him.

I didn’t have a favorite uncle, not really. I loved them all. But if I did have a favorite, it would be my uncle Teddy. He was my cousin and best friend Mackenzie’s father, and I knew him almost as well as I knew my own dad. The hardest part about

leaving Texas and moving across the country to New Hampshire had been moving away from them. And I knew I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Uncle Teddy and my mother were at the tail end of the Gifford lineup, and the closest of the Gifford siblings in age, barely eleven months apart. The two of them were best friends when they were little, and they were still best friends now that they were grown up.

"How are you enjoying Pumpkin Falls so far?" Janet asked my grandmother, her pen hovering over her notebook.

"Mighty fine!" Grandma G enthused. "You've got yourself a real slice of American pie here."

I could tell by the way Janet was nodding and scribbling that she liked that quote. It was perfect headline material, and I braced myself for the fact that, thanks to my ridiculously quotable grandmother, my family was probably going to end up plastered all over the front page of the Patriot-Bugle.

If only we'd kept the reunion in Texas, where it belonged! The Giffords had gotten together every summer since before I could remember, but until now our reunions had always been at the ranch. That's where my mother and her brothers had all grown up, and everyone but us still lived within half a day's drive. This year, though, for the first time, we were breaking with tradition. This year, my mother had invited everyone to spend the Fourth of July with us here in Pumpkin Falls.

The town didn't know what had hit it. Giffords had started arriving yesterday morning, and they'd kept streaming in all day. My father had been put in charge of logistics for our reunions years ago, and he organized the weekends like a military operation. This was right up his alley, seeing as how he was a former lieutenant

colonel in the United States Army. Everything ran like clockwork thanks to him, with rotating squads of Giffords in charge of transportation, food shopping, meal setup, cooking, cleanup, and more. This year, Mr. Military had rented a school bus, and he and my brother Danny had taken turns running shuttles to and from Logan Airport in Boston, and would now spend the holiday weekend ferrying all of us around Pumpkin Falls.

This morning, we'd all gone downtown and descended on Lou's Diner for donuts (Dad had called ahead of time to warn them that thirty-seven hungry customers were on their way, to make sure there would be enough). Afterward, we'd given everyone a tour of Lovejoy's Books, our family's bookstore, and then stopped by Mahoney's Antiques for a peek at the big silver pumpkin trophy that would be awarded later this week-end to the winning Fourth of July road race team. Finally, we'd headed to the Pumpkin Falls Library, whose front steps had been selected as the best place in town for our reunion photographs.

As I watched Grandma G looking over the shots that Janet had taken so far, Hatcher spotted the expression on my face and grinned.

"Cheer up, Drooly," he whispered, calling me by my least favorite nickname. My real name, Truly, was odd enough, but Drooly? Please. "It will all be over soon."

I shot him a look. Thirty-six more hours hardly qualified as "soon."

It's not that I didn't love our epic family reunions—I did. They were great, when they were in Texas where they belonged. We were invisible on the ranch, and safe from prying eyes. We could be as goofy and loud as we wanted, without the rest of the

world looking on. Here? I glanced around. By my calculations, at this very moment fully half of Pumpkin Falls was gawking at us.

“That should do it for this group,” said Janet, after she and my grandmother settled on the winning shot. “How about one with just the grandkids next, and then we’ll go for—what is it you call it? The full Gifford?”

My uncles let out a collective Texas whoop. I scowled, not feeling nearly as enthusiastic. Our upstairs hallway was plastered with “the full Giffords”—group portraits that had started when my mom and her brothers were little, gradually swelling in size to include their spouses, and then us grandkids. Our parents and aunts and uncles had all looked ridiculously young when they were first married, hardly older than Danny and Hatcher, who dubbed the photos *Hairstyles Through the Ages*. Most of the men had long hair and mustaches back in the day, and a few had even sported mullets. (“Business in the front, party in the back,” as Danny put it.) Not my dad, of course. Mr. Military’s hair was even shorter back then.

The portraits had grown larger each year as more and more cousins and siblings came along. I used to love looking at baby me and toddler me, and all the rest of us as we grew over the years. Now, when he really wanted to needle me, Hatcher called the pictures “the full Truly,” for the way they charted my astronomic growth. I’d been a normal-size kid for a long time, but at the beginning of sixth grade I’d started to shoot up like one of the giant sunflowers in Grandma G’s garden. At six feet tall, I towered over all of my classmates and most of my immediate family, and I was happy not to be reminded of that fact.

“Hey!” said my cousin Mackenzie, slipping her arm through mine. “There’s Cha Cha and Jasmine!”

Cha Cha Abramowitz and Jasmine Sanchez were my closest friends in Pumpkin Falls. They waved at us, grinning hugely. I could tell they were enjoying the Gifford reunion spectacle. Mackenzie and I waved back.

“Ooo, and there’s Calhoun!” My cousin stretched up on her tiptoes to see over the crowd. Mackenzie was petite, like my mother and grandmother. Whenever I was with her, I felt like an ostrich standing next to a chickadee.

I could feel my face flush. I’d been studiously ignoring Romeo Calhoun ever since I’d spotted him at the edge of the crowd. I could only imagine what he thought of this sideshow. I slid a glance over to where he stood talking to his sister Juliet. Seriously, those were their names, Romeo and Juliet, thanks to their father, who was a huge fan of “the Bard,” as he called Shakespeare.

Calhoun wasn’t my boyfriend, but I liked to think that we were more than just friends. Or at least that we’d both like us to be. We weren’t officially dating or anything—my father said I was much too young for that. “When you can drive, you can date, and not before,” was his motto, and when Lieutenant Colonel Jericho T. Lovejoy laid down the law, us kids said “yes, sir” and fell in line. Calhoun and I hung out a lot, though. I’d taken him bird-watching a few times—my favorite hobby—and we went to the General Store for ice cream and stuff with our group of friends. But unlike Jasmine’s brother Scooter, who had ambushed me on my birthday last Spring Break with a big smooch I wasn’t looking for, Calhoun hadn’t so much as tried to

hold my hand. Mackenzie thought he just needed encouragement. I wasn't sure what to think. Despite the fact that I had two brothers, boys were still a mystery to me.

"Kids!" called my grandmother in her bullhorn voice, momentarily silencing the crowd. "Come and get your pictures made!"

As Mackenzie and I headed toward her, Aunt Angie appeared with the stroller containing our youngest cousins. Twins Bella and Blair were just six months old.

"Why don't you girls hold them for the picture?" our aunt suggested, passing a baby each to Mackenzie and me.

Mackenzie was a pro, thanks to all the babysitting she did back in Austin. Babies weren't my thing, though. In fact, they were way up on the list of things I wasn't good at. Blair must have sensed that, because the minute I took her, she started to cry.

"Jiggle her up and down, like this," said Mackenzie, bouncing Bella gently.

I tried to mimic her, but it only made my tiny cousin cry harder.

"I'm right here, peanut!" cooed Aunt Angie, wagging her fingers.

"Give her to me," said my younger sister Lauren, scooping Blair out of my arms. She made googly eyes and silly faces and bounced her expertly on her hip until Blair stopped crying and produced a toothless smile.

Aunt Angie gave my sister an admiring glance. "Don't you have the magic touch!"

"Babies aren't that different from kittens," Lauren replied, turning pink with pleasure at the compliment.

"No, Lauren, you can't have a kitten," my mother said automatically. My sister had been angling for another pet ever since we'd arrived in Pumpkin Falls.



Lauren heaved the deep sigh of the misunderstood, then followed Mackenzie and me onto the steps to join the rest of our cousins.

“Two rows! Tallest in the back, shortest in the front!” ordered Grandma G.

“How about we try something different?” Janet suggested. “Let’s put Truly in the middle, and then staircase down from there on either side.”

I grimaced. I’d been hoping to hide in the back row. I knew Janet didn’t mean anything by it, but Truly-in-the-Middle was my father’s nickname for me, since I was the middle kid in our family. And ever since my growth spurt, it was like my family couldn’t resist showing me off. My parents had put me smack-dab in the middle of our last Christmas card photo, where I towered over both of them, and over my brothers and sisters, all of us in our matching holiday sweaters my mother had knit for us. Talk about a sight to behold.

Aunt Louise, Mackenzie’s mother, sorted us into place with help from Aunt True, who was a Lovejoy, not a Gifford. They went up and down the line, wiping noses and brushing stubborn cowlicks into place in an effort to make us present-able. This was Aunt True’s very first Gifford reunion. If she was feeling a little overwhelmed, you’d never know it. My father’s sister seemed to take everything in stride, including giving up a life of travel to move back to her old hometown and help run the family bookshop.

“I think that’s as good as it gets,” said Aunt Louise finally. My aunts retreated to the sidelines as Grandma G gave Janet a thumbs-up. The camera whirred and clicked.

“Looking good!” said Janet. “How about one more, just in case? Smile, everyone!”

Just as the camera shutter clicked for the final time, my cousin Matt, who was ten and a show-off, made a face. This meant another retake, of course, and there were two more misfires after that, one because my little sister Pippa got distracted by a butterfly and another because Uncle Rooster's two youngest boys started swatting each other. Finally, Janet managed to take a picture that satisfied my grandmother. Which was a good thing, because my cheek muscles were starting to hurt from all the smiling.

"Time for the full Gifford!" Grandma G announced. She gave her lips a fresh swipe of her signature bright red lipstick as the rest of the Texas side of my family crowded forward.

"True, you get in the shot too," my mother said.

"Yes, True, come on up here and join us," said Grandma G. "And bring that long drink of water with you." She winked at Erastus Peckinpaugh, my aunt's gangly boyfriend, who taught history at Lovejoy College. Their romance—which my friends and I helped rekindle last winter—was finally out from under wraps. It was also a subject of keen interest to the residents of Pumpkin Falls, who were placing bets as to when Professor Rusty, as everybody called him, would propose.

"But we're not Giffords!" Aunt True protested.

"Neither am I," said my father, taking his place beside my mother. "But we're all still family."

"Honorary Giffords!" Aunt Louise decreed, and another big Texas whoop went up from my relatives.

Aunt True smiled and shrugged. Grabbing her boyfriend's hand, she squeezed in beside me. Suddenly I didn't feel like such a freak. Aunt True and I were the same height.

"Stand your ground, tall timber," she whispered, giving me an affectionate nudge with her shoulder.

Aunt True liked to refer to the two of us as "tall timber" and often joked that we were born to stand out in a crowd. Maybe someday I'd have her confidence. Right now, I was still getting used to my newly attained height. And my size-ten-and-a-half feet. I took a deep breath, straightened up, and smiled once again at the camera.

"And that's a wrap!" said Janet half a dozen clicks later. My father stepped forward, thrust two fingers in his mouth, and gave a sharp whistle. "Head 'em up and move 'em out!" he ordered. "The bus leaves in two minutes—there's just enough time before dinner for a swim over at Lake Lovejoy. Y'all know what's on the menu tonight: Teddy's famous ribs!"

This announcement brought another chorus of whoops. Uncle Teddy's barbecued ribs were always a highlight of our reunions. I could hardly wait. Pumpkin Falls didn't know the first thing about barbecue. New Englanders called it "having a cookout," and it mostly involved hamburgers and hot dogs, not brisket and ribs.

As I followed my family across the village green toward the waiting school bus, I waved to an elderly woman seated on a bench. She waved back. Thelma Farnsworth and her sister Ethel were married to a pair of brothers. Ethel and her husband Ike Farnsworth ran the General Store; Thelma and Elmer Farnsworth had a small dairy

farm at the edge of town. Every summer, the Farnsworth sisters also helped out as cooks at Camp Lovejoy.

“Are you part of a circus?” Thelma asked me, puzzled, as the stream of Giffords in matching T-shirts flowed past her bench.

“We might as well be,” I muttered in response.

“Did you hear that, Elmer?” Thelma shouted to her husband, who was bent over a nearby trash bin, sorting through its contents. A bag full of empty soda cans was at his feet. Elmer loved collecting junk. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure” was his motto.

“ELMER!” Thelma called again, louder this time. “THE CIRCUS IS IN TOWN!”

Elmer was hard of hearing but refused to wear a hearing aid. The reason I knew this pretty much summed up my life in Pumpkin Falls. There were no secrets in a town the size of ours. Everybody knew everything about everyone else—including the fact that Elmer Farnsworth had a stubborn streak which, combined with his pride, was keeping him from admitting that he didn’t hear as well as he used to. This had been a topic of lively discussion recently on the General Store’s front porch, where he and his buddies liked to hang out, and where I often overheard their conversations when I was eating ice cream with my friends.

Elmer snapped upright like he’d been poked with a pin. “I LOVE THE CIRCUS!” he bellowed.

I did a mental face-palm and ran for the bus.

I loved my family and I loved our reunions, but I didn't love being such a public spectacle. Stealth mode was more my speed, my term for flying under the radar. I didn't love people staring at us or the prospect of being front-page news, and I especially didn't love our matching T-shirts—this year's were a blinding shade of neon green with a bright orange pumpkin on the front and THE GIFFORDS GO TO PUMPKIN FALLS! splatted on the back.

I hated to admit it, but as much as I'd been looking forward to our family reunion, I was looking forward to it being over, too. Because then my perfect summer could finally begin.