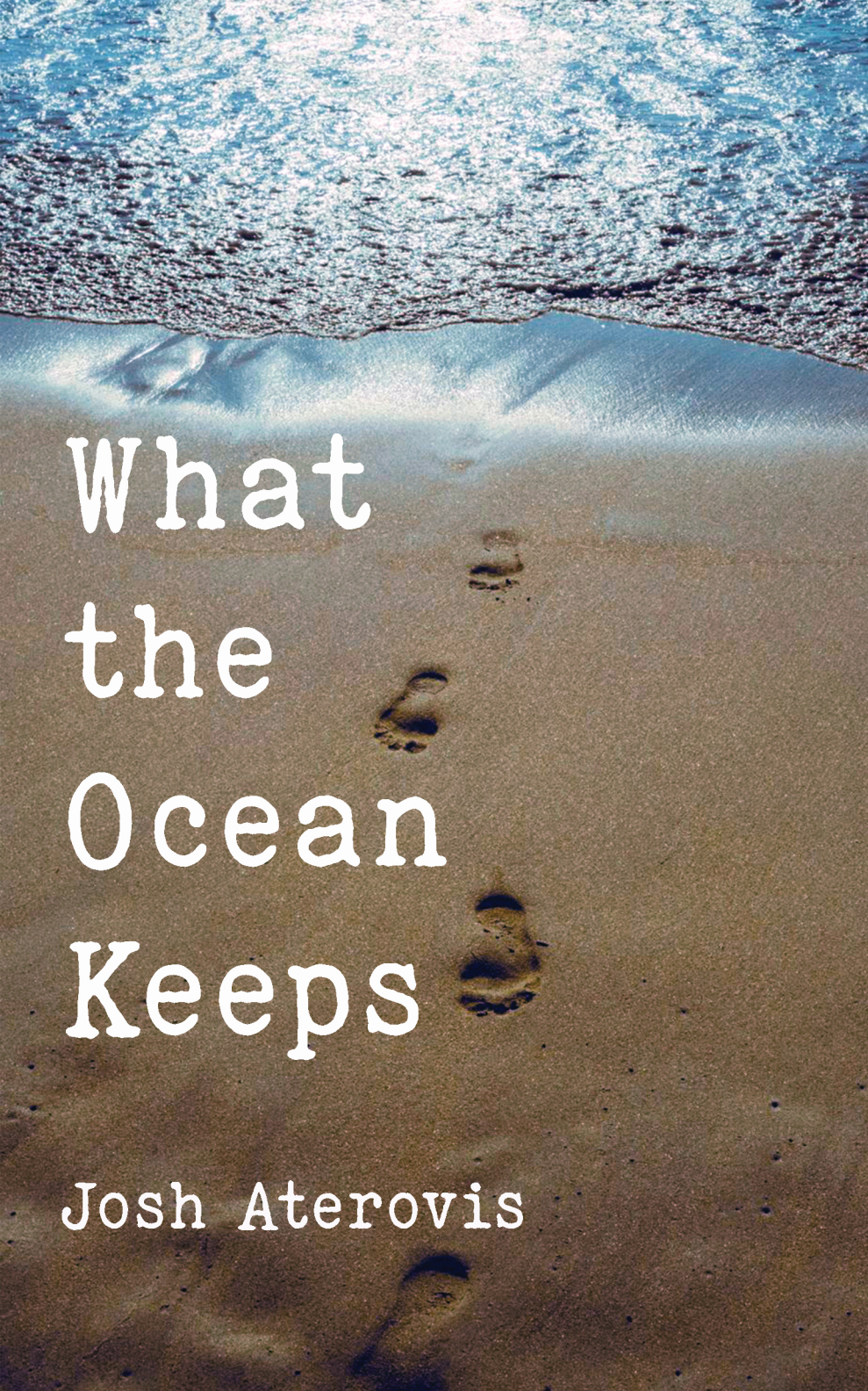


A photograph of a beach scene. The top half shows the ocean with white, foamy waves crashing onto the shore. The bottom half shows the sandy beach with several footprints. The text "What the Ocean Keeps" is written in a white, serif font on the left side of the beach. The author's name "Josh Aterovis" is written in a smaller, white, serif font at the bottom left.

What the Ocean Keeps

Josh Aterovis

What the Ocean Keeps

A Killian Kendall Expanded Universe Story

Josh Aterovis

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Cover Design: Josh Aterovis

I lay on the warm sand, listening to the waves crash against the shore and watching hot, half-naked guys wander by — and I was bored out of my mind.

The family vacation had been Adam's idea. He said I needed to get away, to clear my head. But there's no such thing as escaping your own guilt. Ever since Aidan died, I'd been struggling — not just with grief, but the bone-deep conviction that I'd failed him.

I hadn't seen Will since the funeral. I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye. I knew he didn't blame me. But I blamed myself, and I couldn't let it go.

Adam thought a week at the beach would do me good. I wasn't so sure. I'd grown up in a seaside resort town, so the beach didn't exactly scream "reset" to me. But the rest of the family had voted for the Outer Banks, and I'd been outnumbered.

As for the hot guys, well, they were off-limits. I had a boyfriend back home. Looking was fine. Touching? Not so much. And frankly, I was tired of even looking. Tired of pretending I was still the guy who'd get excited by a flirtatious smile from a stranger on the sand.

I sat up with a heavy sigh.

"What now?" Kane grumbled from beneath his towel.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I had been complaining. A lot.

"It's been four days," I said. "I've had enough beach to last me the rest of the year."

He groaned. "Why can't you just relax?"

"Because when I'm quiet, I start thinking. And when I start thinking, I end up back where I started."

He pulled the towel from his face and sat up. "Is this about Aidan again?"

I didn't answer. I didn't need to.

Kane sighed. "Look, I miss him, too. He was a good guy. But none of this — none of what happened — was your fault."

I stared out at the waves. "But if I hadn't pushed them, if I hadn't kept pushing them..."

"They asked you to get involved. You couldn't have known."

I nodded, but it wasn't enough. "But I was the one who agreed to keep digging when Aidan asked for my help...after Will told us to back off. I should have listened. Maybe he'd still be alive..."

“You can’t know that.”

“No. But he was my cousin. And Will’s husband, even if they were only married for a few hours before he was killed...”

Kane didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he reached out and patted my knee. “This isn’t helping anything. Go take a walk. Maybe clear your head a little.”

It was probably the best suggestion I’d heard all day.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

I wandered toward the surf, letting the waves wrap around my ankles. I tried to let the ocean scrub my thoughts clean, but every thought seemed to circle back to Aidan. His laugh. His kindness. The way he looked at Will when he didn’t think anyone was watching.

If love like that couldn’t survive the world, what hope did the rest of us have?

Things with my boyfriend Asher hadn’t been great lately. We’d been arguing more than usual, and an unspoken tension lingered between us — always there, just under the surface. I liked to believe we could still fix things, but sometimes I wondered if love was really worth fighting for if it could be snatched from your hands so easily?

I don’t know how long I walked before a flash of light caught my attention, snapping me out of my reverie. It wasn’t just sunlight reflecting off the water. It looked as if something was sparkling under the surface.

I stepped closer and saw something nestled in the sand.

A ring.

I picked it up for a closer look. It was a ring. Gold, with a purple stone and engraving around the outside of the band. It looked oddly untouched, as if the ocean had preserved it rather than eroded it.

I bent down and rinsed off the sand. The engraving read, “Annemessex High School.” On one side of the stone was the number “19” and on the other “58.” A class ring from 1958. And judging by how delicate it was, it had belonged to a woman. How long had it been out here in the ocean? Had someone just dropped it?

I looked around, but there was no one in the immediate vicinity. A family had set up a blanket and umbrella a little farther along the beach, so I trudged toward them to see if maybe they’d lost it.

The mother eyed me suspiciously as I approached. I gave her a large grin hoping to put her at ease.

“Hi! I was wondering if anyone here lost a class ring.”

She shook her head no. “Why? Did you find one?”

It crossed my mind to say, “No, I just thought it would be fun to ask,” but instead I kept the smile on my face and nodded. “You didn’t happen to see anyone over in that area earlier today, did you?”

“Nope, and we’ve been here since this morning. Guess it’s just your lucky day, huh?”

I kept the now pasted-on smile as I turned away. “Thanks, anyway.”

Sure, it was my lucky day. I’ve always wanted someone else’s class ring from 1958.

As I absentmindedly slipped it onto my little finger, I glimpsed something out of the corner of my eye. I spun around to see a young woman in an old-fashioned cut, bright-red strapless bathing suit standing in the same general area where I’d found the ring. She wore matching lipstick, and her hair was swept back in a colorfully patterned scarf...and she was looking right at me.

I blinked and she was gone.

I rubbed my eyes, but there was still no one standing there. I decided I’d been out in the sun too long. It was time to return to the house we’d rented for the week.

Once there, I downed a glass of juice before slipping the ring off my finger for a closer look. This time, I noticed a name engraved on the inside of the band: Elizabeth Murphy.

I quickly opened my laptop and did a Google search for “Elizabeth Murphy Annemessex High School Class of 1958.” Several alumni websites came up, but you had to be a member to view them. I didn’t see anything directly related to the person I was looking for.

Maybe my search was too narrow. I searched just for just “Elizabeth Murphy,” but quickly realized that it was far too common a name.

It was futile. I set the ring on the desk next to the computer and went to find a snack for Kane and me. I opened the cabinet and just stood there, staring blankly at our meager vacation food stash — not really seeing any of it, my mind still tangled up in that damn ring.

For some reason, I felt compelled to find the owner. I kept telling myself I was being silly. There was no way I could find some

random person who'd lost his ring at the beach as long as seventy years ago. Besides, in that length of time anything could have happened. The owner could be dead, or living in another country, or who knows what.

Still, the ring wouldn't let go of me.

I grabbed a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread from the cabinet, then a jar of jelly from the fridge. I started slathering peanut butter on the bread, but the entire time, my mind kept wandering back to ways to find the ring's owner. I thought about posting a notice online, but what were the chances the right person would see it — and where would I post it? Maybe if I knew the area where the ring was from, I could place an ad in a local paper.

Sandwiches abandoned, I moved back to my laptop and searched "Annemessex High School," then clicked on the school's website and scrolled down the page.

I noticed a link for alumni in the bottom corner and clicked on it. It took me to a different site, one that was much older and obviously updated much less frequently. It was basically just a list of graduation years, so I selected 1958. I was surprised at how few students there were. I was immediately able to pick Elizabeth Murphy's name from the list. This almost seemed too easy.

Then I realized there were no addresses or phone numbers with any of the names, although some of them had the word "deceased" next to them in parentheses. Elizabeth was apparently still alive — at least at the time the page was last updated.

I scrolled all the way to the bottom and found a woman's name, email address, and phone number for corrections and updates. Maybe she would have Elizabeth Murphy's contact information.

I grabbed my phone and dialed the number. It rang two or three times before a woman answered.

"Hello, my name is Killian Kendall. I'm looking for information about someone who graduated from Annemessex High School in 1958."

There was a brief pause before she spoke again, sounding slightly confused. "Well, that's the year I graduated."

"I got your number from the school website. It said you were the one to contact for corrections and updates. I was hoping maybe you could help me."

“Oh, yes. I forgot they voted for me to keep track of all that at the last reunion. Do you have a correction? Oh dear, no one died, did they?”

“No, no. Um, actually, I was hoping you could help me find someone. Her name is Elizabeth Murphy.”

“Lizzie? I know her well. She’s Liz Bunting now, though. Married.”

“I found her high school ring, and I’d like to return it to her. Do you happen to have her phone number?”

“Her class ring? How sweet. What a nice young man. Sure, just hang on a second, darling.”

It took her several minutes, but she eventually found the number and gave it to me.

I disconnected and dialed the number she’d given me. It rang. And rang. I was just about to hang up when someone finally answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, I’m looking for Elizabeth Murphy. I mean, Elizabeth Bunting.”

“That’s my mother,” the man said, sounding confused. “She’s not here at the moment. Can I take a message?”

“Oh, um, yeah. My name’s Killian Kendall. I found her high school ring while I was walking on the beach.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. Found it right in the surf.”

“Wait! What beach? Ocean City?”

“No, the Outer Banks.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Uh...no. It’s from Annemessex High School, 1958. Her name’s engraved on the inside. Well, her maiden name.”

“That’s insane. How on earth did you find her?”

“Online search.” I didn’t feel like going into details.

“Wild. Well, get this. She’s in the Outer Banks right now — on vacation, with my sister and her husband. What are the chances?”

A chill crept down my spine. “She’s here? Now?”

“As we speak! Man, that’s wild. And I just happened to be checking her house when you called — an hour earlier or later and I’d have missed you. Would you be willing to call her at the rental? This is seriously going to blow her mind.”

“Sure,” I said, still trying to process the strange twist. “I don’t mind.”

The guy’s excitement was infectious, but I felt a little off kilter, like I’d just stepped into someone else’s story.

Then a thought struck me. “Is it possible she lost it this week? I mean...the ring looks almost new.”

“Oh, no. That’s what makes this so unbelievable. She hasn’t had that ring since before I was born. I remember asking her about it when I got my own class ring, and she said she’d lost hers years before she even met my father, rest his soul. Here’s the number. You ready? Man, this is going to make her day.”

He rattled off a phone number, and I scribbled it down.

After a few more enthusiastic exclamations from Mr. Bunting — and a couple of awkward laughs from me — I finally managed to say goodbye and end the call.

I sat and stared at the phone for a few minutes before dialing. The whole situation was starting to weird me out. Still, if the old woman was half as excited about getting her ring back as her son was, it would be a rewarding experience.

A woman answered.

“Hello, I’m looking for Elizabeth Bunting.”

“May I ask who’s calling?” There was curiosity in her voice.

“My name is Killian Kendall. I found her class ring earlier today.”

“You found her...what?”

“Class ring. Annemessex High School, class of 1958. Her name was engraved inside the band...”

“That’s...bizarre. How did you get this number?”

“I looked her up online and got her home phone from an old classmate. Her son happened to be at the house when I called and gave me this number.”

“That would be Jeffrey, my brother. I’m Mrs. Bunting’s daughter, Amy. Where...where did you find his ring?”

“I found it on the beach on the Outer Banks where I’m vacationing.”

“We’re vacationing there, too.”

“That’s what your brother told me.”

“That’s incredible. Where are you exactly?”

It turned out they were only one town away.

“Mom’s napping right now, but she should be awake in about an hour. I can run over and pick it up sometime after that—”

“How about I bring it to you?”

“I couldn’t ask you to go to all that trouble. You’ve already gone above and beyond by tracking her down.”

“It’s no trouble, really. In fact, I’m kind of bored, so I don’t mind at all.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Then great! Thank you so much. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled. You know, you should really be a detective!”

After she gave me the address and we said our goodbyes, I sat there for a moment, trying to let my brain catch up. What were the odds? It almost felt like something — or someone — had orchestrated all of it.

A chill crept down my spine. No. That was ridiculous. Just a strange string of coincidences. Nothing more.

I shook the thought off and called Adam to ask if I could borrow the car. I wasn’t sure he’d pick up — he and Steve had been looking forward to their alone time — but thankfully, he answered. He sounded a little annoyed until I told him the story. After that, he was all in.

I changed out of my bathing suit, slipped the ring into my pocket, and hit the road.

My heart was pounding by the time I pulled up to the house. I wasn’t sure why I was so nervous. It was just a simple good deed, right? And yet, it felt like I’d stumbled into something larger than myself, like I was following a thread someone else had started weaving long ago.

I climbed the front steps, took a steadying breath, and rang the bell.

A moment later, the door swung open to reveal a pleasant-looking woman with a neat, blonde bob and a warm, curious smile.

“Hi! You must be Killian. I’m Amy. Come on in.” She stepped aside to let me pass, then led me down a short hallway toward the back of the house. Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Mom’s in here. I didn’t tell her exactly why you were coming — just that you’d found something of hers.”

We entered a bright room with three walls of floor to ceiling windows overlooking the beach. Wicker furniture was arranged to best appreciate the view. In one of the chairs sat a gray-haired woman with lively blue eyes behind thick-framed glasses. One side of her face seemed to droop ever so slightly. Despite the summer weather, she wore a pair of light blue pants and a long-sleeved white shirt with embroidered violets around the collar. Small gold hoops hung from each ear and a gold chain around her neck disappeared under her shirt.

She smiled as we came into sight. "Why, hello there. Please excuse me for not standing. I had a stroke about this time last year, and my leg hasn't been quite right since."

"Oh, no, that's fine." I shook her hand.

She smiled at her daughter. "That's why we're here, actually. Amy thought it would be nice to get away for a week and just relax at the beach."

Amy smiled warmly back. "Now, if only you'd just relax instead of worrying about inconveniencing me or Roger all the time."

She laughed brightly and returned her attention to me, curiosity clear in her eyes. "I hear you have something of mine."

"Yes, ma'am." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring. "I found this today on the beach."

I held it out.

Her face changed the moment she focused on the ring. Her smile faded, and her eyes suddenly looked haunted. She reached out and took the ring cautiously. She gave it a closer look, let out a shaky breath, and dropped the ring onto her lap. She raised an unsteady hand to her mouth.

"Mom?" A note of alarm had crept into Amy's voice. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and waved her away. "Can you give me a moment alone with the boy?"

Amy shot me a confused look, but I was in the same boat as she was. I shrugged helplessly.

She nodded. "Okay. Sure. I'll just be in the other room, though, so if either of you needs anything, just holler."

She retreated, although not before casting one last questioning look my way.

As soon as she was gone, Mrs. Bunting picked up the ring again with hands that still shook.

"It's been a long time since I've seen this ring," she murmured as she studied it closely. She raised her gaze to mine. "Where did you find it?"

"On the beach, earlier today. I was walking along the surf, and the sunlight caught it just right for me to notice."

She shook her head. "Incredible."

"Did you...lose it? Years ago, I mean?"

She didn't answer right away, then, "I lost much more than just this ring."

She sat quietly for a minute, and I thought that was all she was going to say. Then she slowly started speaking again. "Her name was Dorothy. Everyone called her Dot. I called her Dottie."

"Back then, we called our friends our girlfriends. Not like they mean it today. But Dottie...she was special. We were...more than friends. We couldn't let anyone know, of course. Not in those days. But I loved her something fierce. When we got our rings, we exchanged them, wore them on chains around our necks, like we were going steady."

She reached up to the chain around her neck and fumbled for a moment, pulling it from under her shirt. Another ring appeared — duller, more worn, but a near match to the one I'd found except that it was set with a red ruby.

"I still wear hers. To the rest of the world, Dottie was my best friend. To me, she was my whole world."

"What...what happened?" I asked softly, unable to curb my curiosity.

"The summer we graduated, we came here with a group of friends."

Her gaze was far away, like she was seeing the past play out in front of her.

"It wasn't much then — a lot fewer houses than there are now — but one of the guys had an uncle who owned a little bungalow in the area. Eight of us staying in one little house, girls in one room, boys in the other. It rained most of the week, and we didn't get to spend much time on the beach. It was driving Dot crazy. She was like a fish — loved the ocean."

“On our last day here, the locals were talking about a big storm off the coast. We were warned not to go in the water, but Dot said she was going in, storm or no storm. And where Dottie went, I went. Of course, the guys had to prove they were big men, too. They couldn’t let two little, tiny girls show them up. The other girls were the only ones with sense. They stayed on the beach.

“The water—” She broke off and took a deep breath. “It was rough. Much rougher than we expected. And the undertow... Being bigger, the guys made it back to the shore, but Dot couldn’t fight it. I tried to reach her. I fought so hard. But I was no match for the waves. Some of the guys on the beach ran for help, but by the time the rescue boats got there, I couldn’t even see her anymore. They pulled me in against my will. I never saw Dot again. Her body washed up about a week later. The ring was gone.”

“I...I’m so sorry.”

She shook his head. “That was a long time ago. I did my mourning. Though I never loved anybody like that again. I married eventually, after college. We had a good life. Forty-seven years together. Two wonderful children. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Except...maybe the chance to see her one more time.”

She looked at the ring again, turning it slowly in the light. “It looks exactly the same as the day I gave it to her.” A tear escaped and rolled slowly down her cheek. “She was so beautiful.”

I remembered the girl I’d thought I’d seen on the beach right after I found the ring.

“Was she... Did she have dark, curly hair?” I asked hesitantly.

She gave me a funny look. “Yes...but how...”

“And was...was her bathing suit red?”

Her hand tightened around the ring as her brows gathered together in a frown. “How could you know that?”

It couldn’t be. It was too crazy to even say out loud. I shrugged nervously. “Just a lucky guess.”

Mrs. Bunting stared at me, her eyes sharp, demanding answers.

I shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. “I...I think she wanted you to have it back.”

She looked back down at the ring and carefully slid it onto her finger. It wouldn’t go all the way on, stopping just at her age-

gnarled knuckle. She covered it with her other hand and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or Dot.

I started backing towards the doorway. “I’ll just let myself out.”

Mrs. Bunting opened her eyes, which were now glassy with unshed tears. She nodded slightly. “I’d walk you out—”

“No, no! It’s fine. I’m...I’m glad I could help.”

She looked at me again, a strange expression on her face, her eyes shimmering.

“Thank you,” she repeated once more before turning to stare pensively out at the waves breaking gently on the beach.

And for a brief moment, I thought I saw something shimmering behind her — a vague outline of a person. And then it was gone. But I knew what I’d witnessed. A reunion of some kind. A healing.

On the drive back to our rental, I kept thinking about Dottie. About how she’d waited — for years, maybe for decades — for someone to bring her ring home. Maybe that’s what ghosts did. Maybe they just waited for the right moment to be seen...to be heard.

Maybe that’s what Aidan was doing.

I thought about the way he used to talk about Will — not just with love, but with purpose. He’d once told me that Will was the best thing that had ever happened to him. That he would die to protect him.

And in the end, he had.

I parked in the driveway, killed the engine, and stared at the ocean. I could almost imagine Aidan standing at the edge of the water, his arms crossed, that big smile on his face.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and hovered over Will’s number.

He didn’t blame me. And maybe — just maybe — it was time I stopped blaming myself. Aidan wouldn’t have wanted that. More importantly, I owed it to the people still here. I owed it to Will.

I owed him more than silence.

I tapped dial and brought the phone to my ear.

It rang once.

Then again.

Then—

“Killian?” Will’s voice was cautious, surprised.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. “Hey,” I said quietly.
“Sorry I’ve been so distant. How...how are you?”