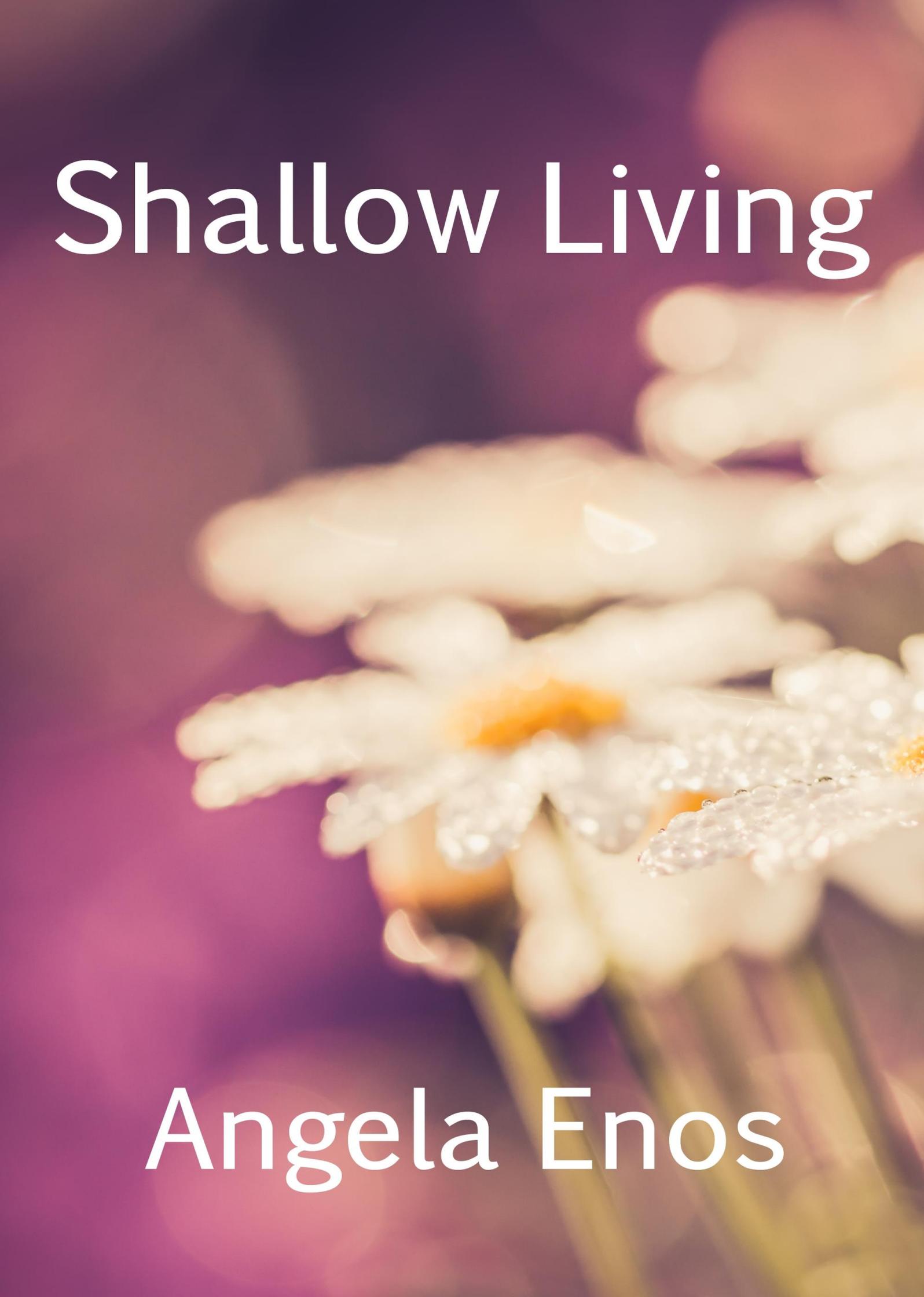


# Shallow Living



Angela Enos

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By Angela Enos

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**T**hings changed for Marisol almost immediately after Keva kissed her in the parking lot of the second-best sushi restaurant in town.

It hadn't been *that* surprising. Marisol was expecting it even. But it was still nice to be right.

It wasn't a date. Not really. Who even went on dates anymore? But it had been more than just hanging out and that was good enough for now. And now she had that moment to carry around with her like a talisman, the sweet weight of it in the pocket of her newly awakened heart.

Earlier that day, during lunch, Marisol had pulled apart three daisies on the high school lawn, embarrassed at her own romanticism, but still needing to know. A swallowtail butterfly had landed near her, just for a moment, and she decided it was a good omen.

Marisol wanted to believe in signs, fate, and the universe whispering in her ear. She had always lived in a world where those around her were quick to dismiss meaning, to chalk events up to chaos and coincidence. But Marisol knew there was no such thing. The world around her ached with meaning, every tealeaf was a message and every robin a sign of spring. You just had to notice and it was all right there.

It was this deep-seated and unquestioning belief that led Marisol to *know* that she and Keva were fated to be.

They'd met in AP Art Studio with Mr. Costopolus, early in their senior year. In class, Marisol kept to herself and painted dreamy watercolors of mermaids and sirens. Keva mostly took photographs of things so magnified that you couldn't tell what they were anymore. She said she was examining the inner life of objects, but Marisol didn't believe her. Marisol knew that objects don't need to be scrutinized to be discovered, they just have to be listened to. That was how they met. Arguing about art.

Keva was blessed with a certain currency of cool that Marisol was not. Keva, with her edgy haircolors and half-shaved head. Keva who had been allowed to design her own tattoo that she got for her sixteenth birthday as a reward for making the honor roll (again.) Keva whose parents were sending her to art school on the East Coast, even though she hadn't been quite good enough to get a

scholarship. Marisol wanted to be jealous of this charmed girl. Instead she found herself smitten. To be close to Keva was to shelter under the magical umbrella that protected her, to hope that some of her blessings would rub off on you by association.

Lipstick and blessings weren't so terribly different, Marisol decided.

After the kiss in the parking lot, it got to be something of a habit. Marisol showed Keva her favorite stretch of shoreline along the lake, the shallow strip of sand that never quite warmed up enough to draw too many crowds in the summer. Now, in the early spring, it became their hideaway.

Foreheads together, wrapped in a blanket against the lingering chill, the two girls traded kisses and confidences. Marisol told Keva about looking for signs and listening to the universe. Keva told Marisol about campus tours and the new car she was getting for graduation.

"You'll be so far away; I don't want to think about it," Marisol murmured, wishing time would slow down just a little.

"It's only a two hour flight; it's nothing," Keva said with that lightness and ease that Marisol envied and appreciated so.

"I could visit you, yeah?"

"I mean, sure." Keva's eyes shifted just past Marisol's long curls as she gazed at the glassy lake. "If you were in the area or something. I mean, where are you going in the fall?"

Marisol was struck and she couldn't hide it. She pulled her boots back on and brushed off the sand. "I was thinking that maybe I didn't have to go to university. That I could just do my paintings and go to the coast or somewhere warmer and just live for a while."

"We're a thousand miles from any coast and that old car of yours wouldn't make it past the city limits!" Keva teased, laughing as she kissed Marisol's shoulder.

Marisol relaxed a little. "The lake is close. The lake is almost like an ocean."

Keva rolled her big blue eyes.

Two weeks before graduation, Marisol gave Keva one of her paintings. It was of a mermaid with long dark hair. Keva said she loved it, but forgot to ever hang it up in her room. Things were so busy, she said, with getting ready for college.

A whole week went by where Keva seemed to be too busy with getting ready for college to see Marisol at all. That was when it really started. Marisol knew because she saw the signs. It was the first time that she wished she couldn't see them, but it was too late. The universe was already whispering the end to her.

Marisol wouldn't have gone to the Cohen twins' graduation party at the pier if Keva hadn't insisted. Keva knew the twins better and claimed that they weren't as horrible as they seemed in Chem lab. Marisol was skeptical but Keva was persuasive. And she found that she wanted to spend time with her at any cost. Marisol wore one of Keva's dresses because nothing she had felt right for the occasion. Nothing quite felt right at all.

As Keva drove them along the scenic route next to the posh lakeside homes, Marisol thought she saw a blue heron on the side of the road. She wondered what it meant.

Later that night after too much sangria and vodka, Marisol would also wonder what it meant when she found Keva upstairs with the girl from Studio class who sculpted lopsided mushrooms and wore too much patchouli.

Keva was still tugging her skirt back down as she ran after Marisol, following her onto the pier where she was crying and shivering and trying not to see all the signs of what was happening.

“You have to stop needing everything to *mean* so much, Marisol.”

But Marisol did need it to mean something. Symbols and omens were where hope came from, where she could gaze into the meaning of something and see some beautiful future.

Anything could become a crystal ball if you looked hard enough.

The first scales didn't appear until the next morning. She noticed them in the shower, as she stood under the streaming water, her body heavy with the weariness of heartbreak. It was a small patch, shadowed greenish purple like a bruise on her right hip. She thought nothing of it until it began to spread.

By the following day, the scales had spread across her belly and were creeping down toward her thighs. Marisol felt like she should be worried, but she wasn't. The smooth green scales felt like armor when she touched them. She felt protected. It felt right.

Food stopped smelling like something edible. Her appetite waned as the scales sealed her body. She began to make excuses when her mother called her downstairs for dinner and took long, cool baths instead while her family clinked their knives and forks and shook their heads.

Every day the air got a little thinner. Marisol could feel her body preparing to survive somewhere else. The day before she graduated, the tender gills that had sprouted behind her ears started to open.

She began to make a plan.

The graduation ceremony was long and Marisol felt her skin dry and tighten as she sat in the sun waiting for her name to be called. She had worn a long dress under her red graduation robe, but her legs had fused together to the knees and her gait was beginning to look odd.

When she stumbled on her way up the stairs to the stage, the girl behind her reached up and steadied her with a quick hand. Marisol gave her a wry smile of thanks and blamed it on cramps. The stage seemed unfathomably enormous as she crossed it to claim her diploma, shaking hands and hearing applause as her name was announced. She was so close to being done that her heart skipped a beat.

Keva was valedictorian, of course.

That night, after the party that her family had thrown her died down, Marisol slipped out of the house in her graduation gown and bare feet. She drove through the starlit night with the carnation and her diploma still on the seat beside her. It was time.

The stretch of sand along the lakeshore was pale and desolate. Marisol killed the engine and slithered out of the driver's seat, landing with her palms on the sandy pavement. The scales were coming faster now.

Marisol worried, for a moment as her thoughts began to unravel, what her mother would think. How things would be misconstrued when they found her car abandoned here on the shore, but there was no time for second thoughts. This had been set in motion ever since Keva kissed her. Marisol opened her graduation gown and sloughed it off like a skin, pulling her body toward the waterline.

The lake was black and still icy cold from the spring thaw, but Marisol's body pierced through the surface like a needle. Her feet never disappeared under the gently lapping water, but her new fins did. Thoughts of the world she was leaving slipped away from her mind as the lake enveloped her and Marisol breathed deeply.

The lake was almost like an ocean.

--THE END--