A homesick teen.
A gravely injured sea turtle.
And a summer that changed everything.

BY SPENCER KAYDEN
CHARACTERS

Circle the character you will play. *Indicates large speaking role.

*Stage Directors 1, 2, and 3 (SD1, SD2, SD3)
GPS Voice, the car navigation system
*Marco, a 13-year-old boy

Teresa, Marco’s mom
*Mel, a 13-year-old girl
Freddy, Mel’s dad
Operator
Rescuer

Dr. Hayes, a marine veterinarian
*Megan, a sea turtle specialist
*Lita, Marco’s grandmother
Crowd, to be read by a group

As You Read
How does Elmar change Marco’s outlook on Marco’s new home?

SCENE 1
A highway in the Florida Keys

SD1: On a hot July day, Marco and his mom, Teresa, are driving in a car packed with boxes and suitcases.

GPS Voice: Continue on US-1 South for 1 mile.

Marco: Uuuugh. We’ve been driving for a week.

Teresa: It’s been two days. And we’re almost there.

SD2: Marco pulls his baseball cap low over his face.

SD3: They drive onto a strip of land with blue-green water on each side.

Teresa: Isn’t it breathtaking?

Marco: I guess.

GPS Voice: In .3 miles, turn right onto Tropical Avenue.

Teresa: I am not going to miss Detroit winters.

SD1: Marco’s phone buzzes. He sighs heavily.

Teresa: What?

Marco: The whole hockey team is going for pizza. Except me. Because you’re making me move 1,400 miles away.

GPS Voice: Turn right onto Tropical Avenue.

Teresa: I know it’s not ideal to move when you’re 13.

SD2: Marco leans his head against the window.

Marco: It’s the worst possible time to be the new kid.

Teresa: Your abuela is getting older, and now that Abuelo is gone . . . we need to be near.

Marco: Don’t Lita’s neighbors check on her all the time?

Teresa: Yes. But we’re her family. La familia lo es todo.

Marco: I know, I know. Family is everything.

GPS Voice: In 200 feet, your destination is on your right.

Teresa: Lita’s neighbor Freddy has a daughter about your age. They want to take you out on their boat tomorrow.

Marco: Yay. I can’t wait to sail in shark-infested waters.

SD3: Teresa pulls up to a mint-green house on stilts. She smiles brightly.

Teresa: Once you stop sulking, I think you’ll realize what a special place this is.

SCENE 2
On the water, the next day

SD1: Marco is on a boat with Freddy and his daughter Mel, who has a Polaroid camera around her neck.

SD2: Marco sits in the back with his arms crossed.

Mel: What grade are you going into?

Marco: Eighth.

Mel: Me too.

SD3: Mel points her camera at Marco and snaps a photo. He raises a hand to block his face.

Marco: Why did you do that?

Mel: I like to capture people when they don’t expect it.

Marco (glumly): Well, next time ask first.

SD1: Mel holds the photo, watching the image appear.

Mel: I can’t see your face. Can you take your hat off?

SD2: As Marco lifts his hat, a gust of wind blows it away.

Marco: My hat! We have to go back and get it! I got it at my hockey championship, and—

Mel (shouting): Dad! We need to turn around. Marco’s hat blew into the water.

Freddy: Okeydokey.

SD3: Freddy swings the boat around.

SD1: Marco searches the water frantically, then points.

Marco: Over there!
**SD2:** Freddy steers the boat toward the object.
**Mel:** That’s not your hat. That’s a turtle!
**Marco:** It’s just sort of floating there. Is it OK?
**Freddy:** I don’t think so.
**SD3:** Freddy makes a call and puts it on speakerphone.
**Operator:** Emergency Stranding Hotline.
**Freddy:** Hi. We’re about 10 miles east of Sombrero Beach. We found a green sea turtle, and it’s not moving.
**Operator:** Is it coming up for air?
**Mel:** No.
**Operator:** Can you gently poke it and see if it reacts?
**SD1:** Freddy takes a piece of tubing, leans over, and carefully pokes the turtle’s flipper.
**Marco:** Its head rose up a little!
**Operator:** Good! It’s still alive. I’m sending the Coast Guard.
**Marco** *(to the turtle)*: Hold on, little dude. Help is coming.

**SCENE 3**

**The same spot, 30 minutes later**

**SD2:** The Coast Guard boat arrives.
**Mel** *(waving)*: Over here!
**SD3:** The rescuers maneuver their boat closer.
**SD1:** One rescuer gently lifts the turtle out of the water.
**SD2:** Its legs and neck are shriveled, its eyes sunken.
**Rescuers:** Poor guy looks close to starving.
**SD3:** Mel snaps a picture. Marco glares at her.

**AMAZING CREATURES**

Sea turtles are reptiles that live in the ocean. They swim thousands of miles during their long lifetimes. Some turtles can live to be 100 years old.

A green sea turtle can grow to be about 4 feet long and weigh around 300 pounds.

**Mel:** What? I’m documenting all this. You want me to ask the turtle’s permission too?
**SD1:** The rescuers scoop seawater into a shallow tub lined with towels, then gently place the turtle in the tub.
**Marco:** Where are you taking him?
**Rescuers:** To the Turtle Hospital in Marathon. If anyone can save his life, they can.

**SCENE 4**

**The Turtle Hospital, the next day**

**SD2:** Marco and Mel stand with Dr. Hayes, a veterinarian, in a bright hallway outside an exam room.
**SD3:** Through a window, they see the rescued turtle hooked up to beeping machines.
**Dr. Hayes:** He wouldn’t eat, so we put in a feeding tube. We weren’t sure he’d last the night.
**Marco:** Is he . . . is he going to die?
**Dr. Hayes:** I’m afraid it’s too soon to tell.
**Mel:** What’s wrong with him?
**Dr. Hayes:** The X-ray shows something blocking his intestines. We won’t know what it is until it comes out.
**Marco:** How do you get it out?
**Dr. Hayes:** We gave him vegetable oil and fiber to help it come out naturally. If it doesn’t, we’ll do surgery.
**SD1:** Mel raises her Polaroid and snaps a photo of the turtle through the glass.
**Mel:** Does this happen a lot?
**Dr. Hayes:** Unfortunately, yes. Turtles ingesting trash is a real problem. The trash causes their intestines to fill with gas, and then they can’t dive down to feed.
**SD2:** Two workers pass by wheeling a cart carrying a giant turtle. The turtle’s shell has a large crack.
**Dr. Hayes:** Excuse me, kids. I’ve got another patient.
**Mel:** Wait. What happened to that one?
**Dr. Hayes:** That’s Mojo. She was hit by a boat.
**SD3:** Dr. Hayes leaves. A smiling woman walks up.
**Megan:** You must be Marco and Mel. I’m Megan. *(looking at the turtle)* Would you like to name him? Since you found him, you get to choose his name.
**Marco:** Um . . .
**Mel:** We should name him Marco. You saw him first.
**Marco:** What if we combine our names?
**Mel:** Mel Marco?
THE TURTLE HOSPITAL
The turtle hospital in the story is based on a real turtle hospital in Marathon, Florida. The character of Megan is inspired by Megan Mertsock, one of the hospital’s conservationists.

Marco: Or the end of your name and the start of mine.
Mel: Elmar.
Marco: *El mar* means “the sea” in Spanish.
SD1: Mel raises her hand for a high five. Marco smiles and gives her hand a slap.

SCENE 5
The Turtle Hospital, two weeks later
SD2: Marco sits next to Elmar’s tub, lightly running his fingers over the turtle’s green-and-black shell.
SD3: The turtle is still emaciated but swimming slowly.
SD1: Megan comes in.
Marco: Elmar doesn’t seem much better.
Megan: Well, he’s eating on his own. Turns out he loves cucumbers. But the impaction hasn’t moved.
SD2: Marco bites his lip.
Megan: C’mon. Follow me.
SD3: Megan leads Marco outside, where a dozen large round tanks are placed in neat rows.
Megan: Go on. Look inside.
SD1: Marco looks into one tank and sees turtles the size of baseballs swimming around.
Megan: Those are Kemp’s ridleys, the most endangered species of sea turtle in the world.
SD2: In another tank, Marco sees a large turtle with a missing flipper.
Megan: That’s Hazel. She’s a 200-pound loggerhead. She got caught in a fishing line that cut off the circulation in her flipper. We had to amputate it.

Marco: Will she be OK?
Megan: More than OK. We’re releasing her into the wild this weekend.
Marco: How will she survive with a missing flipper?
Megan: She learned to adapt. Turtles are resilient creature
SD3: Suddenly, Marco’s eyes well up.
Megan (gently): Not every turtle makes it, but we try to focus on the ones that do.

SCENE 6
The beach, that evening
SD1: Marco sits on a blanket picking at loose threads. His grandmother, Lita, sits in a chair beside him.
Lita: Why so sad, *mijito*?
Marco: I was thinking about Elmar. He wasn’t doing anything wrong. Just swimming around being a turtle. Now he’s away from home, living in this weird place... and he might die.

FROM SAND TO SEA
To lay their eggs, many females return to the beach where they were born. One of the most important turtle nesting habitats in the U.S. is along the southeastern coastline, where this play takes place.
**LA MUERTE ES PARTE DE LA VIDA.**

**Marco:** I know. Death is a part of life.

**SD2:** Lita rests her palm on his back.

**Lita:** Mel dropped this off for you.

**SD3:** Lita hands him a bright-green flyer.

**Marco: (reading)** Sombrer0 Beach Cleanup. This Saturday, 9 to noon. Bring a bucket and gloves, and let’s make the world a better place. (looks up) Yeah. Like picking up a few plastic bags will do anything.

**Lita:** It could save another tortuga.

**Marco:** What about the tons of trash on beaches all over the world? What about the millions of sea animals dying off? I’ve been reading, and it’s not just turtles. Sharks, whales, dolphins—

**Lita:** Marco, we do what we can.

**SD1:** They look out at the brilliant sky and the setting sun.

**Lita:** If everyone does one small thing, all those small things add up. It makes a difference.

**Marco:** I’m not sure that’s true.

**Lita:** What do you see in front of you?

**Marco:** The sea.

**Lita:** What is it made of?

**Marco:** Water.

**Lita:** Sí, mi hijo. Each of us is only a drop of water. But put them all together, and you get a mighty sea.

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### SCENE 7

**Sombrero Beach, that Saturday**

**SD2:** Mel and a group of volunteers are picking up trash. Marco walks up.

**Mel:** You made it! Hey, everyone, this is Marco. He just moved here.

**Marco: (waving)** Hi, everyone.

**Mel:** How’s Elmar?

**Marco:** He’s having surgery on Monday.

**SD3:** Mel nods solemnly.

**SD1:** As they walk along the beach picking up trash, Marco notices a track from the sand into the water.

**Marco:** Looks like someone rode a one-wheeled truck right into the ocean.

**Mel:** Oh, that’s a turtle track! Female turtles come out of the water at night and dig nests on the beach. They lay about 100 eggs, cover them with sand, and go back to the water. It’s pretty mesmerizing.

**Marco:** You’ve seen it?

**Mel:** Only from a distance. You have to stay back so you don’t disturb them. Hey, you should come next time.

**Marco:** OK. That sounds cool.

**Mel:** What’s even better is when the eggs hatch. These teeny turtles pop up out of the sand and crawl down to the water. Bet you can’t see that back in Detroit.

**Marco: (laughing)** No.

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### SCENE 8

**The Turtle Hospital, Monday morning**

**SD2:** Marco is pacing. Mel sits chewing her nails.

**Marco:** Thanks for being here.

**Mel:** Of course.

**SD3:** Dr. Hayes comes out. The kids look up eagerly.

**Dr. Hayes:** Good news! We were able to remove the impaction. It was a party balloon.

**Marco:** Why would a turtle eat a balloon?

**Dr. Hayes:** To him, it probably looked like a jellyfish.

**Mel:** Is he going to be OK?

**Dr. Hayes:** We’ll have to wait and see.

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### SEA TURTLES

1. **They’re in Crisis.**
   - Of the seven species of sea turtles, six are endangered or threatened. Their numbers are dwindling because of fishing, pollution, and climate change.

2. **They’re as Old as Dinosaurs.**
   - Sea turtles have been around for more than 100 million years—since the time when the T. rex and the Stegosaurus roamed the planet.

3. **They’re Important for Ocean Health.**
   - Sea turtles help keep ecosystems in balance. For example, hawksbill turtles eat sea sponges that grow on coral reefs. Without the turtles, sea sponges would overtake and kill the coral. This would be devastating for the millions of sea creatures that depend on reefs for food and shelter.

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*Coutesy of the Turtle Hospital, Playa Mariona, Sombrero Beach, Mexico. Source: cbta.org, and the Department of Earth Science, National Taiwan University. Scholastic Books & Media UK and Scholastic Inc. 2020.*
HOW TO HELP SEA TURTLES
Small steps can make a big difference.

Give up single-use plastic:
An enormous amount of plastic trash, such as bags, straws, and food containers, ends up in our oceans. Sea turtles can get tangled in trash or eat plastic, which is toxic to them.

Organize a beach cleanup:
If you live near the coast, head to your local beach with some volunteers to pick up trash—and keep it out of the ocean.

Pick up trash:
Litter that is hundreds of miles from a beach can still end up in the ocean eventually. Making sure trash is properly disposed of will help keep sea turtles (and all marine life) safe.

Volunteer:
If you live in an area where sea turtles live, contact local conservation groups to see what you can do to help.

Have a conversation:
Share what you’ve learned about sea turtles and the struggles they face. Talking about how our choices affect these creatures is one of the best things we can do.

SCENE 9
The Turtle Hospital, two months later
SD1: Marco and Mel toss pieces of cucumber into Elmar’s tank. He swims over and gobbles them up.
Marco: It’s weird.
Mel: What is?
Marco: Well, if I hadn’t moved here, then we wouldn’t have been out on the boat, you wouldn’t have taken my picture, I wouldn’t have lost my hat, we wouldn’t have turned back to look for it, and—
Mel: —we wouldn’t have saved Elmar.
Marco: It’s like it was supposed to happen or something.
SD2: Elmar comes up for a breath of air. Mel smiles.
Mel: It’s like you were meant to be here, Marco.

SCENE 10
The beach, two days later
SD3: Marco, Mel, Lita, Freddy, and Teresa gather by the water with a small, cheerful crowd.
SD1: The Turtle Hospital van drives up.

Freddy: Everyone, they’re here! They’re here!
SD2: Megan climbs out.
Megan: Elmar is fully healed and ready for release!
Crowd: Yay! Woo! Woo!
SD3: Members of the release team open the van and bring Elmar out. He is wriggling around.
Mel: Look how feisty he is!
SD1: They carry the turtle to the water’s edge.
Crowd: El-mar! El-mar! El-mar!
SD2: They set him down and he immediately glides into the water.
Marco: Goodbye, Elmar!
SD3: Mel snaps a picture.
SD1: They watch the turtle swim farther and farther out to sea until at last, he dives under the waves and disappears.
SD2: Mel hands Marco the photograph.
SD3: As Marco smiles at the photo, Lita leans over.
Lita: Look at all of us, Marco: drops of water that together make a mighty sea.

Writing Contest
Imagine that you are a journalist. Write a news article or create a podcast about Elmar’s rescue and release. Incorporate quotes from characters in the play. Send your work to Sea Turtle Contest. Five winners will each get Song for a Whale by Lynne Kelly. See page 2 for details.

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