

Disney

SCHILLS



Part of your Nightmare



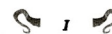
I

Under the Sea

Cold water enveloped Hannah as she plunged. She spiralled down through what appeared to be tangles of kelp.

What was happening to her? Where was she going? Finally, she somersaulted to a stop in a dim underwater cavern.

She began to swim, holding her breath, not sure where she was going, just knowing she needed to find an exit, to find air. But seaweed snagged at her ankles, trapping her.



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'Leave here... turn back!' came a tiny, pained voice as clear as day, even that far underwater.

Hannah looked down and saw *faces* on the seaweed. And with her heart racing and air running out, she realized it wasn't seaweed at all, but withered grey life forms with sallow eyes and gaping, contorted mouths. They were nothing she had ever studied or seen in the aquarium. They couldn't be talking to her, though. She must have imagined it.

A current gripped her and sucked her down.

She tried to swim against it, but it was too strong. Her lungs ached, fit to burst.

Suddenly, an enormous crystal ball clamped around her, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. But then the water drained from the enclosure, and she was able to breathe, though she spluttered and spat and pounded her fists on the curved crystal.

'Help! Let me out!' she yelled. Everything looked distorted through the glass. She could barely make out the underwater cavern. Glass bottles lined

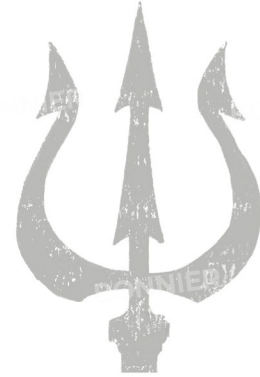
the rough-hewn walls, and there were glowing anemones and the eyes of those... *things*. She gasped as something huge, bulbous and black swam past her. *What was that?*

'Lose something, dear?' The same deep, rich voice she'd heard in her little brother's bedroom emanated from the shadowy corner of the cavern. 'So coy!' A black tentacle shot out of the gloom and rapped on the glass. Hannah cowered, fear gripping her.

'Wh-what do you want?' she gasped.



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Three days earlier...

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The dreams that you
FEAR
will come true.





2

#Strawssuck

Circle up and pay attention, students!' Mr. Aquino attempted to corral his class, a rowdy group of Year 7s from Triton Bay Secondary School, as they gathered around the main aquarium exhibit. When the chatter died down only a little he raised his voice again. 'Now, who can tell me what this marine animal is called?' he said, pointing to a large graceful creature paddling through the rippling blue water.

Before Hannah could stop herself, she stuck up

her hand. 'Leatherback sea turtle.'

'Very good, Hannah,' Mr. Aquino said. 'Now, why do sea turtles eat plastic bags?'

''Cuz they're dumb fish!' Kevin Watson said, prompting snickering.

'Actually, they're not *fish* – they're *reptiles*,' Mr. Aquino said with a disapproving frown. 'And they're *not* dumb. They're actually very smart! Now... anybody else?'

Hannah was secretly glad that he'd shut Kevin down. *Serves him right.* She watched the sea turtle drift past the sunken pirate ship and treasure chest that decorated the faux-undersea environment. It wheeled around a rusty, barnacled trident, the centrepiece of the exhibit, which stuck out from the bright white sand. Suddenly, a huge reef shark swam behind Mr. Aquino.

'Watch out!' Kevin yelled, pointing to its huge jaws, filled with jagged teeth. Gasps and nervous giggles rang out. 'Megalodon just tried to chomp Mr. Aquino's head!' he said.

As if anything could swim through the glass,

Hannah thought. She thrust up her hand again, since no one had answered their teacher's question yet, and Mr. Aquino pointed at her.

'Because sea turtles mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, their main food source,' she said.

'Correct again, Hannah,' Mr. Aquino said, flashing her a smile while her classmates groaned.

Hannah's new best friend, Katie, shot her a look and mouthed one word: *Nerd*. Amy and Annabelle – the twins who rounded out their friend group – giggled at Hannah. Katie had long blond hair that swooped around her shoulders like it was out of a shampoo advert and blue-green eyes the colour of the sea. The twins were identical, with curly auburn hair in a stylish asymmetrical bob and brown eyes. All three girls were dressed the same, in designer athleisure clothes from Ever After Boutique in Triton Bay, the quaint seaside city where they lived. The trio also slurped iced lattes from disposable plastic cups with two plastic straws *each*. Hannah's cheeks burned with embarrassment.

I shouldn't have kept raising my hand, Hannah

thought. It was a hard instinct to fight.

Science nerds were more revolting than rotting fish to the popular kids. She'd had to change schools at the beginning of the school year, when her mother moved her and her little brother, Dylan, from their big old house by the ocean to the townhouse in the complex on the edge of the canals, and it had taken her many long months to make new friends.

One glorious day, Katie had invited Hannah to sit with her group at lunch. Hannah had become fast friends with the three of them after that. *Nothing* was going to ruin Hannah's happiness about that friendship, including her father leaving their house and moving into the weird dingy flat with the stained carpets that always smelled like greasy delivery food. Not even her brother's goldfish, Mr. Bubbles, going belly-up and getting flushed down the toilet last week was going to spoil things. *Nothing* was worse than having no friends.

'Nice job, Hannah,' Mr. Aquino said with a wink, snapping her out of her thoughts.

'Nice job, Hannah,' Kevin mocked. *'Of course she*

knows everything about fish.'

Everyone knew that Hannah's parents owned the Triton Bay Aquarium. A year earlier, she and her little brother used to love going to work with their parents on the weekends, following their mother around while she managed the feeding schedules and directed the staff, or hanging with their father in the office while he handled the bills and dealt with guest relations.

But the days of both her parents being at the aquarium at the same time had passed.

Hannah followed as Mr. Aquino led the class to the next tank on the tour. Hannah caught sight of her reflection in the tank's clear barrier. She had long, curly dark hair streaked with blond highlights from all the time she spent on the aquarium's outdoor sun deck feeding the dolphins. Her eyebrows and eyes were darker brown than her sun-kissed skin. Her favourite thing about her appearance was her long, strong legs, which helped her swim fast.

Sunlight filtered through the water, casting

strange shadows onto her classmates. She didn't need to look at the illustrated placard to know what this exhibit housed: spiny lobsters, stingrays, barracuda and garden eels. The lobsters, looking like giant red insects waving their antennas, lumbered around the bottom of the tank filled with coral reef and sea sponges.

Mr. Aquino held up a white plastic straw. 'Now, can someone tell me what *this* is?'

They all stifled their laughter at the easy question. All except for Hannah, who prevented her arm from rising. She wasn't going to risk Katie calling her a nerd again.

'Uhhh, I'm pretty sure that's a straw,' said Kevin. 'Do I get extra credit now?'

The class broke into laughter.

Our sea sponges here are smarter than Kevin, Hannah thought, shaking her head.

'It's not just *any* straw,' Mr. Aquino replied, ignoring Kevin's request. He slipped into his full-on enthusiastic-teacher mode, waving the straw around. 'It's a plastic straw I found on the beach this

morning.' He paused for dramatic effect. 'Did you know that ninety per cent of seabirds and fifty per cent of sea turtles have been found to have plastic in their stomachs?'

Hannah felt a lump form in her throat. She *did* know. How could she not? She used to be the head of the Kids Care Conservation Club at the aquarium. Earlier that year, she had spoken to Mr. Aquino about starting a chapter at school. That was before she became friends with Katie.

'This straw looks harmless enough,' Mr. Aquino went on, gesturing to the exhibit, where a smiling stingray drifted serenely behind the glass. 'But it's no laughing matter. This little straw could kill an endangered animal like that turtle – or *poison* our precious oceans.'

'Death by *killer* straws,' Katie murmured, shaking her iced latte with its two straws at Amy and Annabelle. 'Anything but the Killer Straws!' she added, flicking the tops of the straws.

Amy and Annabelle giggled at her quip and sipped from their own iced lattes.

Hannah cringed, feeling bad for Mr. Aquino.

Her teacher gave up. 'All right, I'll give you two options – dolphin exhibit or gift shop.'

They all yelled, 'Gift shop!' at the top of their lungs.

Hannah kept her mouth shut. She wanted to visit the dolphins and watch the feeders toss fish to Sassy and Salty and maybe even dip her hand into the open-air tank and pet Lil' Mermy, the youngest dolphin in the pod. But it would just have to wait for another time.

Fit in at all costs, she told herself as she sidled up to her new friends.

'Please,' Katie said to her posse, then loudly slurped her iced latte through its two straws. 'First no more plastic bags, and now they want to take away my straws? No thanks.'

'For realz,' Amy chimed in, fiddling with her sparkly hairband, which perfectly matched her sister's, though Amy's was pink and Annabelle's was blue. 'Who cares about boring old fish, anyway?'

'Hashtag BTD,' Annabelle added. 'Bored to death.'

She drank from her iced latte.

The three girls turned to Hannah expectantly, each sipping from her drink.

'Right... so boring,' Hannah mumbled, forcing herself to say the opposite of what she actually felt.

'Totally,' said Katie with a smile. 'Hann, we love how you're such a know-it-all.'

Annabelle and Amy giggled at her remark.

Hannah didn't know how to take it, so she simply smiled. 'Thanks, I think,' she said.

The girls began to trail behind the rest of the class, heading for the aquarium gift shop. Hannah glanced at the front entrance that led up to the main exhibit, and she spotted the new security system and alarms installed on the doors. She'd overheard her father talking on the phone with the police, saying that somebody had been trying to break into the aquarium the past few weeks.

But then the entrance passed out of sight as Hannah and her friends headed into a dark and narrow corridor marked by portholes. Only shadowy light filtered through the round windows, and

undersea creatures darted past the glass. This was Hannah's favourite part of the aquarium.

Katie nudged her side. 'Hey, who is *that?*' she asked, cocking her eyebrow.

Hannah followed her gaze to a boy about their age leading a group of tourists past them through the corridor. He had curly black hair and green eyes the colour of ocean shallows. His smile lit up as he talked animatedly, pointing to jellyfish spinning and twirling in a graceful undersea dance. Their transparent bodies glowed with bioluminescence in the large porthole.

Hannah shrugged. 'Oh, that's just Enrique.'

'*Just Enrique,*' Katie said in mock horror. 'Major swoon.'

'*Total swoon,*' Amy and Annabelle said in unison.

Hannah studied his face, trying to see what Katie, Amy, and Annabelle saw. But all she could see was a friendly boy who shared her fascination with marine life. Everyone at the aquarium was family, including Enrique. She couldn't think of him any other way.

'His older brother Miguel is at university,' Hannah said. 'Miguel studies marine biology and volunteers here for his autumn internship. Sometimes Enrique tags along to help out. He's actually pretty silly. And kind of a... science nerd,' she added, the last words slipping out.

'Science nerd, huh?' Katie asked, pulling a grossed-out face. 'Never mind.'

Suddenly, something gelatinous swam up to the porthole behind Katie's head. It moved like a gigantic spider, only quicker, cutting through the water and blocking out the light.

Amy squealed and dropped her cup.

Annabelle pointed to the porthole. 'Katie, watch out!'

Just then, a slimy tentacle shot toward the glass.



3

Octopus Queen

'Get that slimy monster away!' Katie yelled, leaping back from the porthole and squeezing her cup of iced latte as she did. The plastic top popped off, and coffee splashed all over her pink designer T-shirt and yoga pants, staining them a milky brown. Amy and Annabelle both screamed again and covered from the glass, which frightened Hannah more than the tentacle or the sea creature to whom it belonged.

'It's okay,' Hannah said. 'That's Queenie, our



giant Pacific octopus. She's harmless – '

Another tentacle slapped the porthole, making the girls shriek again. But not Hannah. Then Queenie unleashed a thick cloud of black ink and darted into it, her huge body swallowed by the darkness she had unleashed in the tank. As fast as she had appeared, Queenie was gone.

Katie aimed her manicured nail at the porthole. 'Harmless? That *thing* attacked me!'

'Actually, she's probably more scared of *you*,' Hannah said, defending Queenie as if she were an old friend. 'Octopuses only release ink when they're afraid. It's how they escape – '

'Look what it *did* to me,' Katie interrupted, pointing to her stained clothes. 'And news flash for you,' she said, staring daggers at Hannah, 'I could have been seriously injured.'

Hannah bit her tongue. She failed to see how an iced coffee stain could have *seriously injured* anyone. She glanced back through the porthole where ink still clouded the water and wondered if Queenie was on to something about her new friends. She pushed

the thought away.

Katie rapped with her knuckles on the porthole, which, Hannah knew, was against aquarium policy. 'You hear that, you big ugly monster?' Katie called out to Queenie. 'I'm going to file a complaint with the school. They should cancel this dumb trip next year.'

Hannah felt her stomach churn. School trips like this one were the bread and butter of their family business. They depended on them to keep the aquarium running smoothly and to put food in the tanks and on their table. This was the day all the local schools came to the aquarium. It was practically a city holiday. Hannah spotted Little River Secondary School making their way past an exhibit across the room – and she saw Jess Warren's familiar silhouette framed by the tank.

Jess was surrounded by the other swimmers from the Little River team – *rival* swimmers.

Jess was tall for her age and stood out from her classmates. Her curly black hair was cropped short, better for tucking inside a swim cap. Her tanned

face sported a constellation of freckles that dusted her cheeks. She must have been swimming outside all summer to prepare for the swim season, Hannah thought with a frown. Between the separation and the move, Hannah had barely had a chance to dip her toes in the water, let alone train.

Jess's friends giggled and pointed at Hannah, who felt her cheeks burn once more. When Jess caught Hannah's eye, she sneered at her. The year before, Hannah had lost to Jess in the fifty-metre freestyle at regionals. *Badly*. And Jess wasn't about to let Hannah forget it.

'This aquarium *stinks*,' Katie went on, oblivious to what had just happened between Hannah and Jess. Amy and Annabelle desperately dabbed at Katie's clothes to soak up the coffee stain.

Hannah tore her gaze away from the Little River swimmers. She had to turn her attention back to Katie. All it took was one formal complaint to ruin everything. And a formal complaint from Katie *Terran* would be the worst. Her family practically ran Triton Bay. Her mother sat on the city council,

and her dad was the head of the PTA. If Katie followed through on her threat, the school could cancel the annual school trip and other local schools might do the same.

Hannah had to find a way to fix this for her family's sake. 'Guess what,' she said, forcing a smile. 'The snack bar has a new coffee machine. My dad installed it to boost attendance.'

Amy perked up. 'Espressos?' she asked.

'Lattes?' Annabelle chimed in, eyes wide. 'Mochas?'

'Yup, yup and yup,' Hannah said proudly. 'Better yet, they make a *killer* flavored latte this time of year. And it's a double shot.' She grinned at each of her friends.

Now she had Katie's undivided attention.

But then Katie pulled a face. 'Urgh, but my credit is card maxed out.'

Hannah dug in her pocket, feeling for the notes and loose change crammed in there. Technically, it wasn't her money; it belonged to Dylan, her six-year-old brother. He'd worked all summer to save

it up, selling lemonade at a tiny stand, and before she'd left for school that morning, she'd promised to buy him a new goldfish on the way home to replace Mr. Bubbles. Now, as she counted the money, she realized that it wasn't enough to buy lattes for her friends *and* a new goldfish for Dylan. But a new goldfish wouldn't keep her friends happy.

Hannah forced a smile and fanned out Dylan's money. 'Lattes on me,' she said.

'Hashtag FTW,' Annabelle said, pumping a fist.

'Hashtag caffeine fix,' Amy chirped, nudging Hannah's shoulder.

'Hann saves the day,' Katie said, linking her arm with Hannah's and steering her toward the snack bar. 'After that tour, I seriously might fall asleep. You're a lifesaver.'

A short while later, Hannah and her friends claimed their flavored lattes from the counter, then headed to the sun deck for fresh air while their classmates continued raiding the gift shop. Hannah caught Kevin shoving a whole cheeseburger into his mouth by the snack bar, which made her queasy.

Worse yet, he made a kissy face at her, puckering up his lips like a fish.

'Hann, you've *got* to use two straws to drink,' said Katie. 'It's way better.'

Hannah usually skipped the lid and straw altogether, sipping straight from the cup – or, even better, brought her own reusable metal cup *and* reusable metal straw. She took the two straws, still wrapped in paper, from Katie.

'Thanks,' Hannah said, trying to act cool, like she slurped from two plastic straws all the time. Feeling a tinge of guilt, she peeled off the paper and crammed the straws through the plastic lid, which made a shrill screech. She could hear Mr. Aquino's nasal voice echoing in her head: *This little straw could kill an endangered animal like that turtle – or poison our precious oceans.*

But she pushed the thought away and sipped her drink. The iced coffee hit her mouth way faster due to the double straws, and the sugary drink was bitter and acidic on her tongue, making her cough.

'Cute,' Katie said with a giggle while Amy and

Annabelle were busy sipping, almost halfway done with their drinks. But then Katie added, 'Don't worry. You'll get used to it.'

'Hashtag BFFs!' the twins chirped, raising their cups to toast Hannah.

'New BFFs.' Katie wrapped an arm around Hannah and pushed their cups together.

Hannah basked in Katie's words. She finally had friends again. And better yet, they were the coolest girls in school. Hannah had never been popular, and she enjoyed being at the top of the school food chain, like an apex predator.

Katie, Amy and Annabelle drained their cups and tossed them into an inconspicuous eco-friendly bin. Hannah decided to hold on to her coffee after a few more tiny sips. There was no way she could chug it all.

'Isn't it cool out here on the deck?' Hannah said.

Although it wasn't even five o'clock, it had already grown dark. The sun was setting, painting brilliant pink hues onto the sky and ocean. Hannah surveyed the open-air tanks. The water in them

sloshed over the thick barrier, mixing with the endless dark waters of the Pacific. It was a unique feature of their aquarium that allowed them to keep larger animals like beluga whales. Hannah saw one push through the surface and spray air out of its blowhole like a sigh of relief.

Katie frowned at the ocean. 'It's, like, totally creepy. What's even out there?'

'All kinds of cool creatures!' Hannah began. 'I mean, if you're into that sort of stuff.'

'Creepy, yucky fish?' Katie said, arching an eyebrow. 'Yeah, no.'

Hannah turned away to gaze at the waves, trying not to cringe. A warm wind jostled her braids, and the briny air smelled like perfume to her. She couldn't let them know just how much she loved the ocean, or that the su deck was her happy place.

Hannah spied Jess Warren and her friends across the deck, checking out the pod of dolphins with one of the aquarium workers, who tossed fish into the dolphins' open mouths.

'Check out Little River,' said Katie, pointing to

them.

'Hey, did you hear the news about the swim meet tomorrow?' Amy whispered.

Annabelle clapped her hands. 'Coach Green says we're getting new suits!'

'Yeah, so we can beat Little River in style.' Amy giggled with her twin.

'New suits. New swim season,' Katie said. 'But one thing won't change.'

'What's that?' Hannah asked, quickly avoiding Jess's nasty gaze. She was excited for her first meet at her new school but even more excited to have another chance to beat Jess Warren. The swim team was no joke. They practised a lot more often than the team at her old school. After class every day, they met up at a big indoor pool where Coach Green gave them drills after warm-up laps. It was the reason she wasn't starting the Kids Care Conservation Club chapter. Well, one of the many reasons.

'Obvi, I'm still going to be number one,' Katie said with a grin.

'Oh. Right,' Hannah said. Of course Katie was the fastest swimmer. At her last school, which was much smaller, it had been Hannah. But they had practised in an outdoor pool or swum in the ocean. The indoor pool wasn't the same. The chlorine smelled stronger inside. The water was too still. No breeze stirred it and no currents pushed her toward the finish line. At indoor practice, her times had been off. Katie had been out-lapping her in the drills, but Hannah was still determined to try harder. She was used to being a big fish in a little pond, but at her new school, she was a little fish in a big pond. Not to mention Jess Warren was still way out of her league.

'Definitely,' Annabelle said. 'Nobody can beat you at breaststroke, Katie.'

'Yeah, Katie. You're totally the best swimmer at Triton Bay,' Amy added.

'Exactly. And being the best swimmer also means being the most popular,' Katie said. 'We have to beat Little River and win the Bayside Regional Trophy this year. My parents promised to throw us

the biggest championship party if we win!

If that was true, Hannah was nowhere close to being on the popular list.

While her friends continued chattering excitedly about the big swim meet the next day, Hannah nursed her iced latte and wandered to the catwalk that spanned the barrier dividing the aquarium's enclosed tanks from the open ocean when something in the water caught her eye. She clambered onto the raised platform a few feet over the sea, looking down at the blue-black waves churning below. She peered harder at the sloshing sea. Two eyes popped open in the dark water.

The eyes glowed with a strange yellow light.

What is that? Hannah leaned closer to get a better look, jamming her feet against the edge of the catwalk. It was narrow with no railing. Technically, she wasn't supposed to be up there, but she did it all the time, despite her father's warnings that it was a safety hazard. Hannah squinted. The eyes locked onto hers. They glowed brighter. She started and reeled back. She'd never seen anything like it before.

She blinked hard. When she looked again, they were gone.

Maybe her eyes were playing tricks on her. After all, it was getting darker out, making it harder to see. She ran through her mental list of sea life, but none had eyes that *glowed*. Some, like certain species of jellyfish, had bioluminescence – a chemical reaction that let them produce their own light – but they didn't have eyes like *those*. *Not glowing yellow eyes*. She looked down at the nearly drained iced latte in her hand. *Too much coffee*, she concluded.

Just then, something latched on to her arm.

Hannah jumped and wheeled around, almost losing her balance on the catwalk.

But it was just Katie, who had grabbed Hannah to keep her from falling over.

'Whoa there, I thought you were a total goner,' Katie said, steadying her. 'What were you thinking, leaning over like that? We don't want anything happening to you.'

'Aww, thanks. I – I thought I saw something out there,' Hannah said, struggling to catch her breath.

Her heart hammered against her rib cage as she thought about the eyes in the water.

Amy and Annabelle wobbled over in their wedge sandals that threatened to slip on the catwalk.

'I mean, I don't blame you for wanting to live a little, Hann, but there are other ways to feel a rush of excitement,' said Katie, clacking her nails against Hannah's coffee cup. She then pointed a manicured nail at the ocean, where waves pushed up against the barrier, spraying the group with icy salt water. 'Go ahead, chuck it out there.'

'Wait... *what?*' Hannah said, caught off guard. She must have heard her friend wrong. Her eyes darted from the plastic cup with its two straws to the signs posted all over the sun deck.

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Katie narrowed her eyes. 'Go on – throw it out there. I dare you.'

The twins giggled. 'Do it! Do it!' they chanted.

But Hannah shook her head. 'No, it's cool. I'll just recycle it inside.' She knew the moment the word *recycle* left her mouth that it wasn't going to go down well with her new friends.

'Wait, you're going to carry that gross thing around?' Katie said. 'Like, what are you afraid of – getting caught? Can't you do whatever you want? Don't you, like, *own* this place?'

'Her parents totally own it,' Amy confirmed with a perky nod.

'Yeah, it's *your* aquarium,' Annabelle added. 'Everyone knows it, Hannah.'

'Nobody owns the ocean,' Hannah said in a soft voice. She clutched the cup tighter in her fist. The flimsy plastic crinkled, poking painfully at her skin. 'It belongs to everyone,' she said.

Katie rolled her eyes while the twins snickered. 'Don't tell me you actually *care* about those stupid fish? Besides, it serves those disgusting creatures right. Just look at my new top.' She stretched the fabric out, exaggerating the dark splatters on her expensive yoga clothes.

Hannah frowned, feeling protective again.

'Ha! I knew it!' Katie said with a triumphant whoop. 'You *do* care!'

'No, I don't,' Hannah said, but her protest sounded weak even to her ears.

'Then prove it.' Katie's words rang out.

Amy and Annabelle watched Hannah with mischief in their eyes.

Hannah swallowed hard, tasting bitter coffee at the back of her throat. Her friends' eyes all looked her way. She held the plastic cup over the ocean. Several feet below, the waves swirled and frothed, beating up against the barrier between the aquarium's tanks and the untamed sea.

A million thoughts raced through her head. *It's just one little cup, right? What harm could it cause? Doesn't everyone litter sometimes, even accidentally?* Besides, she'd never do it again. *Just this once.* But still her fingers wouldn't release the cup. She thought of Queenie, and the leatherback sea turtle, and the dolphin pod, and all the sea creatures in their care, but then she pushed the thoughts away. She glanced

at her friends, watching her with twinkling, eager eyes.

'Hurry up, fish lover,' Katie said, puckering her lips. 'Chuck it out there already!'

When Hannah still didn't budge, Katie sighed, turned, and headed down the catwalk. The twins wobbled after her. The moment was slipping by Hannah. Her heart raced.

Fit in at all costs. With that reminder, Hannah forced her fingers, one by one, to release the cup. It dropped from her hand, catching on the breeze and sailing to the sea. It landed on a wave, where it floated and bobbed. Hannah looked at her friends, who broke into hearty, genuine smiles.

'Nice job, Hann!' exclaimed Katie, hugging her. 'Knew you had it in you.'

'Uh, thanks,' said Hannah, giggling.

Amy and Annabelle also hugged Hannah. She'd done it. She'd achieved true friendship status.

'Maybe we can make this a tradition,' said Katie. 'Visiting the aquarium the day before our first meet.' Hannah's stomach lurched, but she felt hopeful.

This meant Katie wouldn't send in a complaint after all and risk discontinuing school trips to the aquarium. Hannah nodded at her.

'All right, let's head back,' said Katie, leading the twins across the catwalk.

But Hannah couldn't fight her guilt and she glanced back out to sea. There, atop a white-capped wave, bobbed the cup before something reached up... and pulled it under. It looked like a black tentacle. Hannah blinked. But the cup was gone, along with whatever thing had grabbed it.

'Did you *see* that?' Hannah asked, but Katie and the twins were already by the door.

'Let's go,' Katie called back to her. 'Unless you want to stay out here with the fish.'

Before Hannah could follow, she heard a strange noise. It sounded like someone was laughing. And not in a nice way. Then the cackle was drowned out by another noise: *roaring water*. The roaring grew louder. Hannah jerked her gaze back to the ocean, just in time to spot a huge wave that had materialized out of nowhere. It was ten feet tall and

moving toward the catwalk.

Moving *fast*.

Hannah yelled as the wave hit her square in the face. It knocked her off the catwalk and sucked her down towards the open ocean. Then it pulled her into a swirl of fizzing bubbles and dark water that crashed into her nose, mouth and ears.

She tried to swim for the surface, towards the dim light overhead, clawing through the cold water but the undertow latched on to her like a vice. Still she struggled against the strong current, gulping salt water. Her lungs burned and screamed for air. She was going to drown.

Then she felt something curl around her ankle. Something slimy. Cold.

It tightened its grip.

And pulled.





4
Shell-fish

Hannah, wake up!' cried a familiar voice. The first thing Hannah noticed was that she was freezing. Shivering, teeth-chatteringly cold. The second was that it felt like she'd just swum five hundred metres. Every muscle ached. She coughed, bringing up a jet of salt water, then flipped over onto wet sand and cracked open her eyes.

A worried face peered down at her. *Enrique*. 'Hannah, are you okay?' he asked with a shake

of his head. His curls sprayed salt water and his clothes were drenched and clung to him.

'Y-yes,' Hannah choked out. Her voice sounded hoarse.

'I thought I lost you.' Enrique's eyes flashed concern as he helped her to her feet.

Her ankle buckled as he propped her upright. *He's stronger than he looks*, she thought. She glanced down at her foot. Her pants were torn by her ankle, and a circular red welt marred her skin. *How did that happen?* she wondered. Her thoughts spun. 'Wait... w-what?' she uttered. She took in her surroundings. Waves rolled in the dark, moonlit sea beyond the beach.

How did I get on the beach? she thought.

'What were you doing on the catwalk? Miguel doesn't let me go up there. It's not safe.'

Hannah searched her foggy memory. *The catwalk... the plastic cup in the ocean...*

'You're lucky I was nearby,' Enrique went on, wringing the bottom of his sopping shirt. 'I was helping with the dolphins on the sun deck when I

heard your friends scream. Well, more like *shriek*.
And when I turned around, I saw a huge wave come
out of nowhere and hit you.'

That's right, Hannah thought. *The wave*.

'Don't worry, your friends are fine,' he added
with a lopsided grin. 'Just a bit shaken.'

Her memory snapped back into focus. The
glowing eyes. The wave sweeping her off the
catwalk. Hannah trying to swim back to the surface
and being pulled down, then... nothing.

'Y-you saved me,' Hannah stammered. 'Thank
you.'

'Don't mention it,' said Enrique. 'Lucky I'm in
training to be a lifeguard next summer.'

'Right... really lucky,' she said, in shock that she
hadn't suffered a worse fate. 'Thank you again. Hey,
where are Mr. Aquino and the rest of the class? Are
they still here?'

'No worries,' Enrique said. 'Everyone's at the bus.
Oh! I almost forgot!' He dug his hands into his jeans
pocket. 'When I pulled you out, you were holding
this. You didn't want to let it go.' He held out a

nautilus shell. It was about the size of her fist and
gleamed in the moonlight.

Hannah took it from Enrique. She ran her fingers
over the nautilus's edges. The smooth enamel was
yellowish, and it wound inward to a perfect pink
spiral. 'That's really weird,' she said.

'What is?' he asked.

She bit her lip. 'I – I don't remember picking it
up,' she said.

'You're okay!' Katie wobbled up the beach with
Amy and Annabelle.

Hannah quickly pocketed the nautilus.

'Did you see the size of that wave?' Amy added.

'Hannah, you're lucky you didn't drown!' said
Annabelle.

'Yeah. It came out of nowhere,' Hannah said,
grateful that her friends cared.

'Enrique, like, *totally* saved you, Shells,' said
Katie.

He nodded. 'Sometimes big waves appear, caused
by a big boat, or an underwater earthquake or a
volcano. Anyway, she's lucky I was nearby. It could

have been much worse.'

'See, girls? This is why we *only* swim in pools,' Katie said with a shudder. 'Told you the ocean was dangerous. I'm telling my mum to cancel the aquarium trip next year.'

Hannah didn't have the energy to argue about it. Everything that had happened hit her at once, and all she wanted was to lie down. Her shoulders sagged and her knees buckled.

Just then, Mr. Aquino ran up to them on the beach. His eyes fell on her and widened in concern. 'Hannah, what happened to you? Why are you soaking wet?'

'I was on the sun deck... and a giant wave swept me out to sea,' she said, her voice still raspy. 'But Enrique saved me. He works here sometimes.'

'This trip is dangerous, like I said,' Katie snorted.

'Let's fetch your parents,' Mr. Aquino said. 'I'm sure they'll want to take you home.'

Hannah's mind flashed to how swamped her mum and dad were at work, not to mention stressed over money. The last thing she wanted was to

be another thing her parents had to worry about, especially when it was just a little water.

'No, I'm fine,' Hannah protested. 'I'd rather go back to school. I'm used to being in the water.'

'All right then. Let's at least get you dry.'

After thanking Enrique, Mr. Aquino helped her back up the beach toward the aquarium. It was lit up against the dark sky like a sea palace. Hannah glanced back at the ocean. That was when she saw them: the two glowing yellow eyes – staring at her.

Then the eyes diverged, swimming in different directions until they were suddenly swallowed up by the dark waves. Hannah took the nautilus out of her pocket and clutched it in her hand, feeling chills.

The bus was already loaded with her classmates and ready to whisk her back to school where her mother would pick her up after swim practice later. Hannah glanced through the window at Enrique. She could barely make out his silhouette in the dim light, but he lifted one hand to wave goodbye. *He saved me*, she thought. She didn't want to think about what would have happened if he hadn't.

For some reason, Katie got out of her seat beside Hannah and moved to an empty row toward the front of the bus and the twins followed her silently. Hannah didn't know why they were acting so weird, but she hoped it didn't have to do with her almost dying or Enrique.

Maybe littering wasn't worth it after all, she thought sourly.

But still she was determined to smooth things out with the girls the first chance she got. For now she needed a breather and was somewhat relieved to be alone at the back of the bus.

* * *

'Hey, did you get it?' Dylan hounded Hannah the second she walked into the kitchen. Her mum went directly to her bedroom and shut the door.

'Go away,' Hannah said, feeling exhaustion in every inch of her body. She glanced around the kitchen. Dirty dishes were stacked in the sink. Overflowing trash needed to be taken out. Dylan's

algae-covered fish tank sat on the counter, needing to be cleaned for a new occupant.

'So, what kind of fish did you get?' Dylan asked.

She had to think of something – and fast. 'Well, I didn't get you a goldfish, exactly,' she said, knowing she had to play this just right to avoid a major Dylan meltdown that would result in her losing her phone privileges or getting grounded and having to skip the swim meet the next day.

'Another *kind* of fish?' Dylan asked. 'I miss Mr. Bubbles so much. He was the best.'

Now Hannah felt even worse. She loved animals of all kinds, but the truth was that Mr. Bubbles had been pretty dull. He never did much of anything. His most dramatic act was doing a lifeless bob and taking a ride down their plumbing. 'Not a fish,' she started. But his face fell, so she plowed forward. 'Even *better*. It doesn't even need food. And you won't have to clean its tank.'

He scrunched up his face. 'What kind of pet doesn't need food? Or a clean tank?'

'*And* it won't die,' she added.

He frowned. 'Like a vampire fish?'

She shook her head. 'No, not a vampire fish.'

'Fine, I give up,' said Dylan. 'What kind of pet did you get me?'

'This kind.' She pulled the nautilus from her pocket. It shone under the kitchen lights.

His eyes lit up. 'Cool! A shell! I love it!' He grabbed it and clutched it to his chest.

Hannah breathed a sigh of relief. She was safe. Now she needed to eat dinner, and then she had to figure out which outfit to wear the next day, but her mind was on the swim meet. Hannah made herself a turkey sandwich, hurried up to her room to eat it and got ready for bed. She laid out her outfit on a trunk at the foot of her bed and flicked off the lights.

The second Hannah's head hit the pillow, she fell fast asleep. Her bedroom dissolved and darkness stole her away. Everything that had happened that day – the aquarium trip, the wave snatching her from the catwalk, her almost drowning, Enrique saving her – had worn her out.

But even her dream was tense. She was in the

school pool but she was swimming in place as her competitors raced past her in a wave of water. Jess passed her, then Katie.

She woke spluttering. 'No, I need to win!' The words escaped her throat. She took a few deep, ragged breaths, then checked her digital clock, which showed it was ten. 'Only a dream,' she whispered. She began to close her eyes, lowering her head back onto her pillow.

Then she noticed the strange light. Pulsing. Yellow. *Eerie.*

It broke up the darkness with staccato flashes. It was coming from the room across the hall. *Dylan's room.* She blinked and sat up, wondering if she was seeing things, but it was still there. Still flashing. She pinched her cheek and winced. Nope. She was awake. The light was real.

Mesmerized, Hannah climbed from her bed. Her feet hit the carpet. Her blanket, which was soaked with sweat from her nightmare, slipped away from her body. She shuddered as if a cold ocean wind

had hit her. The room smelled like salt and seaweed – most likely from the canals near the townhouse. Goosebumps pricked her skin, from the cold, but also from a sudden fear. The light continued to pulse, breaking the darkness. Silently, she followed it.

When she padded into the hallway, the light grew brighter. Her toes sank into the thick carpet her mother had installed when they moved in. It was a small way to make the new place feel more like home. Her mother's door was down the hall, cracked open. Hannah considered waking her up. But lately when Hannah tried to get her attention, her mother just seemed annoyed. Though Dylan's door was shut, the glow lit up the frame and keyhole.

Usually, she avoided the little barnacle's room like an outbreak of Ich, the parasitic disease that made fish grow slimy white spots. She took a breath, held her nose with her fingers against the fishy stench, then pushed the door open.

In the pulsing light, her eyes scanned her brother's room. She took a step, then shrank back.

Her bare toes had touched cold water. Puddles, leading to his bed, soaked the carpet.

'Dylan?' she whispered, trying to gauge if he was awake. No one answered.

She took in the small room. Old toys littered every surface. The contents of Dylan's wardrobe spilled out onto the floor, revealing his half-hearted attempt to obey their mum's insistent orders to clean up his room – *or else!* Dylan lay asleep, his small body curled up in bed. His hair was mussed from tossing and turning and drool clung to his chin.

There, resting in the palm of his tiny hand, was the source of the pulsing light.

The nautilus.

Its pink-yellow spiral glowed brighter.

Intrigued, Hannah approached it, her feet squelching as they pressed into the drenched carpet one step after the other. Reaching out her hand, Hannah could see the delicate flesh of her fingertips illuminated by its strange glow. As if in response to her presence, the shell flashed faster and grew so bright that she had to squint. She froze when she

Part of Your Nightmare

heard a voice.

'My dear, sweet child. Go ahead. Don't be afraid.'

The voice was rich, and kind, and as deep as the sea itself. A voice full of laughter, it seemed to emanate from *inside* the shell.

'H-hello?' Hannah whispered, unable to take her eyes from the vibrant nautilus.

'Go ahead, dear... take it. It was my gift to you. Go on. Take it. Take it!'

Hannah touched the nautilus.

And fell through the floor.



5

Part of Your Nightmare

Cold water enveloped Hannah as she plunged. She spiralled down through what appeared to be tangles of kelp.

What was happening to her? Where was she going? Finally, she somersaulted to a stop in a dim underwater cavern.

She began to swim, holding her breath, not sure where she was going but knowing she needed to find an exit, to find air. But seaweed snagged at her ankles, trapping her.

'Leave here... turn back!' came a tiny, pained voice as clear as day, even that far underwater.

Hannah looked down and saw *faces* on the seaweed. And with her heart racing and air running out, she realized it wasn't seaweed at all, but withered grey life forms with sallow eyes and gaping, contorted mouths. They were nothing she had ever studied or seen in the aquarium. They couldn't be talking to her, though. She must have imagined it.

A current gripped her and sucked her down.

She tried to swim against it, but it was too strong. Her lungs ached, fit to burst.

Suddenly, an enormous crystal ball clamped around her and her mouth opened in a silent scream. But then the water drained from the enclosure and she was able to breathe, though she spluttered and spat and pounded her fists on the curved crystal.

'Help! Let me out!' she yelled. Everything looked distorted through the glass. She could barely make out the underwater cavern. Glass bottles lined the rough-hewn walls, and there were glowing

anemones and the eyes of those... *things*. She gasped as something huge, bulbous, and black swam past her. *What was that?*

'Lose something, dear?' The same deep, rich voice she'd heard in Dylan's bedroom emanated from the shadowy corner of the cavern. 'So coy!' A black tentacle shot out of the gloom and rapped on the glass. Hannah cowered, fear gripping her.

'Wh-what do you want?' she gasped.

Suddenly, the black tentacle reappeared, unfurling to show off an empty coffee cup.

Hannah felt her cheeks turn hot. She knew tossing that cup in the water had been a huge mistake. She knew it had been wrong. But she had done it anyway. 'I'm s-sorry,' she stammered. 'I-I didn't mean to!'

'You didn't mean to use my ocean as your – oh, what do you *landlubbers* call it? Dump?'

Hannah's heart thumped fast.

Then the voice softened. 'But don't be afraid, my child. I'm here to help poor unfortunate souls like yourself. Souls who have problems that need fixing.

It's what I do!' The voice broke into a dark chuckle. Where was it coming from? Was there a creature with tentacles that could... talk?

'What happened to me? Where am I?' Hannah said, her voice echoing in the crystal ball. Peering down, she could faintly make out some sort of clawed, spiny pedestal that held it.

'You are a poor unfortunate soul,' the voice replied. 'That's why you're here, isn't it? My dear, you can trust Auntie Ursula.' There was another flash of something swimming through the cavern.

Hannah shied away from the glass, sitting in the ball with her arms wrapped around her knees. Was she a poor unfortunate soul? All the things that had gone wrong in her life lately flashed through her head. Her parents splitting. Her father moving out. Her moving with Dylan and their mother into the townhouse and changing schools. The Term of No Friends, as she'd come to think of it – those few months at the beginning of the year. And now that she had friends – Katie, Amy and Annabelle – all she could think of was losing them. And where

was she? Dreaming? How had she gotten there? Her memory was fuzzy, but she recalled the nautilus in the dark.

'Ursula... can you let me out of here?' asked Hannah.

'In time,' replied Ursula. 'But first, what do you want even more than that?'

That caught Hannah off guard. She thought about it and said, 'To be happy?'

'Is that it? Come on, now. I'm a very busy woman. Go ahead and make your wish.'

'A wish? You can grant wishes?' asked Hannah. The words felt funny leaving her mouth. How was any of this strange dream possible, if it even was a dream?

'Of course I can, silly girl,' said Ursula. 'Now, what'll it be?'

'But who...?' Hannah began, feeling a stab of fear. 'But *what* are you?'

'Oh, a good question, my dear. Some call me the sea witch.'

'You're a *witch*?' Hannah asked, straining to get a

glimpse of her captor in the dark. Something shifted in the shadows. She caught sight of a flash of what looked like white hair and a ripple of more black tentacles. Hannah backed against the curved glass, but then the voice probed at her again.

'Some used to call me the protector of Triton Bay, but I haven't been called that in many moons.'

'Well, are you a witch... or a protector?' asked Hannah.

'Would you believe that I'm both?' A deep chuckle – booming like thunder – emanated from the watery shadows. 'Now, hurry up and make your wish. I really haven't got all day.'

Hannah couldn't explain it, but she felt like the voice understood her.

'One wish?' Hannah said, then bit her lip. She closed her eyes. What did she want more than anything? To patch up her family? To be popular? To get certain people to notice her?

Nothing was worse than having no friends. She couldn't let that happen again.

There was one way she could be sure to get

some popularity points. She needed to win her event against Jess Warren at the swim meet and advance to the championship meet. That way she could help her team win the trophy. That trophy mattered more than anything to Katie, so Hannah had to do everything she could to help Katie get her hands on it.

Hannah opened her eyes. 'I want to be the fastest swimmer in Triton Bay,' she said, 'so we can win the swim meet against Little River.'

'Oh, my dear, now, swimming is something I know a bit about.' The dark shape darted past the crystal ball again. Suddenly, an image projected onto the curved glass like a movie.

Hannah saw herself in the championship swim meet. She dove off the block and plunged into the pool, easily outswimming her archnemesis from the rival school and winning the freestyle race. She swam faster and faster, slapping the wall far ahead of Jess Warren.

The image morphed into one of her standing on the top of the podium with a gold medal draped

around her neck. Katie and her friends, still in their swimsuits, swimming caps, and towels, cheered for her with their coach. She saw her proud parents and Dylan cheering in the stands.

Her mother then did something wild. She turned to Hannah's father and hugged him. Was it possible they could get back together? Could their daughter's winning the race make them remember how great their family was? This wish could make everything in her life better!

It was so clear, just like the crystal ball.

The vision in the crystal faded, and Hannah found herself staring at her warped reflection. 'You can make all that happen?' Hannah asked. She wanted it so badly, more than she'd ever wanted anything. If she could be the fastest swimmer, then she could make her friends happy and, better yet, make her parents happy. Maybe even bring them back together again.

'Oh, my dear,' Ursula said, 'all that and more.'

The vision reappeared in the glass.

Hannah ran her hand over the image of her

family back together. She touched her friends' jubilant faces and the gold medal hanging around her neck. The scene began to fade away again.

'No, wait! Bring it back!' She hit the glass, trying desperately to make the beautiful scene return. But it kept dissolving, like a sandcastle washing away in water on the shore.

'Well, my dear, there's only one way to make it work,' Ursula said as the image faded.

'I want it! Please help me!' Hannah begged.

'Don't fret, my child,' Ursula said. 'Of course I can help – provided you pay a price.'

'Please. I'll do anything!' cried Hannah.

'Anything, you say? Well, I like the sound of that. I have something in mind.'

Suddenly, a rolled-up piece of parchment materialized before Hannah inside the crystal ball. Hovering in the air in front of her, it glowed with the same eerie golden light as the nautilus had, and as it unrolled, a fountain pen with a bony fish tail materialized. Her eyes scanned the length of parchment as she read the ornate script.

'A... contract?' Hannah asked. She reread the words scrawled on the page:

**I HEREBY GRANT UNTO URSULA,
THE WITCH OF THE SEA, ONE FAVOUR
TO BE NAMED AT A LATER DATE,
IN EXCHANGE FOR BECOMING THE
FASTEST SWIMMER, FOR ALL ETERNITY.**

'Go ahead and sign,' Ursula said. 'Time's ticking.'

Hannah swallowed hard and put the pen to the page, which rippled with golden light.

'Good girl!' Ursula egged her on.

Hannah hesitated, biting her lip. 'What favour, exactly? What do you want from me?'

'Oh, my dearie, all will be revealed in time,' Ursula said, sounding perturbed. She swam around, shifting in the shadows like a murky cloud of billowing smoke. Her eyes glinted hungrily for a second. 'Great power was stolen from me by someone close to you. I cannot be a protector of the sea without it. All I want is for it to be returned to

me... but all in good time.'

'Great power? But what is it?' asked Hannah.

'Tsk, tsk. You're wasting our precious time!'

Ursula's black tentacle emerged from the darkness and tapped on the crystal ball, pointing at the contract. 'Do you want to be the fastest swimmer, or not? Many poor unfortunate souls would kill to be in your position right now.'

Hannah studied the contract and considered her situation. Returning something that was stolen didn't sound so bad. Stealing was wrong, of course. If anything, it would be good to right an old injustice. But still something worried Hannah. Her mother always said not to act hastily.

'Can I think about it?' she inquired.

'*Think about it?*' growled Ursula, no longer kind. 'What's there to think about, my child? Either you want your wish or I can set you free to swim back through my cave with the hope you get out before something comes after you. It's what a child like you deserves, for thinking it acceptable to throw your toxic rubbish into my domain.'

'I'm sorry. Please, I just need a day,' said Hannah, peering again at the contract. It flashed with an intense light, then vanished. Nearly complete darkness flooded back into the cavern.

'My dear, as you wish. You have twenty-four hours to return to my lair and sign the contract, or our deal shall be rendered null and void. No takebacks. No second chances.'

Six black tentacles suctioned around the glass, cracking the crystal ball.

Seawater rushed back in, silencing Hannah's scream.



Something Fishy

Hannah woke, gasping for breath and clawing at her throat. Gradually, the nightmare released its dark hold on her as she sat up. Her eyes adjusted to the dawn light streaming through her bedroom curtains. Her pillow was damp, and her pyjamas were soaked. For a second, she feared that her dream had been real, that her bed was wet from being underwater. But then she realized that she was just feverish and very sweaty.

'Only a dream,' she panted. 'Only a nightmare... not real.'

The piercing alarm on her phone erupted, making her jump. It was intended to make sure she wasn't late for school, but mostly it just gave her a scare every single morning it went off. She jabbed at the phone in annoyance, silencing it, then lay back and tried to recall her dream before the details faded away. She remembered following a strange light into Dylan's room...

Why on earth had she dreamed about *that*?

But then more details surfaced. The nautilus... pulsing with yellow light. And when she had touched it, she was teleported into a dark underwater cavern... where Ursula offered to grant her a wish. *I want to be the fastest swimmer.* That had been her wish. She could remember it clearly. The details were fresh and sharp in her mind. *But it wasn't real*, she reminded herself.

With that reassurance, Hannah climbed out of bed, padded to her wardrobe and examined her appearance in the mirror. She didn't look feverish.

She ran her fingers through her curly brown hair, still tousled from sleep. Nothing out of the ordinary, at least.

Hannah changed into her pink tracksuit and turned back toward her bed – and that was when she saw it. Her skin pricked. A soft gasp escaped her lips. 'No. That's *impossible*,' she blurted.

She rushed to her bedside table and blinked, thinking she must be seeing things. But no matter how many times she batted her eyes, it was still there, right beside her mermaid lamp.

The nautilus.

The one from the beach.

The one from her nightmare.

How had it ended up back in her room?

She studied it. Water had pooled around it. She struggled to understand how it got there. Dylan probably was snooping around her room again, like he always did. That was it! He probably left it there by mistake. How else could she explain it?

Feeling a surge of irritation at both the nightmare and her snooping little brother, she

reached for the shell. But then she hesitated. She didn't want to touch it. She remembered that touching it in the dream had transported her to an undersea lair. She didn't want to take any chances, even though she knew it was just a nightmare. Quickly, Hannah used a sock to protect her hand while she tossed the shell to the bottom of her laundry basket. *I'll deal with you later*, she thought as it vanished among dirty clothes.

With that, she flew from her room and to the kitchen. She quickly poured herself a bowl of cereal. A few minutes later, Dylan's voice rang out. 'Mum, I can't find my shell!'

Hannah tried to ignore him and focus on her soggy cereal. But it was a lost cause.

A second later, her little brother charged into the kitchen with an indignant expression on his face. He wore a striped T-shirt, khaki shorts and a red sheet tied over his shoulders like a cape. He had the same olive complexion and brown eyes as his sister, but his dark hair had an uneven, choppy bowl cut from when he had tried to give himself a new hairstyle,

much to their mother's horror. He put his hands on his hips and squared off to face her. 'I bet Hannah stole it!' he added.

Hannah glared at him. 'I didn't steal it. Besides, why would I give it to you just to take it?'

'Because it's *special*,' Dylan said.

Hannah rolled her eyes. 'You probably lost it in that tip you call a room.'

Their mother ambled into the kitchen, bag slung over her shoulder. 'What's wrong?'

'Mum, Hannah stole my shell,' Dylan whined. 'And now she's lying about it!'

Hannah rolled her eyes. 'Mum, I didn't steal it. He probably lost it.'

'Liar!' he cried.

'Hannah, did you take it?' her mother asked. 'Maybe by accident?'

Hannah felt sick. She shrugged, not sure what to say. *Had* she stolen it? Had she been sleepwalking and taken it? Had Dylan been snooping around and left it in her room? All she knew was that she couldn't afford to get in trouble. Not with the first

swim meet coming up.

She had enough to worry about already.

Before she could respond, her mother checked her watch. 'I'm going to be late for work,' she sighed. 'You two need to stop fighting all the time. Now please apologize.'

'Okay, I'm sorry,' Hannah said, feeling guilty. 'I'll do better. I promise.'

After their mother kissed them both goodbye and headed for the door, Hannah approached Dylan. 'Hey, bud, it's time for school,' she said gently. 'Listen, I'll help you look for the shell tonight, okay? After I get home. And maybe we could clean up your room a little, too?'

Dylan snuffled but then relaxed. 'Okay, thanks. I love you.'

She ruffled his hair. 'I love you, too. Now let's go!' After Hannah raced to the front door to grab her backpack, her eyes darted to her bedroom door, where a stain had formed on the carpet.

Wet footprints led from Dylan's room to her door.

Probably from him taking a shower and not drying

off.

But it still sent a tingle up her spine. The nightmare flared in her mind.

You have twenty-four hours to return to my lair... No takebacks. No second chances.

The sea witch's voice echoed through her head. She shook it off, deciding to revisit everything later. She didn't have time to worry about it all now or they'd miss the bus.

* * *

The bell rang, and Hannah darted into Triton Bay Secondary School.

She wove through the crowded hallway, hoping that no one would see her. She missed her private school, which was smaller and less chaotic. She headed straight for her locker, scanning the halls for Katie and the twins in hopes of seeing her friends. They would cheer her up after her nightmarish morning. They knew that Dylan sometimes got on her nerves. But to her dismay, she didn't see them

anywhere.

A few minutes later – though it felt like an eternity – she reached her locker. ‘Come on,’ she whispered, twisting the combination lock and tugging it to no avail. Ever since she had got to secondary school and had to change classes throughout the day, she had been having stress dreams in which she forgot her locker combination. She tried again. *Click*. It unlocked and the metal door swung open.

Right as a group of students walked past, rotten fish spilled out of her locker. They spewed onto the floor, their eyes wide and pale, along with a pile of plastic garbage – straws, plastic bags, old coffee cups, plastic bottles. It was the kind of trash that washed up on the beach.

The stench was overpowering, making Hannah gag. Worse yet, she stepped on a fish and lost her balance, hitting the floor with a thud and shouting out. The other kids turned to stare at the scene as more and more fish spilled out in a heap, covering Hannah as she lay on the floor.

She tried shoving them away, but they kept gushing out of her locker and all over her, their lifeless eyes staring. Now everyone in the hall had stopped to look.

Kevin laughed. ‘Fish lover!’ he whooped, nudging his friends.

‘They’re n-not mine!’ Hannah stammered, pushing the slimy bodies off her and standing, holding on to the wall of lockers to keep from slipping back into the rotten fish pile.

Her mind struggled to come up with a rational explanation. Maybe her archnemesis, Jess Warren on the rival swim team, had planted them to intimidate her before the first meet? They’d face off that night in the hundred-metre freestyle. Jess was famous for pulling off elaborate pranks. Legendary, even. But then again, where would Jess have gotten all those fish? They looked exactly like the ones they fed to the dolphins at the aquarium. And how would she have snuck them into the school without being seen? More puzzling, how would she have gotten the combination to Hannah’s locker?

'Fish lover!' kids chanted.

Hannah's face flushed. Now she was completely soaked in awful-smelling fish juice. She backed away from her locker. The fact that her family owned the aquarium made matters worse.

The other kids kept taunting her. 'Fish lover! Hannah wants to marry a fish!'

'Tuna for lunch?' one kid quipped.

Hannah had never wanted so badly to disappear. Her cheeks felt as if they were turning into molten lava, like from an underwater volcano. She opened her mouth, then closed it, unsure of what to say.

'Look! She looks like a *fish out of water!*' someone cracked, followed by more laughter.

That was when Katie stepped into view with Amy and Annabelle, all dressed in their designer yoga pants and T-shirts. They stared at Hannah. Katie shot her a worried look. Her dainty nose scrunched up in disgust at the stench.

But then Katie set her hands on her hips and turned on the other kids. 'Hey, don't you *losers* have better things to do than make stupid jokes about

fish?' she called out.

The twins joined her. 'Yeah, hashtag *Losers*. Capital L,' Annabelle said.

'Stop being lame and leave our friend alone,' Amy added with a sneer.

Our friend, Hannah thought, warmth spreading through her body.

So they *were* friends.

The second bell rang, causing the crowd to scatter and rush off to their classes. Hannah slumped against her locker. Hot tears spilled from her eyes and dripped down her cheeks. This was turning out to be the worst day of her life – and it was only beginning.

But then Katie wrapped her arm around Hannah. 'Hey, don't worry about this mess,' she said. 'It's probably just Jess and her annoying pranks. But we'll show her tonight at the swim meet. We're winning that trophy this year. You're going to fly past her in your race.'

'Thanks, Katie,' Hannah said, sniffing. 'And you're so right.'

'Hashtag winning,' Amy chirped.

'Hashtag regional champions is more like it,' said Annabelle.

'Yeah, we'll help you clean this up later,' Katie said. 'I'm not the swim team captain for nothing! I'll get the whole team to help. You're not alone in this. We're on your side.'

'Come on. Let's get you changed. I have an extra hoodie in my locker,' Amy said.

'Thank you,' Hannah said. As she followed her friends to class, she felt grateful for their support. But a sinking feeling also pooled in her gut. She couldn't let Jess beat her again. She couldn't afford to let Katie down. Not after Katie had just come to her rescue and defended her. She had to win her race at all costs. Winning meant she could keep her friends and prove her worth. And it meant getting revenge on Jess for her putrid prank. Her eyes drifted back to her locker, where the rotting fish and pile of trash still sat in the hallway.

Her nightmare flashed through her head again. The coffee cup she had dropped in the ocean. The

sea witch. The contract and the offer to grant her wish. But she blinked to clear her head. The prank had nothing to do with her nightmare. It was Jess Warren messing with her.

I'll show her, Hannah thought. *And once I do, everything will be okay.*





7

In a Bind

Hannah dove off the block into the pool as the buzzer sounded. Her pulse thudded with adrenaline as she hit the cool water. Her arms tore through it with her feet kicking in rhythm. The straps of her new competition suit dug into her shoulders. Vaguely, she was aware of cheering echoing through the indoor arena. She could just make out Jess Warren's purple swim cap in the lane next to her. It bobbed into view every time she turned her head to breathe. Hannah

counted her strokes in her head. One, two. Then breathe.

As Hannah's arms propelled her through the chlorinated water, everything that was on the line rushed through her head – beating Jess, keeping her friends – and she kept seeing the dead fish and rubbish spilling out of her locker. Anger rose in her, making her swim harder. She heard Katie's voice in her head. *We're winning that trophy this year. You're going to fly past her in your race.* She had to win for Katie and her teammates. She had to win for her school. And most important, she had to win for herself.

She couldn't let Jess get away with that prank. And she couldn't disappoint her friends – not after they'd come to her rescue when the other kids were taunting her in the school hall.

One, two. Then breathe.

Hannah swam as fast as she could, slicing through the water with her arms and legs in perfect rhythm. But after the first flip turn, she started to lose speed. She still had three more laps to go, but

her arms were starting to feel like molasses. Her legs were wearing out, too.

Maybe it was from almost drowning in the ocean the day before? Terrible memories swirled through her head, making it hard to focus. The nightmare. The nautilus. The contract. Fighting with Dylan. The dead fish and gross trash in her locker. Despite her efforts, she couldn't focus or keep pace with the others.

Especially Jess.

The purple swim cap kept getting further and further away, no matter how hard Hannah struggled in the pool. The water fought her every stroke, every breath, every lap.

Come on, you can do this! She turned her head to breathe but swallowed a mouthful of water instead, choking and almost losing her stroke altogether, which would disqualify her. This was *nothing* like swimming in the salty open ocean where she felt at peace. This felt all wrong.

For three more miserable laps, Hannah struggled, trying to catch up with Jess but only falling farther

behind. The purple swim cap was now half a pool length ahead. Hannah wasn't just losing to Jess Warren, though that was bad enough, especially since she still suspected that Jess had something to do with the dead fish. No. Hannah slapped the edge off the pool and popped her head up but didn't bother reading the scoreboard. She knew that Jess had won the race by a long shot. And like she'd feared, Hannah had come in last. *Dead* last.

Demoralized and exhausted, she hoisted herself out of the pool. She was freezing and reeked of chlorine. One lane over, Jess celebrated her win with her Little River teammates. Their jubilant cheers only made Hannah feel worse.

Jess shot her an icy smile. 'Better luck next time. Hopefully you won't stink like a fish.'

The rival swimmers all laughed.

Heat crept into Hannah's cheeks. So it *had* been Jess who planted the dead fish.

Desperately, Hannah looked for her friends, hoping for moral support. Katie, Amy, and Annabelle huddled on the bench with the rest of the

team, with towels wrapped around them, wet hair, and swim cap lines on their foreheads. There was no jubilant cheering in the Triton Bay stands behind them. Just glum faces and glummer conversation. Hannah tentatively walked to the bench for a towel.

'This, like, majorly sucks,' Katie said. 'I hate it when we lose.'

'Yeah, it sucks worse than straws,' Amy chimed in.

'Hashtag straws suck,' Annabelle added, but no one laughed.

Hannah's friends looked crestfallen and deflated. She felt terrible for letting them down. Like *next level* terrible. The kind of terrible that made her want to curl up into a ball and disappear. As team captain, Katie took all their races personally, even when she wasn't the one diving off the starting block. While it was true that Hannah had swum as hard as she could – she'd tried her best – she hadn't swum well enough to win her race. Jess had sailed past her. Hannah realized that the locker prank had worked; it had gotten in her head. She had lost focus, had lost

rhythm and had fallen precious seconds behind. She caught Jess eyeing her with a triumphant expression on her face but quickly looked away, feeling humiliated.

'I especially hate losing the whole swim meet,' Katie told her teammates. 'Little River will never let us live this down.'

Hannah wrapped a towel around herself. 'What do you mean? We lost the whole *meet*?'

'Look at the scoreboard,' Katie said, pointing across the pool, to where the other side of the stands was beginning to empty out as people filed from the room.

Hannah studied the scoreboard and saw the final tally for Triton Bay versus Little River. Not only had Hannah lost her race, but coming in dead last had caused her entire team to lose the meet overall, despite Katie's winning her fifty-metre breaststroke and Amy's and Annabelle's placing first and second in the hundred-metre backstroke. As if she could feel any worse.

'Next week is a new chance!' said Coach Green,

their coach, in an effort to cheer them up. She peered at them through her thick glasses. Her dreadlocks pooled around her face. In front of her, she clutched her clipboard, on which she kept track of their times. 'We'll hit the pool hard in practice this week. Everyone rest up.'

Hannah followed the dejected team and their coach into the locker room. There, she and her teammates changed out of their competition suits. The new suits had looked so cheerful when they had put them on before the meet: deep navy striped with sunshine yellow, their school colours. But now they were sodden and balled up, and her teammates shot Hannah dark looks.

Hannah suddenly wanted more than anything to be alone in that instant. She glanced at Katie, who had donned an expensive new athleisure outfit and was lacing her trainers. The twins stood on either side of her, dressed and ready to go, glued to their phones.

'Hey, Katie. I'm sorry I lost,' Hannah said, zipping up her tracksuit jacket. 'I'll work harder

at practice this week, promise. I won't lose to Jess again. I can't believe she beat me.'

Katie frowned, but her expression softened. 'Fine. Luckily, we have one more shot, like coach said. Triton Bay still has the chance to win the Bayside Regional Trophy this year.'

'Yeah, it's only Katie's life goal,' Annabelle said, exchanging glances with her twin.

'Yup, hashtag winning,' Amy said. 'We've been planning it all summer. We're going to throw, like, the biggest party to celebrate if – I mean *when* – we win.' She flashed a big smile.

'That's right,' Katie said. 'My parents promised us. So don't ruin it, Hannah. Got it?'

They all stared at Hannah expectantly.

She forced a smile. 'No problem. I'm just having an off day. I'll do better next time.'

She would do whatever it took. She never wanted to feel this way again.

Nothing was worse than letting her friends down.

'We'll meet you outside,' Annabelle said.

Without another word, Katie, Annabelle, and

Amy took their backpacks and left along with the other swimmers. But Hannah stayed behind and sat alone on a bench as a million terrible thoughts circled through her head. She kept envisioning the next swim meet and Jess's purple swim cap, bobbing further and further out of reach. She had to find a way to swim *faster*. She had to find a way to beat Jess and win her race. She went to the sink and turned on the taps, splashing water on her face. But then something strange happened. The water tasted *salty*. Like seawater.

Not only that, but it smelled like the ocean when a breeze wafted off it and onto the shore. But that was impossible! The smell grew stronger. She even heard seagulls squawking.

Slowly, she backed away from the sink, still tasting salt on her tongue.

Suddenly, a familiar voice echoed through the locker room, even though it was deserted.

'Ticktock, ticktock, my dear!'

Hannah spun around. Her heart thudded. 'Who... who said that?' she asked.

'Twenty-four hours,' Ursula said. *'That was our deal. Time's almost up.'*

'But this is impossible, Hannah thought. *It was only a nightmare! It wasn't real!*

'You may feel like a fish out of water now,' Ursula said. The taps turned on their own, water gushing from them fast and flooding the sinks. *'But I can change that – I can help you win your next big race. Remember your wish?'*

The water sloshed onto the floor, pooling around Hannah's feet. She felt the urge to run, but something kept her rooted there. The sea witch in her nightmare had promised her one wish, hadn't she? Was it possible that it hadn't just been a dream? That it had really happened after all?

She remembered the contract printed on parchment paper in ornate golden cursive, tempting her to sign it. Three words from the contract came to mind: *the fastest swimmer*.

Maybe it was a silly thought, but then again, hadn't her whole day been odd? Maybe this was her chance.

No more losing to Jess Warren and Little River. No more disappointing Katie. Better yet, if Hannah became the fastest swimmer on her team, she could actually help Katie achieve her goal to win the Bayside Regional Trophy and throw the championship party.

This wish could fix *everything*.

'You... you can help me win my next race?' she stammered.

'Of course, my dear,' Ursula said. 'You'd better visit me again before it's too late.'

'But... how do I find you?' Hannah asked, staring at her own reflection in the fogged mirror. She felt crazy for talking to a sink, with nobody else around. 'How do I get back there?'

But the voice fell silent.

Then the sinks abruptly shut off. The water that had cascaded onto the floor ran down the drain. No smell of the ocean anymore. No more strange, disembodied voice talking to her.

But drawn in the condensation on the mirror was a simple swirl. It reminded her of something....

The nautilus! Of course!

If Hannah touched the nautilus again, it would transport her back to the undersea lair.

Feeling excited, Hannah fixed her gaze on the swirl. That was the answer. That was the way to solve all her problems. She could keep her friends and win her next race. She could pay Jess back for the embarrassing prank. They'd get the trophy and have the celebratory party!

Hannah took a deep breath. She knew what she had to do.

She just had to hurry – before her time ran out.

* * *

After dinner with the swim team, Katie's mum dropped Hannah off. As soon as she'd closed the door behind her, Hannah darted through the house, zigzagging around the furniture, through the kitchen, down the hall and into her room. She needed to get that shell and get back to Ursula's lair before her time to make her wish ran out. She dove for the

laundry basket, which was shoved into the wardrobe and stuffed with her dirty clothes and started pawing through it, feeling for something hard. But her hands only sifted through soft, crumpled clothes. She dug deeper, reaching the bottom of the basket. But *nothing*.

The nautilus wasn't there.

'Where is it?' she said in frustration, wheeling around. This was her one chance to fix everything in her life. She had to find that shell. Her eyes darted to the clock. Over an hour had passed since she was in the locker room. She searched her memory. She'd been upset from the nightmare – the nightmare that apparently wasn't a dream but was real after all. But she clearly recalled tossing the shell into her laundry basket before leaving for school.

Then she saw a note pinned to her mirror.

Scrawled in crayon was Dylan's terrible handwriting: I KNEW YOU STOLE IT! YOU'RE NEVER GETTING IT BACK NOW!

'Dylan, where did you put it?' she yelled at the mirror, ripping off the note. Her cheeks felt hot

with anger. Sure, she wasn't supposed to have the shell. Technically, it belonged to him. She had given it to him as a gift. But he wasn't allowed to enter her room without her permission. Dylan was many things, but he wasn't very creative. It must be in his room.

She had to find it. She couldn't let Katie and her friends down again. She needed the sea witch's help to win their next race. She flew through the hall and pushed open his door. Fortunately, Dylan was staying at their dad's house that night.

Piles of dirty clothes covered the floor. She couldn't even see the carpet underneath. Stray toys were strewn through them, just waiting for her to step on them and injure her foot. She started searching through the clothes but there was no sign of the shell. She tried his wardrobe but it was so stuffed with toys it was impossible to make headway. The second she opened the door, they all spilled out. No way had he hidden it in the wardrobe. There wasn't space.

She tried under the bed. On his desk. In the

drawers. The bedside table.

Still *nothing*.

'Where are you?' she muttered, wiping sweat from her forehead. Her eyes darted to his clock and widened. It was almost ten o'clock. She didn't have much time to find it and return to Ursula's lair. Could Dylan have taken the shell with him to their dad's house? If he had, she was in trouble. Or what if... ?

Suddenly, a thought took the breath from her: if Dylan had found the shell, maybe it had transported him into the treacherous undersea lair.

Just as the panic of that possibility set in, her eyes darted to Dylan's bookshelf where Mr. Bubbles's dirty aquarium now sat on the top shelf. She dashed over, reached up, and pulled it down – and sure enough, there it was. The nautilus sat at the bottom of the filthy tank.

'Thank goodness! There you are!' she said, fishing the shell out of the filmy water. But nothing happened at her touch. 'You said it would bring me back!' she yelled, feeling silly. 'Well, I found it!

I'm ready to make my wish!' She clutched the shell tightly in her fist.

She tried yelling again and waving the shell in the air.

Fear rippled through her.

Was she too late?

No – she thought back to her dream. Hannah had asked for one more day – and the sea witch had agreed. It hadn't been a whole day yet. She had a few minutes left. She was sure of it.

'Come on, why aren't you working?' she muttered to the shell. Now she felt even sillier for standing in Dylan's room. Anyone who saw her would think she had completely lost it.

'Fine, I give up,' she said dejectedly. 'All I wanted was to be *the fastest swimmer* –'

As soon as the words left her mouth, the seashell started to pulse with its eerie yellow light.

Then, in a flash, she was plunging through the ocean, down, down, down. Water flooded her mouth, rushed down her throat, filled her lungs. She was choking, gasping for breath. Hannah felt like she

was about to pass out, and then, suddenly, as if someone had flipped a switch, it was over and she could breathe again.

Hannah coughed and glanced around. She was trapped once more in the dry hollow of the crystal ball, which meant she was back in Ursula's lair. She could see that something large swam around in the shadows, just like before.

'I'm here... I – came back!' she gasped to the darkness, pushing back against her fear, which made her want to scream. 'I want to sign the contract. I want to be the fastest swimmer.'

A moment of silence. Just the shifting of shadows and the strange tentacles.

Ursula's voice echoed out. 'Are you sure, my child? It's binding. There's no going back.'

Hannah took a deep breath. 'I'm sure. I want to be the fastest swimmer on my team,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady. 'I *need* to be the fastest swimmer. You promised to help.'

Again it was quiet except for the soft hum of the ocean current swirling through the lair.

Then: 'As you wish, my child.'

Suddenly, the contract materialized in the crystal ball above her. In another flash, the fish bone pen appeared in her hand. It shimmered with a golden light. The tip glowed with golden ink. She raised it over the contract.

**I HEREBY GRANT UNTO URSULA,
THE WITCH OF THE SEA, ONE FAVOUR
TO BE NAMED AT A LATER DATE,
IN EXCHANGE FOR BECOMING THE
FASTEST SWIMMER, FOR ALL ETERNITY.**

The current picked up, swirling through the underwater lair. Then she heard shrill voices rising from the water. She couldn't tell where they were coming from, which made them that much eerier.

'Don't do it!'

' . . . you'll regret it – '

' . . . can't trust her – '

' . . . she only takes!'

'I'm sorry, but I need this,' Hannah said softly, more to herself than to the warning voices. She gripped the pen and pressed it to the parchment. 'I don't have a choice.'

She scrawled her name —*Hannah*— across the signature line.

The whole contract flashed with light. It rolled up into a scroll, then vanished in another flash and reappeared outside the crystal ball. A black tentacle reached up, encircled the parchment and unrolled it, then scrawled a name onto the other signature line below Hannah's:

Ursula

'Oh, you'll be the *fastest* swimmer,' she said, cackling. 'You'll swim like a fish!'

Emerald light flashed through the lair, followed by a deep rumble of thunder. The ocean currents whipped up. The walls of the crystal ball dissolved, and once again the ocean claimed Hannah, choking her and expelling her from the underwater lair. As

she felt the ocean sweep her away, a deep cackle made Hannah shiver with fear.

'Just remember our deal. After you win your race, you have to come back here. You owe me a favour. I gave you something, so now you have to give me something I want in return.'

Hannah had a sinking feeling about what she had just done.

But she pushed it away.

I had to sign it, she reminded herself. *I didn't have a choice.*

She couldn't afford to lose her next race. Otherwise, she risked losing her friends and going back to that horrible new-kid-in-school purgatory, where she had to eat lunch *alone* and walk to class *alone* and do everything *alone*. Having no friends was the worst, the absolute worst.

Or was it?





7

Green Around the Gills

Hannah woke up clawing at her throat on her bedroom floor. Her lungs pulled at the air, but something felt different. She couldn't explain it. It took longer to get enough oxygen. As she caught her breath and her vision cleared she looked around her room. Morning light flooded through her curtains. Half asleep and very groggy, she stood up on autopilot and staggered to her wardrobe to pick something to wear. After she got dressed, she inspected the state of her hair

in the mirror, wondering how long she'd have to spend taming it with the hair straighteners. As she gathered it up, she gasped and backed away.

'What is that?' she hissed at her reflection. She stepped closer to the mirror to inspect what she had seen. On each side of her neck were parallel slits. When she breathed, the slits flared open, freaking her out even more. *What happened to my neck?*

She wondered if she'd injured it at the swim meet. But nothing jumped to mind.

The day before, her neck had been normal. She was sure. That wasn't something one failed to notice, like a spot on a chin that was just beginning to blossom. No, that was unmissable. They were completely noticeable, especially with the whole flaring-open-when-she-breathed thing.

'What happened to me?' she whispered to her reflection, studying her neck slits.

A door slammed down the hall, making her jump back from the mirror with a start. She was late. Any second, her mother would rap on her door and let her know that the bus was waiting. She

had to hide her neck – and fast. She couldn't let her mother catch wind of what was going on.

What was going on?

Hannah rustled through her wardrobe, her fingers finding a winter scarf from some long-forgotten family ski trip. It was far too warm for the mild weather, but it was made from thick wool that promised maximum coverage. She started wrapping the scarf around her neck.

The door to her room swung open.

'Mum, she took it again!' *Dylan*. Her dad must have just dropped him off and he'd gone right for the shell, of course. His little face was blotchy and twisted up with anger.

'Get out!' Hannah yelled, shutting the door on him. Her eyes darted to the shell on her bedside table. She swiped it and stashed it inside her wardrobe. She couldn't let him have it back; it had strange powers. Plus, she owed the sea witch a favour and she needed the shell to fulfil the deal.

But Dylan had blocked the door with his foot.

'You're not allowed in my room!' Hannah said.

With one hand, she tried to slam the door shut while desperately attempting to finish wrapping the scarf around her neck with her other hand.

Luckily, Dylan was so focused on getting through the door that he didn't seem to notice Hannah's neck. At least she hoped he didn't. Suddenly, the *click-clack* of her mother's high heels sounded. They hit the hall carpet and quieted, which meant her mother was coming closer.

'What now?' her mother said when she reached Hannah's room. 'Open the door, please.'

Reluctantly, Hannah stepped away from the door.

Dylan was pushing on it so hard that as soon as she released it, the door flew open. He staggered into her room and fell flat on his face. Her mother followed him in, surveying the room. When she saw Dylan pouting on the floor, she helped him up and looked hard at Hannah.

'What in the world is going on with you two?' her mother asked.

Before Hannah could answer, Dylan wailed, 'Mum, she took my special shell again! I found it in

her room yesterday, so I hid it in my aquarium tank. But it's gone again!'

Hannah felt a flood of guilt. He was right, of course. She did steal it back. But there was nothing she could do about it now. Carefully, she shut the door to the wardrobe, where she'd stashed it.

Then she knelt down on the floor by Dylan. 'Bud, I'm sorry, but I think it's gone for good,' she said, hoping he would leave it at that.

He sniffled and stopped wailing. 'It's not fair.'

'I'll get you a new fish for your aquarium. A real one! Like Mr. Bubbles.'

'Will he have a black stripe, too?' he asked.

Mr. Bubbles had had a distinctive black stripe that marked his side. 'Black stripe and all.'

Her mother's frown transformed into a relieved smile as she leaned close to Hannah. 'Thank you, Hann. I'm proud of you for working this out with your brother.' Her mother glanced down at her watch. 'Now, hurry up, you two or you'll miss the bus and be late for school. And, Hannah, honey, please make sure your brother gets his homework

from the kitchen table.'

After her mother kissed the top of each of their heads, she looked at Hannah. 'Why are you wearing a scarf?'

'It's the latest trend,' Hannah lied, holding the scarf to her neck to make sure it didn't slip.

'Kids these days,' said her mother with a laugh as she headed back down the hall.

Hannah snatched up her things, grabbed Dylan's homework from the kitchen and quickly tied his shoelaces before locking up and heading out.

* * *

Hannah walked down the hall with her hand pressed to the scarf wrapped tightly around her neck.

Her eyes darted around nervously. She hoped nobody would notice how strange it was that she was wearing a winter scarf inside. But this wasn't her only problem.

There was still the matter of the dead-fish juice

in her locker. The day before, she'd picked them up and thrown them away to avoid making it smell any worse than it already did, but there was still the stinky residue to deal with. A few minutes later, she reached her locker – and stared up at it in horror. Something was spray-painted across the front in shoddy teal handwriting.

FISH LOVER

Who had done that to her locker? Was it Jess Warren and the Little River swimmers pulling yet another prank? Or some other kid from her school who had witnessed the fish incident the day before?

She held her breath as she put in her combination, expecting the fish stench to assault her. But when the door swung open, her locker didn't smell fishy at all. The sudden disappearance of the smell was as strange as the appearance of the fish in the first place. How could the fish smell simply vanish? In fact, her books and smattering of pens were dry, without any stains or any indication

that her locker had been filled with fish and slimy rubbish. Once the shock wore off, she felt relieved. Why was she upset the fish smell was gone?

That was a good thing, wasn't it?

No dead-fish smell.

One less problem. Maybe the day would get better after all. Maybe she wasn't cursed.

A familiar voice echoed down the hall. 'Don't worry, we cleaned up your locker,' said Katie, sashaying up to Hannah with Annabelle and Amy in her wake. 'We all got to school early so we could surprise you.' Her eyes darted to the fresh spray paint. 'But we couldn't get that off.'

'Don't worry,' Annabelle added. 'We reported it to the head teacher.'

'Yup, she'll have it removed and repainted by this weekend,' Amy said with a smile. 'Your locker will be back to normal – and as good as new. Maybe even better than new.'

'*You* cleaned my locker?' Hannah said, feeling gratitude for her friends. They still supported her even though she'd lost her race and cost them the

swim meet.

'Of course, silly,' Katie said. 'You needed our help.' Her eyes darted to the spray paint. 'Jess and Little River are so *lame*,' she added.

'Yeah, hashtag lame,' Annabelle said.

'You think *Jess* wrote this?' Hannah asked, nodding at the blue lettering.

'Like, of course,' Katie said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. 'Who else would pull such a dumb prank? They probably did it to celebrate their win yesterday.'

'Uh... right, of course,' Hannah said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other and resting a hand on her scarf. She couldn't let them see her neck. She didn't need more problems.

'But you know what this means, right?' Katie asked.

'Uh, what does it mean?' Hannah asked.

Katie made a face. 'Even more reason for payback next race!'

The twins giggled. 'Hashtag payback,' said Amy.

Katie hooked her arm through Hannah's and

pulled her down the hall toward class. 'Don't worry, we've got your back,' Katie said with a wink. 'We'll handle it for you. Oh, and odd choice with the scarf. But I don't hate it. Right, girls?'

Amy and Annabelle nodded.

As they walked into class, Hannah felt a ripple of happiness. Her friends had her back after all. They *did* care about her. They cared when she'd almost drowned. And they'd cared when she'd been pranked. They'd even cleaned up the mess for her. The swim meet and the fishy locker were just flukes. Plus her wish ensured that stuff like that would never happen again.

Moments later, Mr. Aquino called the class to order. 'Today we'll be talking about fish anatomy,' he said, flipping off the lights and turning on the projector. An image of a goldfish appeared. 'You probably learned a lot during our aquarium trip,' he added.

Snickers rang out in the classroom. Nobody liked science class except for Hannah. She tried to focus on the lesson, but her hand kept drifting up to check

on the scarf. Suddenly, she felt a wad of wet paper hit her cheek. She jerked her head around. Kevin made a kissy face.

Fish lover, he mouthed. His friends giggled from the back of the room. So they'd all seen Jess's latest prank. Hannah shrank down in her seat, feeling annoyed.

Mr. Aquino aimed his laser pointer at the goldfish's neck. 'Class, what are these called?'

Hannah's mouth dropped open in shock. The little laser point hovered over the slits in the fish's neck. She knew *exactly* what they were called. But that wasn't why she was freaked out.

She reached under her scarf and touched her neck, feeling the slits.

When no one answered, Mr. Aquino shifted his gaze. 'Hannah, care to enlighten us?'

But she couldn't say it. Her mouth felt dry, like it was filled with cotton balls. She quickly pulled her hand out from under the scarf. She suddenly remembered the sea witch's words and somehow, it all fell into place: *Oh, you'll be the fastest swimmer.*

You'll swim like a fish!

This was the gift from the sea witch. Ursula had given her *gills!* But that wasn't what Hannah had meant when she made her wish. She didn't mean for it to happen like this. Another spitball hit her cheek.

Fish lover, Kevin mouthed at her.

The silence stretched.

Hannah started to feel like she couldn't breathe. Her chest felt tight. Her lungs screamed. Since the slits had appeared on her neck, breathing seemed harder. It wasn't her imagination, either. It had something to do with the gills. She was certain.

Mr. Aquino looked worried. 'Hannah, is everything okay?'

But all she could think about was her neck and Kevin and the horrible nickname, and how if the other kids saw her, well, her new fishlike parts, it would only get worse.

Much, much worse.

'Uh... can I use the bathroom?' she managed to utter, then grabbed the hall pass and bolted from class. She had to figure out more about the gills and

how to make them go away before anyone could notice them. Hannah rushed into the bathroom, checking to make sure nobody was in there. Fortunately, it was empty. Slowly, she unwrapped the scarf from her neck, revealing the gills in all their fishy glory. She breathed deep, watching as they flared open, then sealed up.

It would be kind of cool – if they weren't *on* her neck. Like a crazy science experiment.

She was reaching up to touch the gills when she heard something.

The sound came from one of the stalls.

It sounded like something wet flopping around.

'H-hello?' she stammered, quickly rewrapping her neck. 'Is anybody in here?'

Nobody answered. It sounded like the noise was coming from the closest bathroom stall. The door was cracked open a bit. She approached it and then pushed it the rest of the way open. The strange noise was definitely coming from inside the toilet bowl.

She held her breath and peered into it.

Then she gasped.

A goldfish floated perfectly still inside the toilet bowl.

She couldn't be sure, but the fish looked an awful lot like Mr. Bubbles. So then... how was he here? She recognized the black stripe down its side. It was *definitely* Mr. Bubbles.

She leaned closer, trying to inspect the fish. On second thought, it probably wasn't Mr. Bubbles. A lot of goldfish looked alike. But then again, what was a goldfish doing in the toilet in the girls' bathroom? Was this another Jess Warren prank?

Hannah's mind whirled with paranoid thoughts.

Suddenly, the fish began to thrash around.

Then he did something that made Hannah jump back in fear.

'Help me! Your brother flushed me!' The shrill voice came from the fish.

Up close, she could see that he looked bloated and decaying.

His pale dead eyes stared back at her and his mouth puckered at the air.

Hannah slowly backed away. 'No, that's

impossible. Fish can't talk.'

But the fish kept shrieking. 'You're just like me now! You're going to go belly-up!'

Hannah slammed the toilet lid.

Fear made her breathing speed up and adrenaline rush through her veins.

But the fish kept shrieking. '*You're going to go belly-up!*'

Her eyes locked on the toilet, she backed out of the stall.

And bumped into somebody standing behind her.



9

The Fastest Swimmer

Hannah whirled around and came face to face with...
Katie?

'Hey, you've been gone awhile,' Katie said, clutching the other hall pass.

Hannah gulped for air. 'Uh, really?' she stammered, feeling her heart racing.

Could Katie hear the fish, too? Hannah's eyes darted back to the bathroom stall. She felt tense with fear. She strained to listen for the high-pitched

voice that had emanated from under the lid.

'Yeah, Mr. Aquino sent me to find you,' Katie said, twirling her hair and studying her perfectly glossed lips in the grimy mirror. 'Guess he was worried after you didn't totally nerd out on that fish anatomy question.'

'What question?' Hannah said, distracted. She couldn't keep her eyes off the stall.

'Seriously, what's wrong with you?' Katie said, spinning around to face her. 'You look like you just saw a ghost. Is it Kevin and his stupid nickname for you?'

'No. It's nothing. I'm fine.' Suddenly, Hannah remembered her neck. She quickly checked the scarf, worried that in her panic it had slipped down and revealed her gills.

And she'd just been talking to a dead goldfish.

Katie locked her eyes on her friend's neck, then they narrowed. 'Seriously, though, what's with the scarf? It's cute, but it's really warm out.'

Hannah felt her mouth go dry. 'Oh, I was just... uh... feeling like I might be getting sick this morning.

So my mum insisted I wear it.' The lie tumbled from her mouth.

A tense moment passed. *Did Katie buy it?*

Then Katie snorted. 'Mums have the worst fashion sense. You should've seen what mine bought me at Ever After the other day. Now I insist on only shopping for myself.'

Hannah forced herself to laugh, even though her mouth still felt dry and her heart was still pounding. The scarf around her neck felt itchy and hot. She was starting to sweat.

With another giggle and a shake of her head, Katie headed for a bathroom stall.

The bathroom stall.

'No! Don't go in there!' Hannah jumped in front of Katie to block her path.

Katie glared at her friend. 'Uh, why not?' she said, giving her a strange look. 'I know the school bathroom is totally gross. But when you got to go, you got to go.' And with that, she pushed past Hannah and opened the stall door.

Hannah cringed, waiting for Katie to notice Mr.

Bubbles.

But she heard nothing but the lock clicking, the lid opening and Katie taking a seat.

The dead fish was gone.

How is that possible? How is any of this possible?

Hannah secured her scarf and bolted from the room.

* * *

'Wow, look at your time!' Coach Green said, clicking the stopwatch when Hannah slapped the side of the pool.

Hannah whipped up her head and snapped back her goggles. 'How'd I do?' she asked, keeping her neck submerged underwater just in case. She didn't want anyone to notice the gills. This was the first time she had tried swimming breaststroke, but the coach had suggested it in case they needed her on the medley relay team. Breaststroke was Katie's event, while freestyle was Hannah's speciality.

'It's not just a personal best.' Coach Green

scanned her clipboard through her thick oversize glasses, then looked back up excitedly. 'Looks like it's a new school record!'

Hannah couldn't believe her ears. '*A new school record?* Really? Are you serious?' Suddenly, she was starting to appreciate the sea witch's gift. It wasn't a curse after all. But would she be disqualified for 'cheating' if the gills came to light? Hannah would have to think about that.

After all, having gills *was* like cheating. The second she had dropped the towel from around her neck – where it was covering up the slits – and had dived into the pool for the practice drill, she had instantly felt something was different. It had felt like she *belonged* in the water. She had torn through the pool like a fish. The gills had worked wonders. She no longer needed to inhale on every stroke. Actually, she didn't need to at all, though she did once or twice so she wouldn't throw anybody off. *Just for show.* She didn't want anyone to grow suspicious about the girl who didn't have to breathe during laps. It was bad enough that Kevin still called her *fish*

lover.

'Well, it's not an official competition time,' Coach Green went on, scribbling on her clipboard. 'We can't add it to the record books. But you beat the previous record by a full thirty seconds. Let's see...!' She scanned her clipboard. 'That record was set last year by Katie.'

The name hit Hannah like a punch to the gut. 'Wow, thirty seconds?' she asked. At the same time, she couldn't help feeling the grin spread across her face. Maybe the deal with the sea witch really was worth it, gills and all. She glanced around the pool. The other swimmers, including Katie, were finishing the drill. Hannah climbed out and joined Coach Green.

Below, Katie slapped the side of the pool. She was red-faced and breathing hard. She'd come in second, but a very *distant* second, in the drill. The twins appeared next, also winded.

Coach Green shook her head. 'I can't explain it, Hannah,' she said, studying her stopwatch like it was broken. 'You're like a whole different swimmer

today. What's your secret?'

Hannah, towel looped around her neck, shrugged and smiled, hoping that would be enough. But when she saw her friends watching, she said, 'I guess practice makes perfect.'

Coach Green grinned, then looked down. 'Katie, nice job,' she said. 'But you'll have to do better! Hannah here just beat your official record. Can you believe it?'

Katie's eyes narrowed but then widened as she swept Hannah into a hug. 'I totally underestimated you, Hann. You swam so fast!' she said. 'Now we'll win that regional trophy for sure!'

Amy said, 'You even beat Katie at her own event. That's, like, *never* happened before.'

Katie flashed Amy a look but then quickly smiled. 'Hannah's a natural at breaststroke,' she said.

Hannah was thrilled by her performance but even more by Katie's praise.

Now she couldn't wait to face Little River and Jess Warren again in the next meet.

I'll show Jess a thing or two.

* * *

'See? I told you I'd do better,' Hannah said, proudly parading into the locker room with Katie and the twins. She kept the towel draped around her neck like a featherless boa. She felt like her wish had been worth it. Now Katie would just *have* to stay friends with her.

Katie reached out and touched her shoulder. 'As the team captain, I'm totally proud of you.' Katie grinned, and for the first time, Hannah felt like she had the upper hand in the friendship – Katie admired her, instead of the other way around.

Amy and Annabelle nodded their agreement.

'Thanks,' Hannah said.

'Don't mention it.' With a flip of her hair, Katie marched to the showers. Annabelle followed, but Amy lingered behind, looking torn.

'Look, I shouldn't say anything,' Amy said, eyes darting. She glanced after Katie, making sure she disappeared into the showers. 'But just be careful

with Katie. She wants you to win – just not *against* her.'

Hannah frowned. 'What do you mean?'

Amy waited for the showers to start running, masking their voices. 'Katie is the *top* swimmer at Triton Bay,' she whispered. 'Everyone knows that. She's the captain of the swim team. It's, like, her reputation. If you keep beating her top swim times, you'll ruin that.'

'Ruin it?' Hannah asked.

'Yeah. Beating her that badly in the drill? At her own event? Surpassing her record time? Then parading in here like you're the captain of the swim team? And like you're better than her at the breaststroke now?'

Hannah felt her stomach drop. Her gills also flared, making her feel self-conscious. She clutched the towel tighter. 'I didn't mean to do that. I was just trying to make her happy. And do what the coach wanted and was best for the team!'

Amy frowned. 'Well, just know it's a sensitive subject, so be careful.'

'I just want to win – to help us get the trophy. So Katie can throw her party.'

Amy shook her head. 'Look, you're new, so I don't expect you to understand everything. But this is a big deal for Katie. If you beat her in the next match, she won't forget it. Trust me on this one. I'm just saying this as your friend.'

With that, Amy headed for the showers, leaving Hannah alone on the bench. She could feel the wet towel wrapped tightly around her neck – and, underneath it, the gills that flared every time she breathed. Wanting to race home and cry, she forced herself to head for the showers instead. Still in her bathing suit, she scooted into a shower stall and turned it on.

'What's good about being the best swimmer if being the best swimmer means that Katie will hate me?' Hannah muttered to herself, stepping under the scalding water.

And aren't friends supposed to celebrate the successes of their friends? she thought.

She reached for the shampoo bottle. The water

pelted her skin. She felt her gills flare. She had thought that becoming the fastest swimmer would help her *keep* her friends, not *lose* them. On top of that complication, she had actual gills. She'd signed her name in gold on that contract. She'd made her wish and agreed to the deal. But now she almost wished that she hadn't.

Was it too late to take it back?

Then she remembered Ursula saying, 'There's no going back,' and her heart stopped.

Mindlessly, she squirted shampoo into her palm – but thick oily black sludge came out of the bottle. It coated her palm and dripped down her arm.

She gasped, dropping the shampoo bottle. 'What the –'

The sludge leaked from the bottle and stained the water black. It reminded her of an oil spill in the ocean. She looked down. Her hand was still stained with the oily black sludge. She tried scrubbing it under the scalding water, but the black stain wouldn't come off.

The sea witch's sultry voice echoed through her

head. *'You can't change your mind!'*

A horrible cackling filled the showers. *'You wanted to be the fastest swimmer!'*

Hannah grabbed her towel and bolted from the shower, darting past Katie and the twins, who were now dressed. She tried to hide her hand, hoping they wouldn't notice the black stain.

'What's wrong?' Katie asked as she detangled her wet hair with a comb.

'Nothing!' Hannah said, her voice higher than she meant it to be. *'I – I'm late for dinner!'* Hannah quickly tugged on her outfit over her bathing suit and ran from the locker room.

The sea witch's cackling followed her out into the car park, where her mother's car waited for her. But as soon as she hopped in and slammed the door, the cackling ceased.

What is happening to me? Am I going mad?

And... what am I going to do?



10

Sinking Feeling

Hannah hoped dinner would take her mind off everything. Takeout containers littered the cafeteria table at the aquarium.

Colourful murals of fish, sea turtles, dolphins, coral reefs and other marine life covered the walls. The floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over Triton Bay, where the sun was dipping into the ocean. Soon darkness would fall. She, her brother and her father had gone to the aquarium after school to order Chinese food.

But Hannah's father had been so busy with a leaking tank on the upper ocean deck that he'd forgotten to call in the order. So Hannah had taken matters into her own hands, locating the crumpled takeaway menu and his credit card. By the time the food showed up, they were famished. Dylan was even starting to drum his fingers on the table. She had thrust the lo mein at him the second the food arrived, along with chopsticks, even though he ate with his hands.

'Sorry about dinner,' her father said, digging into his chicken and veggies.

'No problem,' Hannah said, reaching for the kung pao shrimp, her favourite dish of all time.

'Lo mein is like salty spaghetti,' Dylan said, slurping up the noodles. 'Isn't that cool?'

'It sure is,' their father said.

Hannah cracked open the container she was holding and shoveled some shrimp into her mouth. But as soon as it hit her tongue, she almost gagged. She spat it out on her plate in disgust.

Her father shot her a strange look. 'What is it,

honey?'

Dylan cracked up. 'Hannah's going to puke!'

Hannah set the kung pao shrimp aside, her stomach rumbling, and settled for plain rice instead. *What is wrong with me?* Usually she loved seafood. She had an uneasy feeling this had something to do with her wish, too.

She wouldn't be surprised.

'Kiddos, it's really nice to have you here,' their father said, looking up from his food. 'Honestly, it gets kind of lonely during the week, even with all our fishy friends for company.'

'Yeah, Dad, we miss you, too,' she said, and she meant it.

She quickly wiped away a tear and finished her rice.

* * *

After dinner, while her father worked on the leaky tank and Dylan released his pent-up energy in the interactive play area, Hannah wandered through

the labyrinth of the aquarium's corridors. It felt like a different world down there – wild, exciting, alien and free. She loved being there more than anywhere in the world, but problems weighed heavily on her heart like an anchor.

She glanced down the halls, which were empty and dimly lit. It was after hours, but many of the staffers and trainers were still working, cleaning up after the busy day of visitors or tending to the many animals in their care. Usually, she'd love to check the pH of the tanks with her father or feed the dolphins their gleaming silver fish, but that night she wanted to be alone.

She pressed her face to the glass of Queenie's tank. 'I wish you could talk to me...'

The octopus seemed to understand. She swam up to the glass, her eight tentacles undulating in the eerie underwater lighting that filtered through the tank.

'You see, I have all these problems,' she said to the tank, soothed by Queenie's graceful movements. 'But I can't tell anyone about them... and it's the

worst to feel alone – '

'Hey, Hannah, what's up?'

The voice made her jump, but then she relaxed. It was only Enrique.

'Oh, hey,' she said, playing it cool even though he'd caught her talking to an octopus.

'You know, I talk to them, too,' he said, flashing a conspiratorial grin. He studied Queenie. 'I think they understand us. Or maybe it's just my imagination. What do you think?'

How much could she tell him about what she knew? That there was deep magic in Triton Bay? That, indeed, some of the life down there could very likely understand them?

'Yeah, I think they do,' she said.

'Right?' Enrique was staring at her woolen scarf. 'Haven't seen you around much.'

'Oh, I've been busy with the new swim season,' she said, suddenly brightening. For a second, she forgot about her troubles. 'I even set a new record time in practice.'

'Wow, congrats!' he said with a genuine smile.

'Glad you've improved since your plunge into the ocean. Just kidding, of course.'

Their eyes met – and he held her gaze. She thought of how he'd saved her by pulling her out of the ocean. But then her hand returned to the scarf around her neck. She couldn't risk him, or anyone, finding out about her gills. She felt them flare. 'Uh, right. Hey, I have to help my dad with the leaking tank.' And with that, she ran off and left him standing by Queenie.

Why did she always act so awkward around him?

The truth was she liked him.

But somehow she always found a way to ruin it.

She always ended up acting, well, as Amy would say, hashtag lame.

What else could possibly go wrong?

* * *

After they had finished up at the aquarium and gone back to her father's flat to watch a film, Hannah

tossed the half-full takeaway containers into the fridge.

'Okay, time for bed,' their father said, switching off the TV.

'You're the *coolest* dad in the whole universe,' Dylan said with a toothy grin.

'And you're the *coolest* kid,' their father said, mussing Dylan's hair. 'Now brush your teeth. We've got a big day at the aquarium tomorrow.'

'Just like old times,' Hannah said from the kitchen. She'd always loved their family weekends at the aquarium. It was their little tradition.

Her father smiled. 'Yup, just like old times.'

Hannah started down the hallway. That was when she remembered she had to share a room with Dylan. He was a total mouth breather. After they had both brushed their teeth, changed into their pyjamas and wiggled into their beds, Hannah stared up at the ceiling.

'Isn't this cool?' Dylan whispered in the dark. 'It's like we're having a sleepover!'

Hannah glanced in his general direction. 'Uh,

yeah. Totally.' She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She knew that all the recent change must have been hard on him.

'Want to tell scary stories?' he went on excitedly. 'Rex told me a good one about sea monsters called sirens that sing beautiful songs to lure in sailors to eat them!'

'Usually, I'd love to hear your stories, but I'm exhausted,' she replied. And it was true. She could barely keep her eyes open. It had been the longest day in a series of long days. She was looking forward to a cosy Saturday at the aquarium.

'Okay.' His voice sounded sad. 'I wish I had Mr. Bubbles. He always stayed up. Until...'

The day he went to the ocean in the sky, she thought, finishing his sentence in her mind. Hannah felt even worse for being a lousy sister. She closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than sleep.

Drip... drip... drip...

Hannah woke with a start. She didn't know how long she'd been sleeping. If she had to guess, it was the middle of the night. She heard Dylan's snores.

Was *that* what had woken her?

She listened in the darkness.

Drip... drip... drip... It wasn't loud, but it was driving her crazy.

She climbed from the bed and plodded out of the room and across the flat on autopilot. Just as she had thought, the kitchen tap was leaking. She tried to shut it off, but when she turned the knob, the tap started dripping even more. And more. Puzzled, she tried twisting the knob the other way, but the water kept flowing. She flicked on the light and put her head near the opening to study the problem. Suddenly, murky black water gushed out of the tap.

It didn't look like water. It looked more like... *squid ink*.

Like the kind she'd poured onto her hands from the shampoo bottle in the locker room.

And it was filling the sink, nearly spilling over its brim.

Then seaweed tendrils shot out of the sink drain and wrapped around her neck. They tightened and started pulling her face toward the putrid black

water.

Hannah struggled to get them off, prying the sinewy plant with her fingers. She wanted to scream, but she could barely get out a breath, and then her face was plunged into the sink. Under the contaminated water, rubbish floated by. She tried to breathe, but plastic bags clogged her gills and made it impossible. Stars danced in her vision. A voice sounded in her ears.

You poor unfortunate soul! Don't forget our deal – or else!

She screamed under the black water.



II

Webbed

Hannah's father flipped on all the kitchen lights. 'Hey, you okay? I heard you scream.' He wore pyjamas and his hair was tousled from sleep.

Hannah looked at him in a panic, clawing at her neck, but nothing was wrapped around it. Fortunately, her father was still half asleep, and it was dark, so he couldn't see her gills. But that was the least of her troubles. She had almost drowned in the kitchen sink, which, now that she looked at it,

was empty, no black ink or plastic garbage in sight.

'Uh, I – I think I was sleepwalking,' she stammered. The lie slipped from her lips.

He screwed up his mouth. 'Everything okay?'

'No. I mean, yes. I'm fine,' she said, working to slow her breathing.

Her father grabbed a glass and filled it from the tap, and she watched, frozen in horror.

But only clean water filled the glass.

Hannah breathed out in relief as her father took a slow drink. Once the glass was empty, he grinned and held it up to the light.

'I don't know why everyone insists on buying expensive filters these days,' he said. 'Triton Bay tap water is crystal clear – and it tastes great.'

Hannah smiled and rubbed her eyes. 'Right. Yeah. Well, I'll just be heading back to bed.'

* * *

Hannah didn't sleep a wink. All night, she listened for the steady *drip, drip, drip* of the kitchen tap. She

kept thinking about the seaweed wrapping around her, pulling her into the contaminated water. Finally, morning arrived. She threw back the covers and ran her hands through her hair, but something felt weird. Her hair was snagged between her fingers. She pulled them back to inspect them, and her stomach dropped. No. It couldn't be.

Her fingers were webbed.

Panicking, she glanced at her feet.

They were webbed, too.

Thin, translucent skin stretched between her fingers and toes, connecting them. Terrified, she waited for Dylan to get up and leave the room, then rustled through the cupboard in the hall until she found an old pair of her father's work gloves. Combined with the scarf, it was the best she could do to hide her new abnormalities. She knew she looked ridiculous, but fortunately her family wasn't the type to judge her various clothing phases.

Across the kitchen table, her father eyed the old work gloves paired with the wool scarf. 'A new fashion trend, eh?' He chuckled. 'Back in my grunge

days, I wore my dad's work boots and flannel to school.' He patted her on the back, making her worry that the scarf would slip down. 'Glad my old gloves are good for something,' he added with a wink.

* * *

The aquarium – which usually cheered Hannah up – wasn't any better than her sleepless night.

Instead of chatting with the staff while they worked or feeding the dolphins or reef sharks or any of her favourite sea animals, she searched for somewhere to hide. The tunnels under the main exhibit seemed like a good choice. She entered the dark corridor. It was lit only by the eerie light that filtered through the water, casting strange shadows. Fish and other marine animals darted past the portholes. The taunt of *fish lover* echoed in her head. She tried to shake it.

'Maybe they're right,' Hannah whispered to her reflection. 'This is where I belong.' She pressed her

face to the glass, feeling alone and misunderstood. Every fish that swam past reminded her of what was happening. Her eyes fixed on the sunken pirate ship and the trident. The trident was corroded and covered in barnacles, but underneath she caught a shimmer of gold.

That trident was old and warped. How could it be *shimmering* like that?

She studied the forked spear.

It happened again.

Another flash of light. Another shimmer of gold.

Suddenly, a tentacle slapped the glass.

Hannah jumped back with a start.

But it was only Queenie again. At least this time Hannah knew she wasn't losing her mind. Queenie was real. The sea witch... well, she couldn't be real, but then how else could Hannah explain her webbed fingers and toes and the neck gills? She shuddered. The octopus floated by the porthole, almost as if she were saying hello. Her long tentacles undulated.

'Hey, Queenie,' Hannah said. At this point, the

octopus was practically becoming her best friend.

'Do you know what's happening to me?'

The octopus seemed to shake her body as if answering no.

But Hannah knew it was only an optical illusion caused by the water.

'Yeah, me neither,' Hannah whispered. 'I didn't mean for this to happen... not like this.'

Glancing around to make sure she was alone, she slowly peeled off her glove and studied her hand. Webbing stretched from each finger. When she touched it, it felt like her own skin. She pinched it and winced at the sting. She couldn't even bear to take off her sneakers to look at her toes. Tears pricked her eyes. Hiding in the dark by the fish, she sank down to her knees and wrapped her arms around herself. She didn't notice the figure watching her from the corridor.

He had heard everything she'd said. 'Hey, Hannah, is everything okay?'

She looked up, startled. Her eyes fell on Enrique, who was leaning against the wall in the shadows,

and she yanked the glove back on. She stood up and looked at him. Shame and fear mixed in her gut. Why did he keep surprising her like that? Didn't he have better things to do?

'How long have you been here?' she asked.

'Not long,' he said. 'But long enough to notice you seem a bit down.'

Had he seen the webbing?

'Well, I'm okay. Just tired,' she said. That wasn't a complete lie.

His eyebrows met in a look of concern. He wasn't convinced. She knew that she looked even more ridiculous with the gloves to hide her webbed fingers. She wanted to confide in him – to talk to somebody about her problems – but she couldn't risk it. No one could see her like this. Not that he hadn't seen her in a worse state. He had saved her from drowning in the ocean, after all. But still.

'I've got to go,' she said. And with that, she bolted down the hall, leaving Enrique alone.





12

Catch of the Day

Hannah draped a towel around her neck and tucked her hands under her arms. Then she dashed from the locker room to the big swim meet. She couldn't let anyone see her fish anatomy. That was how she'd come to think of it. Katie shot her a strange look but didn't say anything. Katie had her game face on. This was their rematch against Little River. That meant one thing: Hannah was facing Jess Warren again in the fifty-metre freestyle. But for now, Hannah could

relax. The first event was Katie's – the breaststroke. Jess was swimming in the race as well, and Hannah was ready to cheer her heart out for Katie. She was about to sit on the bench when Coach Green tapped her clipboard and said, 'You're up, Hannah!' She pointed to the middle lane starting block.

Hannah's heart lurched. 'But I don't swim the breaststroke.'

'After that record-breaking performance at practice you do!' Coach crowed.

Hannah's eyes darted to Katie, who scowled like Hannah had never seen her scowl before.

'Um, okay,' Hannah said, stepping up to the block. Now she had to swim fast enough to beat Jess but not so fast that she would upset Katie.

Okay. She could do this. She just needed to pay close attention to where both Katie and Jess were in the water at all times. Luckily, her lane was situated right between theirs.

Buoyed by her strategy, Hannah took a deep breath and glanced at Jess Warren.

Jess shot her a nasty look. 'Good luck, fish lover.'

You're going to need it.'

'Trust me,' Hannah said, keeping her towel over her shoulders, 'you won't beat me this time.'

The buzzer sounded.

Hannah dropped the towel and dove headlong into the pool. She cut through the water faster than ever before, her gills opening and closing and filling her with all the breath she could ever need and more, her webbed hands and feet propelling her through the water at high speed.

In fact, she was going *too fast*.

She tried desperately to slow down, but she couldn't. No matter what she did, she kept swimming *faster* and *faster*. Her arms and legs seemed to have minds of their own. She started to panic, but there was nothing she could do except keep swimming.

Why couldn't she slow down? With horror, it dawned on her. She had made a wish to become *the fastest swimmer*. The sea witch had granted that exact wish. She couldn't swim slowly anymore. No matter what she did, she would always be the fastest

swimmer. For all eternity. After her first flip turn, she was already several strokes ahead of Jess and the other swimmers. Then after the second turn, it was half the pool's length. She swam faster than possibly any human ever. After she had lapped all the other racers in the pool, she slapped her hand onto the edge and stayed put.

So I can stop swimming, she thought with relief. She glanced up at the scoreboard, and her eyes widened in joy – and fear. It was a new record, but while she'd wanted to beat Jess and win the race, she hadn't wanted to win like this. She remembered Amy's warning. Katie would be *upset* that Hannah beat her top score in a real race. While everyone in the stands was focused on the scoreboard, Hannah slipped out of her lane and back under her towel, feeling defeated. From the bench, she watched the other swimmers struggling to finish the last lap.

Coach Green ran over to her with clipboard and stopwatch in hand. 'Great job, Hannah!' she exclaimed. 'A new school record! And this time, it's official! Better yet, it's even faster than your practice

time. Wow! Just wow!’

‘Thanks,’ Hannah said sheepishly. While Coach Green scribbled more notes on her clipboard, Hannah glanced at her team. They were out of the pool and racing toward her, cheering for her along with the crowd in the stands, which was missing her parents.

But Katie was not cheering.

Their eyes met as Katie climbed out of the water – and she glared at Hannah something fierce. Annabelle and Amy looked glum. They both knew what had just happened. They knew that Hannah had taken the record from Katie. And this time, like Coach said, it was official.

Coach Green patted Hannah hard on the back as she addressed the rest of the team. ‘Looks like we have a new top swimmer at Triton Bay!’ She beamed at Hannah, who cringed in response.

Katie looked downright furious. Her expression sent a cold wave through Hannah. The whole reason she had made her wish – the reason this all had been happening to her – was that she didn’t want

to lose her new friends. But the wish hadn’t helped at all. In fact, it had made everything worse. Katie hated her. And the twins would surely follow suit.

‘Hannah, where are you going?’ Coach Green called after her.

But Hannah had rushed to the locker room, tears pricking her eyes and blurring her vision. She tried to change quickly before the rest of her team came in. She needed to get her gloves on and fasten her scarf around her neck. She couldn’t risk anyone seeing her without them.

She pulled out the gloves and slid one on, but in her frazzled state she dropped the other on the floor. She reached down to pick it up when someone stepped on it. Hannah looked up. Katie was staring down at her. She studied Hannah’s bare hand – complete with its webbed fingers.

Katie’s face contorted in disgust. ‘What’s that? Did you *cheat* or something?’

Hannah yanked the glove from under Katie’s foot and slid it on. ‘No. Not at all!’

Katie squinted at her. ‘You’re acting awfully fishy.’

Also, how could you take over *my* event?’

‘What? Why? Didn’t you want me to win?’

Hannah said, scared of her friend’s reaction. ‘So that we could beat Little River? I did it. *We* did it! What does it matter who came first as long as we got the trophy?’

‘Who cares about the trophy?’ said Katie. ‘You were just being a show-off. And nobody likes a show-off.’ Katie eyed Hannah’s now gloved hand. ‘Or a cheat.’ And with that, Katie stormed out.

Hannah felt as if a jellyfish had stung her right in the heart.

* * *

Hannah hid in the showers until all the girls had gone, and then she stumbled back into the locker room. When she cracked open her locker and pulled out her backpack, she felt the shell lodged in there. *The nautilus shell that started this wild chain of events.* That shell and the sea witch were the reasons she was in this mess in the first place. Sure, things

hadn’t been perfect in her life before her wish.

But they were better than this. *Fish lover* taunts reverberated in her head.

Her body was transforming into a fish. Would it ever go back to normal?

She pulled out the shell and stared at it, and then – almost on impulse – she tossed it into the bin. She waited for something terrible to happen, but nothing did. She let out her breath. It felt like a weight had lifted off her shoulders. *Good riddance*, she thought. She headed back to the indoor pool. All she could think about was the look of disgust on Katie’s face. It hovered in her memory with every step she took. Hannah’s mother was supposed to be in the school car park by then to pick her up. As Hannah passed the pool, it was dark and shadowy. The main lights had already been turned off. Only the pool lights glowed, casting eerie rippling shadows across the walls. She walked along the edge of the pool.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a dark shadow dart under the water. It created a ripple that curled from one end of the pool to the

other. Watching it, Hannah skidded to a halt, her heart thudding. 'Hello... is anybody there?' she called out, squinting at the pool.

That was when she saw it again. There was *something* in the water.

She peered over the edge of the pool and down at the blue-green water.

Glowing eyes locked on to hers. She staggered backwards and ran.

But a thick black tentacle shot out of the water and grabbed her ankle.

'No! Let me go!' she screamed, digging her nails into the tentacle to try to get free. But the tentacle pulled her closer to the edge of the pool, where the glowing eyes and dark shadow waited for her just under the waterline. Hannah staggered towards the water, closer and closer, trying her hardest to break free. A cackle reverberated through the arena. It was the sea witch.

'Stop!' Hannah screamed, fighting to pry the tentacle off her leg.

She was dragged along the cement floor as it kept

pulling her toward the pool, closer and closer. The eyes watched her, unblinking. Hannah was inches away from being yanked into the water.

'You forgot our deal!' Ursula cackled. *'You owe me a favour!'*

'But I take my wish back!' Hannah screamed as the tentacle tightened. *'I didn't mean it!'*

'No takebacks, my dear! Come to my lair – or else!'

Hannah struggled against the tentacle, punching the slimy flesh, and finally it released its grip and slithered back into the pool. Hannah ran as fast as she could. The sea witch couldn't follow her out of the water – could she? *I'm dreaming*, she thought. *It's the only explanation. It's not real.*

But when she reached the car park, she glanced down at her ankle. There were bright red welts where the tentacle's suction cups had grabbed her. She rubbed the skin carefully, wincing.

Hannah climbed into the back seat of her mother's car, numb with shock. Her ankle throbbed. Her best friends thought she was a total freak. And the worst part was Katie was right. She *was* a freak. And a cheater. She didn't deserve the high score.

And she certainly didn't deserve friends. As the car whipped along the road, her gaze drifted to the open sea.

One thought filled her head: she had to figure out a way to make this stop, once and for all. She had a terrible feeling the sea witch wasn't going to let her forget about their deal that easily. She'd escaped this time – but next time she might not be so lucky.



13

Poor Unfortunate Soul

Hannah cycled back to the pool later that evening in a panic. The sea witch's cackles echoed in her head.

You forgot our deal! You owe me a favour!

Hannah had to find a way to put an end to whatever the sea witch was playing at. She had to fulfil her part of the contract she had signed, or the witch wouldn't stop haunting her and ruining her life. It was the only solution. She had to find the nautilus she'd thrown away and return to the sea

witch's lair. She had to find out what Ursula wanted from her.

But she also couldn't trust the sea witch. The 'gift' of becoming the fastest swimmer had turned out to be a terrible curse. Sure, she'd won the swim meet and beat Jess Warren, but she lost her friends, was still part fish, and had to hide her body. And it was only getting worse.

She cycled faster. The sun was just beginning to set. A brisk wind made her shiver as she stowed her bike and clambered up to the pool arena by the school. But the door was locked. She should have expected it would be. It was after hours.

Hannah crept around the outside until she found the window that led to the girls' locker room. She reached up and pushed it open, then slithered through, landing in a crouch in the dark. She rushed over to the bin where she'd tossed the shell – but it was empty.

'I'm so stupid,' Hannah muttered through her teeth. 'But I can't give up!'

If the staff had emptied the bins then the

contents would be in the big bin outside. She crawled back through the window, careful to shut it behind her, then circled around to the bin out the back. As soon as she lifted the lid, she was hit by the stench. Pinching her nose, she rooted through the rubbish until she saw a soft glow coming from the back of the bin.

Could it be? She reached farther, almost slipping into the bin as she picked through the disgusting rubbish; then she felt the hard outline of the shell. As soon as her fingers touched it, she experienced the now familiar but still terrifying, sensation of being sucked down into the ocean and into Ursula's lair. She pressed her palms against the glass of the crystal ball.

'Took long enough, didn't you?' cooed Ursula. The sea witch didn't sound happy.

In the dimly lit lair, Hannah could just make out her dark figure swimming around. She caught a glimpse of tentacles, then a glimmer of Ursula's wide evil smile.

'I want to take my wish back!' Hannah screamed

at the shadows. 'This isn't what I meant! I don't want to be the fastest swimmer anymore! I don't want the gills or webbed things!' She held the nautilus in her hand. Her *webbed* hand. She drew her arm back and then chucked the shell at the glass. It magically passed through the barrier and sailed into Ursula's lair. For a minute, nothing happened. Then it ricocheted back into the crystal ball – along with something else.

It was the crumpled coffee cup with the two straws.

The one she'd thrown into the ocean before everything went wrong.

Hannah stared at it, then picked it up and inspected it. What did that mean? What did it all mean? She'd thrown it into the ocean only for it to come back to her. Defeated, she sat down and sobbed, gripping the shell hard. 'I wish I never signed it. I wish I could take it all back...'

The second those words left her mouth, the lair started to churn angrily with a current.

A cackle echoed from the shadows. *No takebacks,*

my dearie! You signed the contract!

The shadow of an enormous tentacled body floated just outside the crystal ball.

'But I didn't mean for it to happen this way,' Hannah said, feeling her heart lurch. 'Please, make it stop.' She held up her hands to show off her fingers. 'I'm turning into a *fish!*'

The sea witch cackled. 'Well, how else did you expect to become *the fastest swimmer?*'

'Please, make it stop,' Hannah begged. 'I'll do anything you want. Just make it stop!'

'Anything, my dearie?'

'Yes, I swear. I'll do anything!'

'You poor unfortunate soul,' Ursula said in a sympathetic voice. 'What fine timing.'

Hannah felt a stab of hope. 'Just tell me what you want – I'll do it.'

The sea witch snorted. 'In that case, I want the trident from your family's aquarium.'

Hannah frowned. 'You mean the old trident? In the main exhibit? But that's just rubbish to entertain the tourists. Why in the world would you want *that?*'

Ursula sighed. 'So many questions for someone in your *precarious* situation,' she said. 'It sounds like you don't want to help me....'

'No, that's not what I meant!' Hannah backtracked quickly. 'I can do it. I just don't understand why you want it, or why you can't get it yourself. You have powers, after all. Why me? I'm... I'm no one.'

'Oh, come now, dear. You're *just* the one. And besides, I can't get it myself,' Ursula said in an exasperated voice. 'You know all the security they have in that place. Fish talk.'

'Well, what makes you think *I* can take it?' Hannah asked.

'You believe in Hannah, don't you, boys?' Ursula said.

At that, two sea eels – moray eels, if Hannah had to guess – swam past the crystal ball. Each had one glowing yellow eyes – just like she'd seen in the ocean: the eyes that diverged and swam in different directions.

Hannah had a bad feeling. 'But why do you want

the trident so much?'

'That doesn't concern you. All you have to worry about is retrieving it from the exhibit. And then your world goes back to normal. No more gills. No more *webbed things*. Now, no more questions, my dearie. This is your only chance. Do it, or you'll turn into a fish... forever!'

Hannah panicked. 'No, I'll do it! Just promise to reverse my wish, and I'll get it for you.'

'My dear, you have forty-eight hours,' the sea witch said in her deep voice. 'Otherwise, it will be too late to reverse your wish. And it will become permanent. Do you understand?'

Hannah felt torn and deeply unsettled, but she didn't have a choice. She couldn't turn into a fish! She had to do exactly what the sea witch wanted. 'Yes, I understand,' she said. 'I'll do it. I'll get the trident and bring it here.'

A deep cackle emanated from the darkness. 'Don't fail me – or else!'

Slowly, the lair dissolved into nothingness and the sea witch along with it. Lastly, the two glowing

eyes of the eels vanished into the watery shadows.



14

Sink or Swim

What's so important about this trident?' Hannah asked herself. She stared through the thick glass while tourists milled around, oohing and aahing at the main exhibit. The reef shark darted past the glass, drawing excited squeals from the crowd.

But Hannah didn't flinch. The shark was harmless; he just *looked* scary.

But also, she had bigger fish to fry.

She kept her eyes fixed on the trident in the

main exhibit, trying to process everything she'd just learned from the sea witch. The prongs pointed upward. The trident itself was badly corroded and covered in barnacles. Behind it, a treasure chest overflowed with faux precious gems and ancient gold coins. Or at least, she *thought* they were faux. But then she remembered the other day. The old trident had flashed with golden light. She'd thought it was a trick of the eye – shifting sunlight filtered through water – but what if it was something else?

A sunken pirate ship towered over the scene while fish, sharks and the leatherback sea turtle swam around the exhibit. Sunlight rippled over everything. The trident really did look like a rusty piece of junk. But she caught a flash of gold again as the sunlight shifted, the same shimmering she had noticed the other day. It wasn't just her eyes playing tricks on her.

Maybe it was full of magic. And if it was, what did the sea witch plan to do with it? What exactly would she use it for? And how had Hannah's family gotten involved in the first place?

Enrique appeared behind her, clutching a slop bucket of fish to feed the dolphins. He usually came to the aquarium after school to help out his brother, who was still interning.

When he saw her, he frowned. 'What happened to you? Looks like you've seen a ghost.'

Hannah bit her lip. She couldn't tell him, *could* she? He'd just think she was imagining things. Maybe he'd even tease her about it. She started to turn away, but he stopped her.

'Come on, spit it out already,' he said, flashing her a mischievous grin. 'I promise, I'm good at keeping secrets. The dolphins tell me *all* their gossip. And my lips are sealed.'

'The dolphins gossip?' Despite her stress, she cracked a smile.

'Yup, they're worse than my dad's book club.' He grinned but then turned more serious. 'Look, I see you here all the time. And lately, you've been acting... *different*.'

'Different?' she said with a start, nervous he was on to her. 'How so?'

'Jumpy. Quiet. Running away from me.' He frowned. 'You never used to be afraid before. It's what I liked most about you. But now, it's like something changed. Ever since I pulled you out of the ocean that day you almost drowned.'

She hesitated. He was right – it had all started when she threw that stupid coffee cup into the ocean and the wave swept her out to sea. Enrique had saved her life. Shouldn't she trust him? But something stopped her. She remembered Katie's disgusted face in the locker room when she saw Hannah's webbed hand. 'Why do you care so much?' she asked, torn. 'It's not your problem.'

He grinned. 'Science nerds have to stick together, right?'

'Then prove it. What's the name of that fish?' She pointed to a bright orange-and-white fish floating in a sea anemone's glowing blue tentacles. Its adorable little face poked out.

'Clownfish... also known as anemonefish.'

'Okay. And what are its attributes?' pressed Hannah.

Enrique studied the fish as the sea anemone's tentacles caressed it. 'Well, it's called anemonefish because it's symbiotic with that sea anemone. The anemone's tentacles are poisonous – but not to the clownfish. Those tentacles protect it from unwanted predators.'

'And that?' Hannah pointed to two eyes in the sand.

He rolled his eyes. 'A flounder, obviously. Ask me a hard one next time, okay?'

Hannah giggled. He really was a science nerd like her. For a moment, her troubles dissolved, but then they rushed back in, like a riptide. She glanced around and lowered her voice.

'All right, something did happen...' she started, feeling completely paranoid. Tourists milled around the exhibits. 'But you have to promise me that you won't think I'm crazy.'

'I swear,' he said. 'Cross my heart.'

'And we can't talk here,' she added. 'We need to talk somewhere private.'

He lifted the slop bucket. 'I know just the place.'

* * *

Hannah and Enrique stepped out onto the sun deck, where the aquarium looked out on the open sea. The waves rolled uneasily in the distance while clouds built overhead. It looked like a storm was coming in. Cold wind whipped off the water and tousled their hair, bringing with it the briny tang of the sea. It was a smell Hannah had once loved, but now it reminded her of evil.

But instead of staying outside with the tourists, Enrique pulled her backstage behind the dolphin exhibit, where only the dolphin trainers were permitted. private: keep out signs were posted, but Enrique ignored them. He was practically staff at this point. He'd been going there with his brother, Miguel, for a long time, helping out and learning everything – and apparently studying Hannah like some curious creature while he was at it.

Enrique tossed some fish to the dolphins, who gathered in excitement. He patted Lil' Mermey on the

head when he swam up to the side. 'Good boy,' he said as the dolphin squeaked and snatched another fish out of the air.

'He is,' Hannah said, forgetting her worries for a moment. The dolphins had that effect on her. And as much as she hated to admit it, so did Enrique. She could still remember when Lil' Mermey was born that spring in the aquarium. It was a big deal to have a newborn in captivity. The tiny dolphin baby had grown up and was basically a mischievous teenager now. Well, the dolphin equivalent, anyway.

'Remember when he stole my brother's hat?' Enrique said, tossing another fish.

Hannah giggled. 'Oh, I heard about that. He snatched it right off his head, then dragged it through the exhibit to show off his new find.'

Enrique smiled. 'Yeah, my brother wasn't thrilled about that. He still had the original stickers on it.'

'Hazards of working at an aquarium,' she said, smiling at the dolphin pod happily munching on their fish snacks. 'You know, sometimes I think

they're smarter than us. And they're definitely more sensitive,' she said, patting Lil' Mermy. 'Just look in their eyes.'

The dolphin purred and squeaked in appreciation.

Enrique looked at her. Their eyes met. 'That's so weird,' he said with a lopsided grin. 'Thought I was the only one who believed that.'

'Ha, same,' she said with a smile.

When Enrique finished feeding them, Hannah led him over to the catwalk that crossed above the tanks, where they sat with their feet dangling over the dolphin exhibit. She looked down at the gloves hiding her webbed fingers. The scarf remained wrapped firmly around her neck.

He nudged her shoulder. 'Hey, really, it can't be that bad.'

She sighed. 'You have no idea.'

'Try me,' he said, nudging her again. 'Promise I won't judge.'

She shook her head. 'You'll just call me nerd or fish lover, like everyone else.'

'Well, I like nerds. Especially ones who are into marine biology.'

Hannah hesitated. Katie's sneering face in the locker room flashed through her head.

But then she looked at Enrique – his kind eyes, the prominent dimples in his cheeks. He wasn't like the other kids. Neither of them were. It was refreshing. She felt like he might understand. It seemed worth it to take a chance. Besides, carrying this secret around was making her even more anxious. What made problems unbearable, she decided, was dealing with them alone. That made everything a million times worse. She took a deep breath, feeling her gills flare.

Her stomach churned with fear, but she forced the words out anyway. 'Okay then,' she said, fiddling with her scarf. 'I did see something, but it wasn't a ghost.'

'Not a ghost?' he asked. 'Well, that's good.'

'No, it was a witch,' she said. 'And not just any witch. It was a sea witch.'

She waited for him to laugh, call her crazy, or

taunt her with names.

But he didn't. His eyes met hers. 'Wow, a real sea witch? Did she grant you a wish?'

Hannah's eyes nearly bulged out of her head. 'Wait, how do you know about that?'

'Don't tell me you haven't heard the old fairy tales,' he said.

'Fairy tales?' she asked.

'Listen, my family goes back a long way in Triton Bay. My grandfather used to tell us all sorts of colourful stories before bedtime when we were kids. He was a fisherman,' Enrique said.

'And some had to do with a sea witch?' Hannah guessed.

He nodded. 'Yeah, but I didn't realize she was real.'

'Oh, she's real, all right,' Hannah said with a shudder. 'And she did grant me a wish. It sounds stupid, but I wanted to become the fastest swimmer.' Reflexively, she glanced at the ocean in the distance. It churned with blue-black waves. Was Ursula listening in?

'That day you fell in the ocean... is that when it happened?' he asked.

She nodded, took a deep breath to still her nerves, then pulled off her scarf, revealing her gills in all their glory. She expected him to recoil in disgust like Katie had when she'd seen her hand.

Instead, he studied her neck in fascination. His eyes roved over the slits, and he watched as they flared open when she breathed. He didn't say anything for a long moment. She began to regret showing him.

Finally, he spoke up. 'I knew you were looking a little green around the gills, but...' Hannah rolled her eyes. His voice trailed off, but then his eyes lit up. 'Are those what I think they are?'

'Yup,' Hannah said.

'Do they... work?' he asked.

'Uh, yeah,' she said, feeling self-conscious. 'I can breathe underwater. I found out at swim practice. I still raise my head like everyone else. But I don't really have to anymore.'

'This is amazing! You have an actual superpower.'

That's so cool!'

'Yeah, I guess I didn't think of it that way. And that's not all.' Hannah pulled off her gloves, then slipped off her shoes and socks. She splayed out her fingers and toes, showing him the delicate webbing.

His eyes widened. 'Wow, you weren't kidding.' Then he grinned and did something unexpected: he ran to the catwalk and dove into the ocean, letting out a joyous yelp as he plunged below the surface.

Remembering how the wave swept her out to sea the last time she'd been out there, Hannah ran to the catwalk and peered into the frothy waves. There was no sign of Enrique. Her heart hammered. What if he never came up? But then he suddenly broke through the surface.

'I love nature!' He plunged back under the water and popped up again. 'Come on, fish girl!' he called out, splashing water toward her. 'Let's see what you can do!'

Hannah hesitated. The last time she'd fallen off the catwalk, she'd almost drowned. But that had been due to a big wave. An unnatural one, she

realized now. And back then, she didn't have special superpowers, as Enrique called them. She dove into the water, feeling the brisk crack of the surface breaking around her, then the reassuring touch of seawater on her skin and in her gills. Nothing felt better – or more natural – to her. She swam down deep, then aimed for the surface. She broke through it, almost like a dolphin, leaping out of the water and then diving back down. A wild pod of dolphins swam by and joined her in her underwater revelry, swimming around her and nudging her on. Enrique watched in awe.

She stayed under for a long time then surprised him by surfacing behind him. 'Boo!'

He startled, then grinned. 'Watching you swim like that – well, it's incredible.'

'So you're not freaked out?' she said. 'You don't think that I'm totally disgusting?'

'Okay, to be honest,' he said, bobbing in the water beside her, 'I am a *little* freaked out. It's not like you meet a half-fish, half-human every day, right? But disgusted? Not at all!'

'Really?' she said.

He nodded. 'This is the coolest thing I've ever seen.'

'Ugh, more like a horrible nightmare,' she snorted.

'Nightmare? You can breathe underwater. And probably swim faster than ever before, too.'

'Yup, I crushed the other swimmers at the last swim meet and broke the official record.'

'Seriously?'

She nodded, remembering her victory and feeling excited about it for the first time.

'When I dove into the pool, it felt like I belonged there. It was the most incredible feeling in the world....' Her voice trailed off.

'I'm guessing there's a catch?'

'It's a long story,' she said. 'Basically, if I don't help the sea witch steal the trident from the main exhibit, then this will all become permanent. I'll turn into a fish *for all eternity*.'

He blinked at her, taking that in. 'Wait... the trident? Why would she want that old thing? You'd

better tell me the whole story. Start from the beginning. Don't leave anything out.'

They waded out of the ocean, onto the beach, and walked back toward the aquarium, and Hannah told him everything from the beginning: Dropping the cup in the ocean. The nautilus and the nightmare. Making her wish and signing the contract, then waking up with gills. When she finished, he studied her.

'Wow, that is some story.'

'You don't believe me,' she said.

'Oh no, I believe you,' he said, pointing to her gills. 'Anyway, that's too crazy to make up. Plus, like I said, I've heard of the sea witch. I just didn't realize the stories were real.'

'Wait, that's it!' Hannah said excitedly. 'Maybe the old stories can help us.'

'Right, there's an old myth about her. My grandfather used to talk about it. Something about her haunting sailors who got lost in storms...'

'Anything else?' she said.

Maybe he knew about a way to help Hannah

that didn't involve the trident at all.

He shook his head. 'It was a long time ago. I'm sorry. I don't remember very much.'

'Right,' she said, feeling crushed. 'Thanks anyway.'

'But I have an idea,' he said, perking up. 'There's a special library at the university with a lot of history about Triton Bay. Old books, original documents. My brother told me about it. Maybe we can do some research.'

'That's so nerdy,' she said, nudging him. 'And so awesome at the same time.'

'Totally is,' he said with a thumbs-up.

She bit her lip. 'Maybe we can find out more about the sea witch – she said her name was Ursula – and why she wants that trident so badly. I don't trust her. Not one bit.'

He nodded. 'And maybe we can find a way to stop this fish transformation from happening to you. I mean, I do love fish and all, but you make a pretty great human –'

Suddenly, the wind whipped up. A bolt of

lightning struck the sea. It flashed with bright emerald light – *unnatural* light. Hannah waited for the deep rumble of thunder that always accompanied lightning. But instead, *cackling* rose from the waves. The laughter grew louder.

'Did you hear that?' Enrique said, casting his gaze out to the ocean. 'What was that?'

Hannah swallowed hard against the sick feeling in her stomach. 'That's the sea witch. She must have been listening to us.'

They backed away from the water. The laughter died down, drifting away. But it had been unmistakable. And for the first time, Hannah had a witness. That meant something important.

She wasn't dreaming.

This was real.

'We have to do something,' Enrique said, looking afraid.

'Yeah.' Hannah studied her hands. 'And whatever we do, we have to act fast.'





15

Hook, Line and Sinker

You get it?' Hannah asked Enrique as he appeared by the bike rack at the aquarium the next morning.

Feeling jittery and scared, she had raced as fast as she could to meet Enrique. When she'd woken up that morning, she'd noticed her skin had started to take on a greenish sheen. Scales had also started to appear on her arms, delicate and smooth like those of a fish. She wore long sleeves to hide them and kept them pulled down over her hands. She

didn't have much time. She felt tense. If Enrique had failed at what he'd set out to do, she didn't know what else they could try.

But he winked at her. 'Mission accomplished,' he said with a grin, pulling the card out of his back pocket. He handed it over. The ID card showed the pimply face of his brother, Miguel. His hair flopped into his brown eyes. student was printed over the crest for Triton Bay University, which featured a trident and a mermaid. 'It's our ticket into the science library at the university, with the special Triton Bay archives,' Enrique went on. 'But we need to hurry before my brother notices I took it.'

'Wait, you didn't tell him?' asked Hannah.

'Uh, that I needed to borrow it for my friend who's turning into a fish because she made a bad deal with a sea witch? Figured the less he knew, the better.'

Hannah smiled. 'Point taken.'

'Look, he's working here for a few more hours. So the sooner we get back, the better.'

'Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!' They

got on their bikes, and Enrique took off. Hannah was about to pedal after him when two other figures on bikes appeared in the distance, careering down the path. A minute later, they skidded to a halt next to her, kicking up sand. Hannah stared in shock.

'Amy? Annabelle? What're you doing here?' she asked.

The twins exchanged conspiratorial glances.

'Well, you've been acting so weird lately,' Annabelle said with a smirk. 'Like how you ran into the locker room all freaked out after the last race. And Katie said something, too.'

'Yeah, about you cheating,' Amy added. 'Oh, and that maybe you're turning into a fish.'

'Yeah, she told us about the webbing on your hands. Which would explain your super swim powers,' Annabelle added. 'It doesn't take a marine biologist to put it together. I mean, something has to be going on, right?'

'So we decided to follow you,' Amy said, sharing a guilty look with her twin sister. 'I mean, we were worried about you. You're our friend, right?'

'But... w-what about Katie?' Hannah stammered. 'She hates me now.'

Amy rolled her eyes and sighed deeply. 'Look, we never liked her that much, either. You're not the only one she bullies and orders around, you know?'

'And we're sick of it.' Annabelle nodded.

'Plus, we're your friends,' Amy said. 'Friends help friends.'

Enrique circled back around, skidding up on his bike. He grinned when he saw Hannah with her friends. 'Oh, so this is the holdup?' he asked.

The twins grinned and batted their eyelashes at him.

Hannah felt a surge of gratitude. 'My *friends*... they came to help us.'

'The more, the merrier,' he said. 'We need all the help we can get.'

* * *

Triton Bay College was located across the bay from the aquarium, perched on a sheer cliff overlooking

the water. Waves swelled up against the steep, rocky incline. Hannah got dizzy just looking down over the side. They parked their bikes then told Amy and Annabelle all about the wild events that had been happening.

'An actual sea witch?' Amy said. 'Like in the old stories?'

'Yup, the old stories aren't just stories,' Hannah said, pulling off her scarf to show them her gills. 'Turns out they're real.'

The twins stared in shock, but their shock turned to fascination.

'Wow, that is so *cool*,' Annabelle said. 'This is way exciting. Beats swim practice.'

Students milled around campus, clutching bags stuffed with books and laptops, while seagulls and pelicans swooped overhead, diving past the cliff to the sea in search of food. The college was famous for its marine biology department. Hannah had always dreamed of going there when she got older. Feeling a stab of anxiety, she pulled her sleeves down farther. Never in a million years had she imagined that her

first trip to the science library would be... like this.

Enrique glanced around to make sure nobody was watching. The students were too busy rushing to class to notice a few kids in hoodies who looked way too young to be enrolled there. They hurried across campus to the science library, a modern and sleek two-storey building.

Hannah turned to Amy and Annabelle. 'You two wait out here and keep watch, okay?'

'Text us if anybody gets suspicious,' Enrique added. 'Or if you spot my brother. Hopefully he won't notice that I took his ID card and come looking for me.'

'We're on it!' the twins said together, settling on a nearby bench. They pulled books from their backpacks and tried to blend in with the students around them.

Satisfied that their lookouts were in place, Enrique swiped his brother's ID through the scanner on the door. Hannah glanced out at the ocean, where it looked like a storm was brewing. She held her breath, praying the ID card worked. 'Come

on, unlock,' she said in a low voice, 'before Ursula catches on to what we're doing. She won't like it.'

After what seemed like an eternity, the scanner finally beeped and turned green.

The door unlocked with a click.

Enrique glanced back at the ocean. 'Yeah, that storm doesn't look natural.'

'It's her,' Hannah said ominously.

'Let's hurry.' Enrique yanked the door open, and they slipped inside. The artificial cold of air-conditioning hit them. The corridor was well lit, but that made it worse. They weren't supposed to be in there.

'This way,' Enrique said, taking her hand. Her scaly green skin was sensitive. A shiver ran up her spine at his touch. He pulled her down the hallway. Signs on the wall directed them toward the archives. They reached a door printed with a sign that read:

restricted

students & staff only

Hannah felt a jolt when she read it. She glanced down the hallway, but it was deserted.

'Here goes nothing,' Enrique said, swiping his brother's ID in the scanner.

It unlocked with a beep and admitted them into the library. They slipped inside, hurrying past the check-in desk before anyone could ask for IDs. Fortunately, the librarian was too busy checking in books to notice.

The library was lit with pools of light spilling down from chandeliers overhead. Bay windows spanned the entire wall, overlooking the sea. It was a stunning room built from old wood panelling and filled with rows of shelves, stacked to the ceiling with books.

A few students, absorbed in research, huddled over their laptops at desks that were piled high with messy stacks of books. A general hush seemed to envelop the room.

It was eerie. Just the *tap-tap-tap* of fingers hitting keyboards.

'Hurry up. Come with me,' Enrique said, pulling her toward the back of the library.

They wound their way down rows and rows of

shelves. The further back they went, the dimmer the light grew and the dustier the stacks became. Hannah sneezed twice in quick succession. That area of the library looked like it got little traffic, as if nobody had touched the shelves in ages. Enrique came to a halt in front of another door marked by a bronze placard:

TRITON BAY HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

'This is it,' Enrique said, swiping the ID card in the scanner.

The door beeped and unlocked. The lights inside were off, but the second they entered, a sensor triggered them to flicker on. Hannah felt a tickle in her nose and the urge to sneeze again. This room smelled even more like dust and decaying paper. It smelled *ancient*. The books in there appeared far older than the books in the main library. Tables were positioned around the room, displaying under thick glass books that featured old maps of Triton Bay. She ran her fingers over the glass, taking in

the beautiful images. They looked hand-drawn and inked.

She followed Enrique over to a bank of computers labeled digital archives. The prompt demanded a username and password. Hannah frowned at the blinking cursor. 'How're we going to log in?'

Enrique arched his eyebrow, then sat down at the computer. His fingers flew over the keyboard. He typed in his brother's first initial and last name, then entered a password.

'Here goes nothing,' he said, hitting return.

They both held their breath.

A second later, the password screen dissolved, revealing a search prompt.

She looked at him, impressed. 'You can hack into a computer?'

'Ha, I wish!' he said with a smirk. 'Miguel uses the same password for everything.'

'Brothers,' she said with a nod. 'Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.'

They turned their attention to the monitor.

Enrique typed in some search terms – *sea witch, Triton Bay, myth, sailors*. The search icon spun. A few seconds later, results flooded the screen, spanning down the monitor. Hannah scanned them quickly. Her heart lurched when she saw the title of one of the archived documents:

THE SEA WITCH AND THE TRIDENT

'Click on that one,' she said, pointing to it. Enrique did.

It appeared to be an old Triton Bay fairy tale, with flowing handwritten text that had been archived in the online database. Hannah read it aloud.

'Once upon a time, a powerful trident belonged to King Triton. It granted him the power to control the ocean and all the creatures in it. Whoever possessed the trident would automatically become the most powerful creature in the sea and could also wreak havoc on the world above if they so chose. That's why the sea witch would do anything to get it.

One night, she tried to kill King Triton and take the trident from him. But he vanquished her in a great sea battle, diminishing her power. The king knew that the sea witch couldn't be trusted, so he used the trident to place a powerful spell on her that confined her to Triton Bay. Thus, the bay became her prison, where she would live out the rest of her days.'

'There we have it,' said Enrique.

Hannah nodded at the monitor. 'Look, there's more.'

Enrique read: 'But the king was still unsatisfied. He put a spell on the trident to protect it from falling into the wrong hands and hid it somewhere safe. According to the legends, nobody knew exactly where it was hidden.'

'Until now,' Hannah said, looking up from the computer.

Enrique thought for a moment. 'It makes sense, right? The sea witch can't leave the bay. The aquarium is on dry land. So she can't get the trident.'

'Hiding the trident in plain sight is perfect camouflage,' Hannah said.

'Yup, it's brilliant,' he agreed. 'Everyone just thinks it's a fake aquarium prop.'

'So is this why the sea witch wants the trident?' she said, tapping the screen. 'To break the curse and escape from the bay?'

'Maybe, but it could be more sinister than that.' He pointed to a line in the story. 'If she gets the trident, then she'll be able to control the ocean and all the creatures in it. Think about what the sea witch could do with that kind of power. You said yourself you don't trust her.'

'You're right. It could be devastating....' Her voice trailed off. The words made them both feel afraid. She rolled up her sleeves, revealing her silvery-green scales. 'But what am I supposed to do? I'm turning into a fish. This is the only way to get her to reverse the curse.'

Enrique looked uneasy. Suddenly, the lights flickered. They both looked around. The wind whipped up outside the windows, and lightning strobed in the sky, bolting down and striking the sea. The lights in the library flickered again, as if they'd

go out at any moment.

Hannah's phone went off, making them both jump. She pulled it out and showed Enrique:

NEW MESSAGE

FROM: AMY

THIS STORM IS GETTING WORSE! THERE'S SOMETHING STRANGE GLOWING IN THE WATER! PLEASE HURRY!!!

'This doesn't sound good,' Hannah muttered softly. With trepidation, she approached the window and pressed her hands to the glass. The waves in the bay churned and surged unnaturally. Thick grey clouds swirled and gathered overhead, pulsing with lightning. One bolt struck the water with a brilliant flash. The lights in the room kept flickering.

Suddenly, something smacked the glass right by her head.





16

Night Dip

Hannah leaped back from the window. Her heart thudded against her chest like a drum while her breathing sped up, making her gills flare under her scarf. The object bounced off the glass. It was a plastic cup.

Just like the one she had thrown in the ocean.

More plastic cups, bottles, and straws started pelting the glass. The storm wasn't natural – it was raining plastic rubbish all over the campus. How was that possible? *Ursula*.

Feeling another jolt of fear, Hannah backed away from the rubbish pelting the window. Then another lightning bolt pulsed in the sky, illuminating Triton Bay. Instead of thunder, cackling laughter rang out. A flicker surged through the library, sparking and shorting out the computer monitor. The screen went dark. Then, one by one, the lights in the archives blinked out.

Hannah shook Enrique. 'It's Ursula – she's coming for us!'

'Hurry, let's get out of here,' Enrique said, grabbing her hand and pulling her toward the door. Outside, the whole library was dark. All the lights had shorted out from the storm.

They ran through the dark stacks, dodging the shelves as if they were navigating an obstacle course. More lightning pulsed outside, but instead of a clap of thunder, cackling laughter rang out over the bay again. Suddenly, books starting crashing off the shelves, pelting their heads. They tried to dodge them and ran faster. When they reached the entrance, Hannah glanced back at the library. It

was empty. That scared Hannah almost more than anything else, but before she could linger on it any longer, Enrique grabbed her hand and pulled her through the door. They dashed down the hall, running full speed, and emerged outside.

'There you are!' Amy said, running up to them.

Annabelle was right on her heels. They both looked afraid.

Instantly, the storm began to recede, the clouds withdrawing and vanishing.

'How is this possible?' Annabelle asked, her face drained of colour.

'Yeah, it was raining *plastic*,' Amy added with a shudder. 'And were those glowing eyes in the ocean?'

'Yes. It's her. It's Ursula,' Hannah said. 'She didn't want us to find that story.'

'You're right,' Enrique agreed with a frightened expression. 'She wants that trident – no, she *needs* that trident. It's the only way she can break her curse and escape from the bay.'

'And she's willing to do anything to get it,' Hannah said, her stomach knotting up.

Annabelle's eyes shifted to her and held her gaze. 'And you're her only hope of getting it.'

'And if she gets it...' began Amy. Her words hung in the air. They all knew how dangerous the sea witch would become if she escaped from her watery prison with the power of the whole ocean behind her. Hannah bit her lower lip. She inhaled and felt her gills flare.

'But if I don't help the sea witch, then I'll turn into a fish. *Forever*,' she said.

They looked at one another for a long, deep moment. Enrique clasped Hannah's hand. She glanced down at the scaly skin that peeked out from under her sleeve. It glinted like silver in the dwindling daylight. 'We'll help you,' Enrique said. 'Just tell us what you need us to do.'

'Listen, it's getting too dangerous,' said Hannah. 'I'll text you if I need help. But I think you should all head home to safety. I'll be okay. Promise. I couldn't bear anything bad happening to any of you. And thank you for your help. It means a lot. Really.'

Reluctantly, the twins nodded and biked away, leaving Hannah alone with Enrique.

When she tried to tell him to leave, too, he said, 'You're not doing this alone.'

'Resistance is futile?' she replied.

'See, you are a true nerd,' he said with a glint in his eye.

* * *

Hannah laid her bike on the beach, then followed Enrique down a long pier that stretched out over the black water. They had to formulate a plan for how to deal with the sea witch. Hannah heard the sloshing of waves and tasted the briny tang of salt water on her tongue. It felt like she was walking out to the edge of the universe. The dark ocean seemed to have no end.

'You sure this is safe?' she said, glancing off the pier. The salt turned acrid on her tongue. Unlike a lot of kids, Hannah had never been afraid of the ocean or the mysterious creatures that lay beneath

the surface. But that had now changed. Each wave that sloshed against the pier made her jump as she imagined black tentacles shooting out at her from the depths.

'We're outside Triton Bay,' Enrique said with a lopsided smile. 'The sea witch can't leave the bay, remember? I come out here sometimes when I need to think or be alone. Also, the views are incredible.' He pointed back toward the lights of their little seaside town.

Just a few days before, their town had seemed idyllic and safe, but now Hannah knew a darker truth. Their town was haunted by an evil, malevolent presence imprisoned in the bay.

'Think your brother noticed that we took his ID?' she asked, following him down to the edge of the pier. They'd returned it to his backpack before biking there.

'I doubt it,' Enrique said. 'He was too busy working with the dolphin trainers.'

She glanced down at her hands clad in the gloves. 'I never should have tried to change myself.

It was a huge mistake.'

'Why'd you do it?' he asked thoughtfully.

'When I first changed schools, I didn't have any friends. And *no friends* is the worst. But then I finally made some. And I guess I was afraid that if I didn't win my race at the next swim meet, then I'd lose them.'

'That's why you made your wish?'

'Yeah, it sounds silly now, but I wanted to impress Katie. Like I said, huge mistake.'

He shot her a sympathetic look and shook his head sadly. 'But that's not a real friend,' he said. 'Real friends should like you exactly the way you are.'

Tears pricked her eyes. 'Yeah, I learned that the hard way. It all backfired anyway. Winning my race only made Katie hate me more. It's all been such a disaster.'

Though, at least Amy and Annabelle had been there for her today. She hadn't lost everything.

'Well, I'm your friend.'

She could tell he meant it, even in her freaky, fishy cursed state.

Suddenly, back over Triton Bay, a bolt of green lightning streaked through the sky and struck the ocean – and this time she saw an image in the flash. It was Enrique – slowly shrinking and starting to turn into one of those strange, pathetic creatures trapped in Ursula's lair.

Hannah jerked her head away. The image was a clear warning from the sea witch not to double-cross her. And it had also signalled something else – something far worse.

As she'd feared, she wasn't the only one in danger anymore.

Enrique was, too.

'Come on, let's turn back,' she said, feeling cold. Nothing felt safe anymore.

'So, what's the plan then?' he asked, seeing the frightened look in her eyes as they headed back to the beach.

'Tomorrow,' she said, knowing that she didn't have a choice anymore. She couldn't let that horrible fate befall Enrique. They had to get the trident. There was no way around it. 'Meet at the aquarium

after sunset,' she told him, eyes narrowing. 'And we'll take the trident.'



17

The Trident

The spare security card had a silver key ring attached to a yellow-and-blue foam flounder.

Hannah had stolen it from a drawer in her mother's study the night before, and now, with Enrique by her side, she swiped the security card, then slid the key into the lock. The new security system frightened her. Her father had it installed after a recent series of strange burglary attempts. The police thought it had been local teens, but



Hannah wondered if it was something far more insidious – *Ursula*. What if they were wrong and she *could* leave the bay? The foam flounder bopped around as she held her breath then turned the key. The bolts released, admitting them into the dark aquarium.

Enrique gave her a thumbs-up. 'Nice work.'

They slipped through the side entrance and followed the corridor down the main hall. The main lights were out, but the exhibits were still lit with their signature blue-green light that cast eerie shadows through the cavernous space. The aquarium felt totally different after hours, when the tourists had cleared out, leaving their sticky residue behind. No kids played tag, careering around the exhibits, or pressed their noses to the glass. No parents chased them, looking exhausted. Instead, it was quiet and foreboding. Not even staff were there. The sea witch was watching; she'd know if they failed. They couldn't let that happen.

Suddenly, Hannah felt short of breath, like her lungs couldn't get enough oxygen. Enrique glanced

back at her in alarm. He noticed her struggling to keep up. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

'I'm... having a hard time... breathing,' she managed, still gasping for air. Her lungs were screaming at her. 'It feels like my lungs suddenly... aren't working.'

He pulled her toward the nearest tank. 'Hurry, over here! I have an idea.'

'What... do you mean?' she gasped. 'Where are you taking me?'

'Maybe it's the gills,' he said, leading her to a small tank and removing the top. 'Fish can't breathe out of water, remember? And you're turning into...'

'A fish,' she said, recalling zombie Mr. Bubbles saying, *You're going to go belly-up!*

'Just try it,' Enrique said, and she dunked her head into the tank on command.

As soon as the salt water hit her gills, it was like she could breathe again. Really breathe. Gradually, her lungs stopped screaming. She pulled her head out with a frightened expression.

Their eyes met. He held her gaze. 'That means...'

'Not much time left,' she finished in barely a whisper. Her eyes fell on the main exhibit that towered over the hall. The reef shark darted around the trident, coasting by the pirate ship.

Enrique followed her gaze. 'How are we going to get it?'

'Superpowers, remember?' she said, stripping off her scarf and gloves, revealing her hands, which were now more fish than human.

'It's really progressing, huh?' he said. 'Your hands weren't like this yesterday.'

She nodded. 'Faster than before.'

Her lungs constricted; she was gasping for oxygen. 'Let's go,' she said, pulling him toward the main exhibit into the staff-only area. 'I need to hurry up and get into the tank, or I'm going to have trouble breathing again.'

They hurried down an echoing stairwell into the bowels of the exhibit where few people got to go. There, it looked and felt industrial, and at night, almost sinister. The space behind the scenes consisted of metal scaffolding, rusty ladders, and

other equipment. She led Enrique over to a ladder that ran up the side of the main exhibit. Light from the tank washed over them as they climbed up and onto the catwalk that spanned the tank. Hannah looked down at the rippling water, illuminated by its artificial light. There were sharks in the tank, but she wasn't really afraid.

'You know, something's been bothering me,' Enrique said, shooting her a worried look. He balanced on the catwalk beside her, wobbling.

'What's that?' Hannah unzipped her hoodie to reveal her wet suit beneath.

'It's almost like the sea witch knew this fish curse would help you get the trident for her. Because it's easy for you to swim into the tank. It's like this was part of her plan all along.'

Hannah gulped. 'Maybe you're right.'

'She's evil – and wicked smart,' he said with a shake of his head. 'She tricked you.'

Hannah handed him an oxygen mask and fins. 'Here. Since you don't have superpowers like me.'

He laughed, then pulled on the mask. She

switched on the oxygen line. He gave her another thumbs-up. Then they clambered further down the catwalk. It was slippery and narrow. She'd never swum inside the main exhibit. It was dangerous with sharks and other animals, not to mention the hazards of diving with an oxygen line. One person needed to be a trained professional to use it, but she might as well have been. They hovered over the pirate ship. She could just see it through the rippling water.

'Here goes nothing,' she said, diving into the tank with a soft splash.

Enrique followed, landing with a churn of bubbles beside her. He was clumsier in the water with all the gear, but she was practically a fish now.

She cut through the tank, diving toward the ship, past it and the fake treasure chest.

The trident stood before her, skewering the sand.

Enrique caught up. Without thinking, he reached out to grab the trident – but she batted his hand away just in time. A bolt of electricity shot out from the trident, nearly zapping him.

'Let me,' she said, and somehow her voice rang out clear as day through the water.

He nodded.

Suddenly, warning voices sounded.

'Don't trust her – she lies!'

But then she looked down at her feet, which were fully turning into fins now, and over at Enrique, remembering the sea witch's threat to turn him into one of her writhing creatures. She had to reverse the curse. She had to help the sea witch.

She grasped the trident.

Though it seemed to be wedged in the sand, at her touch it came loose with surprising ease.

No electric shocks zapped her.

Then, all at once, the barnacles fell away, revealing a gleaming, golden weapon.

She felt great power emanating from the ancient weapon, but also danger.

Suddenly, alarms sounded. Removing the trident must have triggered them. They had to get out of there before the police came. Enrique gave her a startled look. Together, they swam upward. But his

oxygen line got snagged on the pirate ship – and came unplugged. He struggled to free himself, unable to breathe. Then, suddenly, the reef shark darted toward Hannah.

The shark looked agitated, too. Like something had gotten into him. An unnatural emerald light flashed in the shark's eyes. Part of the enchantment to protect the trident?

The shark cracked open its jaws and zeroed in on the trident.

Hannah tried to swim away to help get Enrique to the surface, but the shark latched on to the trident with its huge jaws. It began to wrench it from her hand as she fought to drive it away. Meanwhile, Enrique struggled toward the surface, but Hannah feared he wouldn't make it without her help. She could let go of the trident and save Enrique – but then the curse would last forever.

She gripped the trident harder. *Please help me*, she thought.

Suddenly, she felt power emanate through the trident and explode in a blast of green light that

blew the shark back through the water. But the shark recovered – and darted for Enrique.

Hannah pivoted and swam toward Enrique, snatching him just as the shark snapped at his torso and missed. But they weren't out of danger yet. The shark darted around to attack again.

Hannah felt something slip out of her pocket; it was the nautilus. It drifted to the bottom of the exhibit, where it settled in the sand next to the treasure chest. She started to swim for it, but the shark charged at them again. Without wasting another second, Hannah hooked her arm around Enrique and swam fast for the surface. She saw his eyes were closed. He needed oxygen right away. The shark was right on her heels and starting to close in on them.

Hannah tried to swim faster, but even with her fish abilities, Enrique and the trident were slowing her down. She kicked harder, feeling her fins claw against the water. Finally, she burst through the surface and up the ladder, dragging Enrique onto the catwalk with her last remaining strength. At that

moment, the shark's open mouth broke the surface, missing his dangling leg by inches.

The trident clattered down on the catwalk with a metallic rattle.

The alarms continued blaring, along with the emergency lights flashing overhead.

Hannah turned her attention back toward Enrique. 'Come on! Wake up!' she yelled, shaking Enrique. He had once saved her. She couldn't fail him.

He coughed, then flipped over and spat out salt water. He gasped for air and breathed deeply.

'Oh, thank the seven seas,' Hannah said with a rush of relief. 'You scared me!'

He coughed again. 'Did you get it?' he asked.

'Yes. But us being here after hours must have triggered the alarms. We have to get out of here!'

She helped Enrique to his feet and he staggered unsteadily on the catwalk.

While the alarms kept blaring they hurried back to the entrance, but when they got there the doors wouldn't open. Hannah tried the keys and the

security card. Nothing worked.

'We're trapped. It must be a security measure,' Enrique said. 'It's probably alerting the authorities.'

She swallowed hard. 'Or my parents.' Hannah felt their time ticking away. Her lungs screamed for oxygen now that she was out of the tank. It was getting worse fast. She couldn't risk getting trapped or caught by her parents. They didn't have much time left to take the trident to Ursula's lair.

Any second they'd be caught. And then it would be too late.

'What do we do?' she gasped. They couldn't escape the way they came in. It was getting harder for her to breathe by the second. Her mind felt sluggish. She clutched the trident tightly.

'What about the shell?' asked Enrique. 'The one that takes you to Ursula's lair?'

'I dropped it in the exhibit, when the shark came after you.'

They both turned to look. The shark was circling the shell. They couldn't risk going back into the tank – the shark would attack them again. And this time,

they might not be so lucky. Hannah met Enrique's eyes. She could tell that they were both thinking the same thing.

What now?



18

Last Straw

The alarms continued to blare in the aquarium. Hannah glanced over at Enrique; he looked afraid. Desperately, she tried to think of another way out – but they were trapped.

Cackling laughter tore through the aquarium, accompanied by the sea witch's voice.

'My dearie, don't fail me! Your time is almost up! Now, fork it over!'

Hannah saw a flash of Enrique becoming a sea

polyp. 'No!' she yelled. That's when Hannah had a wild idea. She grabbed Enrique's hand while still clutching the trident with her other. She could feel power surging through the weapon. 'To the sun deck! It's the only way out!'

They ran the other way, bolted up the stairs, and emerged onto the sun deck. Wind whipped off the ocean. The dolphins circled in their exhibit. They knew something was wrong.

Overhead, a storm was brewing – and not just any storm – an unnatural storm. Bright lightning pulsed in the dark sky, lighting up the clouds, while the ocean grew turbulent. In the distance, Hannah saw the two yellow eyes of the sea eels blink open in the dark water. They swam in opposite directions. The sea witch was watching them.

'Come on,' she said, leading Enrique to the catwalk over the open ocean. It was the same spot where she had littered, dropping the plastic cup at her friends' urging. It was also where the giant wave had snatched her.

I made a mistake by littering, she thought. I'm

sorry.

She'd learned her lesson. More than learned it. Littering in the ocean was wrong. If only she'd done the right thing and hadn't bent to peer pressure, then none of this would be happening. She just hoped she still had time to make it right.

The waves sloshed up onto the catwalk, spritzing them with seawater. She tasted it on her tongue and breathed it into her lungs. She held the trident in her hand and peered into the dark ocean, filled with angry whitecaps. The wind whipped up, making the sea churn faster. Hannah could feel the power of the trident flowing through her body. She remembered what it had done to the shark.

'Hurry, dive in!' Enrique said, standing next to her on the catwalk. Rain and wind pelted his face and body. 'Swim to her lair. Take her the trident. That's the only way to stop this.'

Hannah wanted to... but something was stopping her. 'No, it's too dangerous,' she said. 'I can't give her the trident.'

Fear flashed in his eyes. 'What do you mean?'

You don't have a choice!

'Did you see what it did to the shark?' she replied while the wind whipped at her. 'If we give the trident to Ursula, then she could use it to do bad things... terrible things to everyone.'

Enrique glanced out over Triton Bay – the only place they'd ever called home, with all the people who lived there – then met Hannah's gaze. He looked grim. 'You're right... but if you don't do it, then there's no way to reverse the curse. You'll turn into a fish for good.'

Fear tore through Hannah. The thought of turning into a fish forever, of leaving her family and friends, terrified her and made her heart ache. But if she gave the trident to the sea witch, then the witch would have the power to hurt everybody she loved – her mum and dad; Dylan; Enrique and his brother, Miguel; Mr. Aquino; Amy and Annabelle. Even Katie and Jess Warren.

She couldn't let that happen. She'd made a mistake before – she'd done the wrong thing by littering in the ocean, by letting other people make

decisions for her – but now she could make a better choice, even if it cost her everything.

This was her chance to make it right.

Hannah stepped down from the catwalk and backed away from the water, trident in hand.

'I can't give it to her!' she yelled over the wind and rain. 'I have to do the right thing and protect Triton Bay, like my parents. I was selfish before. I can't make that same mistake again.'

Enrique met her eyes and held her gaze once again. He looked troubled, but he managed a weak smile. Hannah could see that he knew she was right, even if it cost him something important, too.

'I always knew you were special – ' he started.

But then a black tentacle shot out of the ocean and wrapped around his chest. His eyes widened with fear, and then the tentacle yanked him off the catwalk and dragged him into the ocean.

Before he vanished beneath the waves, he locked eyes with Hannah and yelped.

And then he was gone.



19

Fish Out of Water

Hannah reached out for Enrique, but she was too late. The tentacle had jerked him underwater. Ursula.

Hannah dove after him. She had to save him. As she hit the water, her gills pulled it in, drinking it up gratefully. Adrenaline pumped through her veins while her heart hammered in her chest. The image of Enrique turning into a poor unfortunate soul flashed through her head.

She couldn't let the sea witch hurt her friend.

She was the one who had made the mistake.

Enrique was just trying to help. Through the murky water, she could make out two glowing yellow eyes – the sea eels. She couldn't let them out of her sight. With any luck, they'd lead her right to Ursula's lair. She just hoped she wasn't too late to save Enrique.

Clutching the trident, she swam fast after the sea eels, plunging deeper and deeper into the frigid water. Her webbed hands and feet propelled her while her gills processed the oxygen and kept her breathing. Her brain kept replaying Enrique being seized by the black tentacle and whipped underwater. He wasn't like her. He couldn't breathe down there.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she spotted the entrance to Ursula's lair: the bony exoskeleton of some sort of mammoth sea creature with a gaping mouth full of sharp teeth.

She swam through the entrance, ignoring the protests of those eerie voices again.

'Don't give her the trident!!' they wailed. 'She'll become too powerful!'

Something grabbed her legs, but Hannah kicked it away and kept swimming. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered, not knowing who she was speaking to, or if there was even anyone there. 'I have to save my friend.'

When she emerged in the shadowy lair, her eyes became fixed on the crystal ball. Enrique was collapsed inside of it. At first, she was worried that he was dead. He wasn't moving at all.

She swam over to the crystal ball and pounded on the outside. The glass was too strong. She couldn't crack it open, nor did she want to. The crystal ball was filled with air, not water.

'Enrique, wake up!' She pounded on the glass harder. 'Don't die on me!'

He lay there, not breathing.

But then his chest moved slightly.

He was starting to breathe again.

But he was trapped – a prisoner.

'Ursula, I'm here!' Hannah yelled. She whipped around, trying to locate the sea witch. 'I did what you wanted. I got the trident for you! Now come and

get it – and keep your promise.'

She held up the ancient weapon, feeling a bolt of electricity run down it. The trident was infused with *great power, ancient power, dangerous power*. But Hannah had to save her friend.

This was the only way.

Slowly, a huge form rose out of the shadows and slunk into the lair, illuminated by the light from the crystal ball. The sea witch finally revealed herself in her full glory. Her head and torso were human, but her lower body was the tentacles of a black octopus. They undulated around her, giving her a menacing appearance. She grinned, displaying all her glittering teeth. Her lips were glossy with blood red lipstick, and she had spiky white hair. 'My dear, you succeeded,' she said with a cackle. 'I had a feeling you had it in you.'

Hannah plunged the trident into the sand in front of the sea witch. 'There, it's all yours! Just like you wanted. Now take it – and keep your promise to me. Change me back, and let my friend go! He doesn't have anything to do with this. He's innocent!'

Ursula grinned, snatching the trident. As soon as her clawed hand touched the weapon, a bolt of electricity shot down her arm and through her body. Her eyes glowed with yellow light while electrical zaps fizzled through her.

She cackled with glee. 'The protection spell is broken! Now it's mine – all mine!'

The ocean current grew stronger, churning through the lair. Hannah had to brace herself against it. Bolts of electricity flickered, running down the length of the golden trident.

'Hurry!' Hannah yelled. 'Reverse the curse! And let my friend go!'

Ursula aimed the trident at her. 'As you wish, my dear!'

A blast of electricity shot out of the forked end and hit Hannah square in the chest. She felt pain surge through her entire body, then recede. A great feeling of relief swept through her.

The sea witch had kept her promise.

Hannah looked down at her hands, waiting for the spell to take effect. But they remained fins. Her

gills were still there. She could feel them flaring and sucking in the water. Then something horrible happened. She felt her legs seal together, fully becoming a tail.

Ursula peered at her with a fierce grin, an eel wrapped around each arm. 'You belong to me now!' she cackled at Hannah, waving the trident in her hand.

'But we had a deal,' Hannah managed to say. Her voice came out shrill.

Ursula laughed heartily, looking down on her with pity. The whites of her eyes shone in the darkness. 'Oh, my dear, it's not a deal unless you sign a contract. Otherwise, it's up for negotiation.'

'What do you mean?' Hannah sputtered. Her voice sounded like Mr. Bubbles's.

'No contract – no deal.'

'You're a liar! You tricked me!'

'Oh, my dear, it's not a lie – it's just sea business,' Ursula said with a wink. She unfurled the contract. Hannah's signature glinted in gold. 'You're the fastest swimmer now... *forever!*'

Hannah opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out.

The last thing she remembered was Ursula holding up the trident and grinning down at her. 'Oh, don't worry, my dear,' Ursula said in a smug voice. 'You did prove your usefulness.'

Hannah wanted to scream, but only bubbles came out.

'I've got something very special in mind for you,' Ursula said.

TRITON BAY TRIBUNE

NEW AQUARIUM EXHIBIT OPENS IN LOVING MEMORY OF Hannah ANDERSON

It's been six months since local pupil Hannah Anderson went missing on the day of the aquarium break-in. The reason for her disappearance remains a mystery, though the police believe the two events must be connected.

MISSING signs, weather-beaten and yellowing, can still be seen posted to telephone poles and buildings throughout Triton Bay. Even the promise of a £10,000 reward hasn't turned up any leads on Hannah Anderson's whereabouts.

This week, her disappearance was officially filed as a cold case.

But somehow, in all this, Hannah's family's aquarium has endured, perched above the ocean like a castle. Today a

special occasion drew in a crowd.

Her parents, the owners of the aquarium, stood before the main exhibit with their young son, Dylan. They all clutched an oversize pair of scissors. Behind them, a turquoise ribbon with a big knotted bow stretched across the front of the massive tank, which was draped with a curtain.

While today was a day of remembrance for their missing daughter, it was also a celebration of what's in store.

'Welcome to the unveiling of our newly refurbished main attraction,' Mr. Anderson said with a smile to the crowd. He gave his wife's hand a gentle squeeze.

Ms. Anderson spoke next. 'While we are saddened over the disappearance of



our daughter, we remain hopeful that she will return one day.'

'An anonymous donor funded this new exhibit,' said Mr. Anderson. 'Today, we dedicate it to Hannah. We love you, honey. We'll always love you. We hope you come home.'

The sombre crowd cheered. The emotion in the room was palpable. Some of the local schoolgirls, presumably friends of Hannah's, cried and dabbed at their eyes with tissues.

One girl, Katie Terran, later stated, 'She was my very *best* friend.' After sobbing for several seconds, she asked, 'You got that? Like hashtag BFF. By the way, I'm also the captain of the swim team.'

Meanwhile, another friend, a boy named Enrique, stood with his older brother. Upon being questioned, he couldn't remember much from that fateful night. He was discovered washed up on the beach. It was almost like his memory was stolen. He just knows his friend is gone.

'Without further ado...' Mr. Anderson said, and then together, as a family, they cut the ribbon.

The curtain fell away. Behind them, in the exhibit, a bronze statue of Hannah stood where the trident once was. A small green fish darted around the statue's face, then swam up to the glass.

The fish bumped up against the glass, drawing the attention of the boy, Dylan. He clutched a curious spiral seashell, a keepsake, he stated, that once belonged to Hannah. They found it at the bottom of the exhibit the day she went missing. He pressed his face to the thick glass, peering at the fish.

'Hey, fishy, want to come home with me and live in my aquarium?' he said. 'Mummy, I found a new pet!'

Ms. Anderson nodded, and the family held each other. The ceremony was a peaceful one, ending with guests laying flowers against the glass as another day in Triton Bay came to a serene close.

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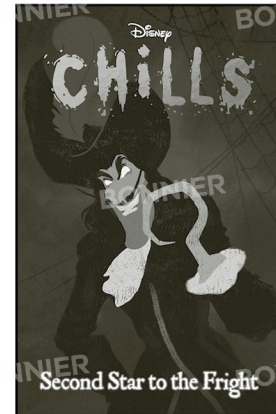
book and channeled inspiration from the ocean; and the Vermont Studio Center and my friend Joj for bringing me to Provence, where I revised these pages. I also want to thank my grandfather Robert Rogers, who consulted with Walt

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I know you'd be so proud of me. Last, special thanks to my parents for taking me to see *Bambi*, my first movie, and inspiring a lifelong affinity for Disney. And yes, I've always liked the Disney villains best. Writing this book was a wish my heart made as a kid who loved scary books. I hope you enjoy this delightfully frightening series, dear reader.

Turn the page for a sneak peek of

Second Star to the Fright



Available now!



I

The Big Fright

Rise and shine!' Barrie's mother's voice echoed through the house, up the stairs, down the hallway, and through his bedroom door. 'Time to get up for school.'

How does she have vocal superpowers that could wake the dead? Barrie thought as he buried his head under his pillow. He cracked his eyes open and groaned when he saw the clock.

'Not even six,' he muttered into his pillow,

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pressing his head into it. He grasped at the last fleeting tendrils of sleep and the exciting dream he'd been having, not wanting to forget it. He'd been trying to solve a mystery in a haunted cabin on a remote island, looking for a secret treasure.

'It's still dark outside. This is... *child torture*.'

He flipped over and tried to bury his head deeper, knocking the pile of mystery books off his bed and onto the floor, along with the torch that he'd used to stay up late, reading well past his bedtime.

His eyes darted to one of the books on the floor.

The cover read *The Mystery of Cabin Island*.

Clearly, the dream was inspired by his late-night reading. He could tell the exact spot where he'd left off and fallen asleep from the deep crease in the spine.

Barrie loved reading mystery books more than anything. He loved the way they made his heart thump with excitement as he read faster and faster, his fingers flipping the pages to get to the end and discover how the characters solved the case. In real

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life, he often found himself sneaking off to look for secret treasures, slipping down dark hallways and into places he didn't belong. He wished his real life was as exciting as that of the band of sleuthing brothers from his books.

Before he could remember if he'd solved the mystery and found the hidden treasure in his dream, the door to his bedroom burst open and startled him, making the whole thing evaporate from his mind.

Bright, artificial light spilled in from the hallway, making his eyes tear up. He ducked under the pillow once more.

'Is my little guy ready for a brand new day?' Mum called in a singsong voice. 'The early bird gets the worm!'

Getting a worm? That's how she was trying to motivate him to wake up?

Barrie couldn't understand how anyone could be this cheerful so early, let alone on a school day. It was one of life's greatest mysteries, even more than the ones in his books.

'I'm up... I'm up... I swear,' Barrie muttered. He tried to sound convincing.

But even he knew he'd failed.

'Don't make me come back up here,' she warned, shifting into her *stern mum voice* like she'd flipped a light switch. It was another one of her superpowers. 'You're almost twelve now,' she went on. 'You know what that means.'

'Uh, what?' Barrie said, his voice muffled by the pillow that was keeping the light from searing his eyeballs. He lifted his head and tried to pry them open again. His mum looked blurry.

'Old enough to get yourself up for school,' she finished. Her gaze darted to the pile of books and the torch on the floor. Busted. 'We'll discuss that later. Now get up!'

Before he could respond, Barrie heard her footsteps retreating across the carpeted hall, then her rapping on his sister's door.

'Rita, that means you, too,' Mum continued. 'You're even worse than your little brother.'

Oh, good. If she was going after Rita, that

would buy him a little time. He tried to snooze a bit more, but he could hear her raised voice reverberating through the house.

Ever since Mum got let go from her job as a copy editor at a magazine last month and started freelancing from home, she'd been more stressed than usual. Dad had picked up more shifts at the power plant where he worked as a civil engineer, but it didn't make up for the lost income – or so Barrie had overheard when he'd been practising his sleuthing skills. Apparently freelance magazine work was scarce right now and even Barrie could see the bills were piling up on the kitchen table. Just last night, his parents had been arguing about it, and he hadn't even had to snoop to hear that conversation. He'd been reading in bed when he was supposed to be sleeping and they'd got loud enough for him to take in every word.

'You just had your seventeenth birthday,' Mum yelled at Rita, her raised voice forcing him to finally, truly wake. 'You can pitch in and help out more. Oh, and don't forget. Starting today, you get

to drive your brother and his friends to school.'

'Ugh, don't remind me,' Rita complained. 'Him and his silly friends are gonna smear hazardous waste all over my back seat.'

'That was our deal, remember?' Mum said. 'I took you to get your license. You can drive your brother to school.'

'Fine, but I need the bleach wipes,' Rita griped. 'Like a whole pack to decontaminate my car.'

'Please, don't be so melodramatic,' Mum said with an exasperated sigh. 'I've been driving you both around for years. How do you think I feel?'

'Have you seen the bathroom after he showers?' Rita said. 'And what's that smell that leaches out of his wardrobe?'

'Fine, you make a good point,' Mum said finally. 'I'll leave the wipes out in the kitchen. Which reminds me... a new list of chores is waiting for you down there – including cleaning the bathroom.'

'Anything but the bathroom,' Rita said. 'Please have mercy on my soul!'

Barrie forced himself out of bed. It wasn't like

he was going to get back to sleep now with Rita moaning and wailing at the top of her lungs. If he'd learned anything about what happened when you became a teenager, it was that everything turned into a huge drama.

A few weeks earlier, Rita had been gifted an incredible seventeenth birthday party, complete with a DJ and dance floor. But ever since her birthday, all his parents could talk about was how she needed to 'grow up' and 'pitch in more around the house.'

Being almost twelve was bad enough, but turning seventeen looked even worse. What happened when you became an actual adult?

Growing up is the worst, Barrie decided, pulling on jeans and a sweatshirt. He missed being a little kid, when he could watch cartoons and play all day and didn't have to get up early for school.

He patted down his curly hair, trying to tame it into submission and caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. He had chubby cheeks, still full of baby fat and dotted with freckles. His eyes

were hazel, a mixture of brown and green that he liked. But basically, he looked like any ordinary twelve-year-old.

Well, *almost* twelve-year-old.

'I wish I could stay a kid forever,' he whispered to his reflection.

As he got dressed, he caught a whiff of his wardrobe and scrunched up his nose. Okay, maybe his sister did have a point about the smell. Of course, his mum had told him like a *bazillion* times to clean it out, but he always seemed to have better things to do, like play video games or skateboard in the park with his friends or read his pile of mystery books.

He could worry about having a clean wardrobe when he got older, couldn't he?

Barrie slammed the wardrobe door and grabbed his backpack then bounded downstairs to the kitchen. He was still half asleep, but luckily, he could navigate his house on autopilot. They'd lived there since he was born.

Before he could pour himself cereal or sit down

at the table, Dad caught his eye. That pile of bills next to him somehow looked even taller than it had last night.

'Did you finish your homework?' his father asked. Another terrible thing about growing up. Homework.

Every year, it got harder and took longer, too. He was one week away from finishing primary school and moving up to Year 7. The graduation ceremony was next Friday. He'd be attending New London High School in the autumn. But first, he'd have a glorious three months of summer holiday, where he didn't have to worry about anything other than being a kid and having fun.

'Uh, yeah mostly,' Barrie said, fudging. The truth was... he hadn't done any of it. He'd just got so caught up in his new book. He'd have to try to copy off Michael and John, his best friends. He just hoped they had actually done the homework and not slacked off like him.

'Well, if we find out you didn't,' Mum chimed in cheerfully, 'you'll get grounded again.' She took

a sip from her giant cup of coffee.

Barrie eyed his parents over the breakfast table. They both looked... *tired*.

Despite them insisting that waking up early was a good thing, they both had dark circles under their eyes and chugged coffee like their lives depended on it. Even now, his mum was downing her fresh cup in a few swallows. Her coffee intake had definitely risen since the redundancy and transition to working from home and the living room had become her office. It was covered in random pieces of paper and draped with power cords for various electronic devices. Everything had changed and not for the better.

'Just wait for secondary school,' Rita said in a snarky voice, pouring a bowl of healthy cereal and adding almond milk. 'It gets a lot harder. You'll have even more homework – plus *algebra*.'

The way his sister pronounced *algebra* made it sound like a curse word. His eyes darted to her backpack, slumped by the front door. It was overflowing with thick textbooks.

'Uh, I'm not even sure what that is,' Barrie said, bypassing the healthy options and pouring himself a bowl of his favourite sugary cereal with a friendly-looking cartoon pirate gracing the box. 'Fractions are bad enough.'

'It's like fractions times a million,' Rita said, aiming her milk-encrusted spoon at his face. 'Trust me, you'll hate it.'

'Rita, don't scare your little brother like that.' Dad cut her off, slurping coffee. 'Algebra is great fun.'

Rita looked horrified. 'Uh, how is algebra fun? Are you losing it? Nobody likes algebra. It's like a scientific fact. They've proven it in actual studies.'

'Right... let's see now... things we couldn't do without algebra...' Dad mused. 'It's how we got to the Moon.'

Barrie shot his father a sceptical look. He knew for a fact that parents lied to kids a lot. Like *white* lies. Little lies. It was almost like they didn't want kids to realize the truth about what it was really like to grow up.

'The Moon?' Rita said with a snort. 'Uh, that's the best you've got? Can algebra get me out of driving Barrie to school too?'

'Rita, we discussed this already,' Mum called from across the kitchen, shooting her a chastising look. 'We had an agreement, remember?'

But then she brightened and tapped the family wall calendar. 'Excited for your birthday next week, Little Guy?'

She pointed to the square for Monday. On it was a crude drawing of balloons and a birthday cake, along with the scrawled words:

Barrie's 12th birthday

The week was packed with other appointments, including his graduation ceremony on Friday. It promised to be excruciatingly boring, featuring a cameo by his annoying Aunt Wendy and his twin cousins, who were both drooling, snotty toddlers.

But then there was also the one thing that he'd been looking forward to for months. His eyes locked on the square for Tuesday and he felt a rush

of excitement jolt through him.

'Yeah, how would you like to celebrate?' Dad chimed in. 'I mean, besides going to the Lost Boys concert with your friends on Tuesday night and rocking out.'

Barrie cringed when his dad said *rocking out*. Somehow it sounded cool when his friends said that kind of stuff. But not when his father tried it.

The Lost Boys were their favourite band. His parents had gotten him a ticket as a gift for his birthday and agreed to extend his curfew since he was turning twelve and graduating from primary school. Michael and John had also convinced their parents and scored tickets to the sold-out concert. They were all going together. It was like some kind of sign – his favourite band coming to town the day after his birthday. Barrie couldn't wait.

'Let's see... oh, I know!' Dad went on, tapping at his tablet with great enthusiasm. 'What about a family trip to the maritime museum this weekend?'

His father smiled at him expectantly. Barrie frowned, fiddling with his spoon. While not as bad

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as algebra, that didn't sound like much fun.

'Uh, what's a... *maritime museum*?' he asked cautiously.

'Oh, it's super exciting!' Dad said in a voice that made Barrie pretty sure that it was the exact opposite.

His father pulled up the website on his tablet, then flipped it around for Barrie to see. Images of old ships flashed across the screen, under the heading: *'The New London Maritime Museum – Where History Comes To Life!'*

'It's located out by the marina,' Dad said, tapping again at the screen. 'It's a museum dedicated to naval history.'

'What's that mean?' Barrie said.

'It means boats, Goober,' Rita said snarkily. She loved showing off how much more she knew than he did.

'And not just *any* boats,' Dad added, flipping through the website. 'This museum specializes in pirate history.' He pointed to a ship with a black-and-white flag printed with a skull and crossbones.

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The name was painted across the hull in ornate script:

Folly Roger

Barrie studied the image, feeling unsettled. The skull seemed to stare into his soul.

'You can even tour an old pirate ship,' Dad went on. 'Doesn't that sound amazing?'

'Uh... maybe,' Barrie said, not wanting to disappoint his dad. But what he really wanted to do was to go to the skate park with his friends, not tour some boring old boat museum.

His father was a big history buff. He loved anything tied to the past. But most of that stuff was just boring if you asked Barrie – or saw all of his B minuses on his history tests. It all happened a long time ago, so why should he care?

'Great, then I'll grab tickets,' Dad went on, oblivious to his son's total lack of interest. 'The whole family can go on Sunday. We can have some nice family time.'

Now it was Rita's turn to look stricken. 'But I

was supposed to see a movie with my friends!’

‘Rita, it’s for your brother’s birthday,’ Mum said in her stern voice. ‘You can see a movie with your friends another time.’

‘Yeah, stop behaving like a kid and act your age,’ Dad added with a frown.

Rita flung her spoon down and pouted, but she knew better than to argue the point further. That could only result in the worst-case scenario for any teen – losing car or phone privileges. Or worse yet, getting grounded.

Mum ignored Rita’s silent temper tantrum, which happened on a regular basis and turned her attention to Barrie.

‘Then, on Monday, you can have a party at the skate park with your friends after school,’ she said. ‘On your actual birthday. How does that sound?’

‘Oh, I can?’ Barrie said, perking up and feeling slightly better. ‘And I can still go to the concert on Tuesday, too?’

‘Yup, it’s not every day my little guy turns twelve. How about a cake?’ Mum said, picking up

her phone to call in the order. ‘What flavour?’

‘Triple chocolate fudge!’ the whole family said in unison, then laughed. It had been Barrie’s favourite since before he could talk.

‘Good choice, Son,’ Dad added, still chuckling.

Even Rita couldn’t think of anything snarky or negative to say about *chocolate*.

‘Love you,’ Barrie said with a grin. His parents really were the best, even if they annoyed him sometimes.

He finished his cereal, then Mum informed them that they were going to be late for school. Still in a bad mood – though lately, that seemed to be her natural state – Rita grabbed her keys, backpack and the pack of bleach wipes.

‘Come on, Goober,’ she said in a pouty voice. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

Barrie picked up his backpack and followed her toward the front door. He turned back to say goodbye to his parents. His father was still studying the maritime museum website.

Suddenly, an image of a pirate flashed onto the

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screen – beady eyes, long black hair and a thin black moustache. He sported a crimson jacket and large pirate hat with a fluffy feather sprouting out of the ornate ribbon.

But that wasn't what caught Barrie's attention. Instead of a hand, his left arm ended in a silver hook. Barrie's eyes darted to the bold headline at the top of the website: *The Mystery of Captain Hook and His Missing Hand*.

It reminded Barrie of the mysteries in his books. Only this was a real-life mystery.

But before he could really consider it, Rita grabbed him by the backpack, dragging him through the front door.

'Don't you dare touch anything in my car,' she hissed under her breath. 'Or, I'll make you walk the plank.'

'Aye, aye, matey,' Barrie said, promising himself that he'd smear snots on the door handle just to teach her a lesson. She obviously deserved it.





