

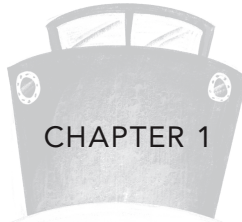
THE STRANGE SIGHTING

An Alice England Mystery – Book 3

ASH HARRIER



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CHAPTER 1

Questions About Persephone

It was 8.19 on Thursday morning, and Alice was taking her usual three minutes to pat next door's cat. Little black and orange Maya was always punctual for their school-morning appointments. She would appear from beneath the camellia bush when Alice stepped out the door and paused beside the old brass plaque that read 'England's Funeral Parlour'. Alice had worked hard to build Maya's trust over the past year and they now enjoyed an agreeable exchange of strokes, purrs and *mrrps*. Alice rarely glimpsed Maya's owners – a young couple who seemed to work long hours.

At 8.22, she wished Maya a good day and went out the wrought-iron gate, across the road and along the footpath towards school. The morning air was fresh on her cheeks, bringing a faint salty scent from the cove. Wrens flitted in and out of the bushes and played in the sprinklers on someone's front lawn. This was Alice's favourite time of year – late summer, when the harshest of the heat had faded but the days were still long and warm. And she had double science with Ms Littlejohn to look forward to.

Every morning for the past few weeks, Alice had used the walk to school to think up questions about her

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mother. In the summer holidays just gone, she'd been watched – not once, but three times – by a woman dressed in dark clothing. When Alice had told her father about it, he thought it was most likely her mother, Persephone England.

Alice had no memory of her mother. Persephone had left soon after her twins were born – red-haired Alice and dark-haired Victoria, who never took her first breath. The umbilical cords had been wrapped up tight around Victoria's neck and Alice's leg. Alice was still troubled by her weak leg. It meant she couldn't run as fast or balance as well as able-bodied kids, and she needed to rest her leg regularly because it ached.

Alice and her father, Thaddeus, had lived contentedly together in their home, now called Tranquillity Funerals, for thirteen years – just the two of them. People always expected undertakers to be solemn and rather invisible, which was how Thaddeus behaved at work. He was sympathetic to his customers and worked hard to make funerals as lovely and inexpensive as they could be. But when it was just him and Alice, he was actually a cheerful, joking sort of dad who wore brightly coloured novelty shirts and made an excruciating number of puns. Nevertheless, Alice was proud of her father and looked forward to the day when she would work full time in the funeral home herself. She had big plans for the business.

Thirteen years – then, quite suddenly, Persephone had shown up, once standing at a bus stop, once lurking behind a tree on their street, then finally *following* Alice and her friends to the Quay. Alice didn't like being followed and watched. It wasn't that she thought her mother had evil intentions; it was just a strange thing to do, creeping

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around and hiding like that. Why not simply come up and say hello, if she wanted to know how Alice had turned out? But Thaddeus had explained that Persephone didn't generally do things in a straightforward manner.

Alice's curiosity about her mother was intense – so intense, she'd asked her father many, many questions. It got to the point where Thaddeus suggested Alice keep her questions to once a week, at dinner on Sunday. Sunday was a strange day that didn't know if it was the end or the start of the week, which made it a suitable day for strange conversations.

Alice now spent much of her spare time working on questions to ask on Sunday evenings. Along with future question ideas, she'd written down what she considered important points about her mother in a dedicated notebook:

- *Persephone England, born in the Tormenting Coast area.*
- *Blue-green eyes, pale complexion. Dark hair with a natural auburn streak on one side.*
- *Wears black habitually and has done since Dad knew her.*
- *Loves the sea and always liked to live in coastal areas.*
- *Preferred a quiet, indoors lifestyle. Did not socialise much.*
- *Dad won't tell me her last name from before they got married.*
- *He was surprised to find she was in the country. He thought she'd gone to live overseas.*

It was good to learn a little more about herself through these facts. For instance, Alice had brown eyes like her father, but she was quite pale, which she must have

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got from her mother. Alice also had hair the colour of overcooked pumpkin, which her father called ‘auburn’ – and her mother had that auburn streak; whereas Thaddeus had brown hair, going a little grey at the sides.

Alice’s mum and dad weren’t in contact anymore. To stop Persephone from following Alice around Damocles Cove, Thaddeus had put a notice in the classified section of a magazine he thought she would probably read. She’d always read it when he knew her, he said. The magazine was called *Illuminated* and, Alice discovered with an unpleasant shock, contained a whole lot of silly conspiracy theories about aliens, ghosts, secret societies and supernatural creatures. This was something Alice most definitely did *not* have in common with Persephone, and she wasn’t sure what to think about her mother reading magazines like that.

The notice Thaddeus placed said:

To Persephone. Please contact me to arrange access visits.

Otherwise please refrain from unarranged approaches.

Regards, Thaddeus

Alice waited with interest to find out how her mother would respond. So far there had been no reply, but Persephone no longer seemed to be following her. Alice hadn’t told her friends about Persephone yet. It was her business – hers and her father’s. Besides, she wasn’t sure if she was ready for anyone else to know she had a conspiracy-believing, child-following parent whose last name Alice was not allowed to know.



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At recess, after a science lesson on vascular sea plants and algae, Alice made her way to the best bench in the school. Well, *she* thought it was the best bench. Her friend Violet Devenish said it was *all right* but a bit close to the principal's office. Her other friend Cal Lee thought it was a terrible spot, and often tried to get them to choose another place to meet.

'We're a target for Ms Goodwill, sitting here,' he would complain.

Alice quite liked Principal Goodwill, especially since she'd helped them solve the Malkin Tower mystery during their summer break. And while she *was* excessively positive and chatty, Ms Goodwill was usually too busy managing the students who wrote on the toilet walls or did parkour in the quadrangle to give Alice and her friends much of her time – so Cal really didn't need to worry.

Today, Violet was already on the bench, nibbling a raisin muffin under her veil. Being allergic to UV light, Violet wore protective gear all through the day. 'Hi,' she called, picking a raisin out of her muffin and tossing it to a family of ravens that had recently moved into the courtyard.

'Hello, Violet. Are raisins good for birds?'

'They're fruit, so I'm sure they're fine. Have you seen Cal this morning?'

Alice shook her head, pulling out her carrot sticks and hummus. Her father was enthusiastic about healthy food and liked to help pack her school snacks. 'Not yet.'

'Maybe he skipped school to go and meet Hana's train.'

Cal's cousin Hana was coming to stay with him for two weeks. Violet seemed almost as excited as he was. She was a fan of a Korean pop group called Moon Squad, and since

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hearing Hana came from the same part of South Korea as one of the group's members, Violet had been bursting to meet her.

It was hard to stop thinking about algae, seagrass and her mother, but Alice made an effort to focus on Violet's words. 'Is Hana coming to Damocles Cove on the train? I thought her parents would drive her.'

'Her parents are staying with Cal's dad in Port Cormorant and Hana's coming to Damocles Cove by herself.' A raven gobbled another raisin and cawed at its sibling in triumph.

'You know, Violet, I don't think the concentrated sugar in raisins is healthy for birds.'

Violet stopped tossing the raisins. 'I really hope Hana likes K-pop, too.'

'In Korea, would K-pop just be called "pop"?' Alice asked. 'They wouldn't add the K for Korea to their own music, would they?'

Violet frowned. 'Hm, I don't know. I wish I had my phone so I could check. I don't want to sound clueless when I talk to her about it.' Phones were handed in at the start of the day at Damocles Cove High School.

Cal arrived at that moment, loping up to them with his black coat flapping. He had a couple of new ear spikes these days, including one that was a silver snake. It pierced his ear and peeked out from behind it, and Alice liked it immensely. Cal always looked a bit untidy, but he was much more alert than when they had first met him. He used to stay up all night gaming, which made him overtired and late every day, but when he got his pet snake, his mother had Cal agree to a deal: he'd stick to reasonable bedtimes and she'd help pay for Ziggy the python's food and equipment.

‘Hi, Ultra-Violet, Zombie Queen.’ Cal slumped down between them onto the bench. ‘Ugh, I just had double history.’

Violet shuffled over to make more room. ‘Has Hana arrived yet?’

‘No, she gets in late tonight. Hey, I was thinking – there’s a pupil-free day next week. Do you want to take Hana to the Quay with me? We can get fish and chips for lunch.’

Violet was already nodding eagerly. ‘I’ll come.’

‘Yes,’ said Alice. ‘I’ll come too, if I’m not working.’

‘Good. She’s really looking forward to meeting you both. I already told her how the three of us practically run a detective agency together, and how our clients are usually dead people.’

Alice wasn’t sure he was representing them to Hana accurately. That made it sound more official than solving a couple of odd mysteries they’d stumbled across. Cal dug a squashed-looking muesli bar out of his bag and gave it an unhappy glance, so Violet passed him her leftover piece of muffin.

‘Thanks, Ultra.’ He picked out a raisin and tossed it to the ravens before Alice could mention the sugar content. ‘It’ll be good, catching up with Hana. I haven’t seen her for about seven years. Hopefully she likes horror games now. We used to play a lot of *Forest Picnic* together – but I’ve grown out of that, obviously.’

‘I’m sure she’s grown out of it, too,’ said Violet.

‘It’s weird when you haven’t seen someone for a long time,’ he said. ‘I keep wondering if she’s the same or different.’

Violet nodded. ‘I always feel awkward before I catch up with my cousins. I only see them at Christmas time. But it

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just takes a few minutes, then we're laughing and talking like we haven't even been apart.'

Alice, who didn't have cousins, had no personal experience to contribute. She wondered if her mother had any brothers or sisters. Maybe Alice *did* have cousins she'd never met.

She pulled her mind back to the conversation. 'I expect you and Hana will slip easily into your old friendship again, Cal. However, it *will* be convenient if Hana has also grown to like playing horror games all night.'

'Yeah. We might be in trouble if she hasn't.'

'I'm sure you'll have other things in common.' Alice considered Cal's range of hobbies. 'Perhaps she'll also like snacking, wearing skull rings, caring for reptiles, complaining about history class or watching videos about the occult.'

Violet burst into laughter and Cal grinned lopsidedly. 'Thanks, Zombie Queen. Nice summary.' He threw a raisin in the air and tried to catch it in his mouth but it bounced off his nose. An enterprising raven snatched it before it hit the ground. 'Anyway, I just hope Hana hasn't turned out, you know ...'

'Loud?' suggested Alice. Her mind was already wandering back to the idea of relatives she'd never met.

'Hair flicky?' said Violet, clearly thinking of their unpleasant classmate Kimberly Larsson, who called Violet a vampire.

Cal tossed another raisin and, this time, caught it. 'Boring. If there's one thing I can't handle, it's *boring*.'



Alice tried to be patient while she waited for Sunday night question time. She thought a lot about cousins, trying to imagine what they might look like and how old they might be. Were they nature-lovers? Did they like cats, K-pop or gaming? Were they interested in marine science?

On Thursday night, she filled some time reading a book she had on loan from the library – *Ancient Life of the Deep Ocean* by Elvira Marchamley. Alice was interested in the deep ocean. Well, any part of the ocean, really. She glanced up at the display of items she'd found on the beach that now lived on her desk. Dried anemones; driftwood; shells both whole and broken, round and jagged; ammonite fossils; smooth, pale pebbles; bits of old rope; seaglass; and desiccated starfish. Cal and Violet called it her collection, but Alice didn't think of it that way. It felt disrespectful, somehow, to call it a 'collection'. It was a variety of fascinating natural objects that shared her bedroom space – like roommates. A lot of roommates. There were so many things on her desk, they'd started spilling over onto her bookshelf and nightstand. She could do with a glass display cabinet to keep it all in, really.

Alice was pleased to learn from her book that Damocles Cove was part of a region rich in marine fossils. There was a deep ocean canyon not far from the coast. She told Violet and Cal about it at Friday lunchtime, but they wanted to talk about Hana. Cal told them his cousin was still fun and easy to talk to. He'd come to school late that morning, looking extremely tired. Apparently, Hana was very much a fan of playing horror games long into the night, and they'd played them so late that he found himself falling asleep at the computer desk.

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Saturday was busy with work. There was a funeral service in the morning – many attended and they ran out of sandwiches, which sent their assistant Patty cursing back into the kitchen to rustle up another two platters. But as Patty was the fastest sandwich maker in the region (perhaps even in the world), it wasn't a problem for long. On Sunday morning, Alice helped her dad prepare a man named Desmond for his funeral, which would be held during the week.

Finally, it was Sunday afternoon, then *finally* it was dinnertime. Her dad turned off the oven, wiped the bench and got himself a glass of kombucha. Alice preferred water.

She waited until a plate of tofu and vegetable loaf was sitting in front of her and Thaddeus had taken his seat opposite, then could hold back no longer. She fixed her father with a steady gaze.

He seemed to sigh slightly as he picked up his fork. 'All right, Alice. Go ahead.'

'Does my mother have any siblings?'

'No. She had a brother, but he died.'

'Did her brother have any children?'

Thaddeus shook his head. 'No, he died when he was young – a long time before I met your mother.'

'Oh.' Over the past few days, Alice had practically convinced herself she had a bunch of secret aunts, uncles and cousins. It was a major disappointment to realise she was as cousin-less as ever. But her curiosity was sparked by her father's last comment.

'How *did* you meet my mother?'

'It was at the Funeral Fair.'

Alice sat up straight. 'What's that? And why have I never been to one?'

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‘They don’t have them anymore, but they used to be held every two years by the Association of Embalmers and Morticians. It was a kind of conference where you could learn about new technology and products, listen to experts speak, and so on. They had an awards night and a dinner dance. It was the highlight of the funeral industry calendar.’

Alice sat imagining the Funeral Fair: a sea of gleaming coffins and caskets of every hue; majestic floral arrangements; advanced sound systems; innovative guest gifts and mementos; delightful canapés – and endless sachets of sugar and coffee. ‘What a shame they don’t have it anymore.’

‘Yes. It’s all moved online these days. Webinars and video conferences.’

Alice tasted her dinner. ‘Can I add some more soy sauce to this?’

He nodded. ‘Not too much, though. There’s a lot of salt in soy sauce.’

Alice went to fetch the sauce bottle. ‘How did you start talking to my mother?’ she asked when she came back.

‘I noticed her sitting alone at the dinner dance and thought she was very pretty, so I went and said hello and asked her to dance with me.’

Alice thought this sounded unpleasant for both parties. ‘And she said yes?’

‘Yes.’ He smiled.

‘You were at the fair because you were a mortician – but why was my mother there?’

‘She had a stand. She was advertising her services.’

‘What sort of services? Did she work in the funeral industry, too?’

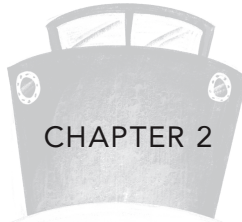
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There was a change in Thaddeus's demeanour, and he shifted in his chair as if it had become uncomfortable. He stared down at his dinner. Alice watched him, waiting, but his silence stretched on. In her lifetime, she'd never asked any question about death, science or human behaviour that Thaddeus hadn't at least attempted to answer. However, when it came to the Sunday night window for questions about Persephone, he often hesitated more, thought longer – and replied less.

'Dad?' she prompted.

The silence grew thicker. At last, he prodded his tofu and vegetable loaf as if no longer hungry and looked up. 'This might be one of those questions that should wait until you're older.' Thaddeus put a smile on his face that didn't look at all natural. 'Now, why don't you tell me a bit more about your marine fossil book?'

It seemed the Sunday night window for questions had already closed.



CHAPTER 2

How to Avoid an Obsession

Alice speculated feverishly about her mother until she grew quite exhausted. Was this becoming an obsession? Violet was, by her own admission, ‘obsessed’ with Moon Squad. Alice pictured Violet’s bedroom, every spare centimetre of wall hung with posters and printouts, every piece of furniture decorated with keyrings, stickers and plush toys that were supposed to resemble the group members.

Perhaps it wasn’t healthy to become obsessed.

When she got home from school on Tuesday, Alice found the house empty. This usually meant her father was working in the funeral rooms. It was quiet, except for the ticking of their old mantel clock. She helped herself to a snack, stacked her files on the mahogany table, and sat down to do her science homework. She labelled the parts of a plant cell and answered some questions about photosynthesis. She was finished within fifteen minutes.

The notebook dedicated to Persephone England seemed to lure her hand. Alice resisted, reaching instead for her marine fossil book. She opened the index to search for belemnites – something like an ancient cuttlefish. She wanted to look at the photos again. She was pretty sure

she'd seen something similar in the gem store at the Quay. Imagine if she could get herself a belemnite to add to her array of natural objects!

Barnacle. Bathysphere. Belemnites. Page 204.

A noise nearby made her look up at the wall opposite, covered in ancient green paper and hung with photos of the England ancestors. The picture of her father holding baby Alice and her dead twin Victoria seemed to be swinging a little. Or was it? No, it was quite still now. She stared at the framed picture, then touched the two pendants hanging around her neck. St Cosmas and St Damian, the patron saints of twins. The pendants clinked together a couple of times, as if conversing quietly.

Odd.

Alice pushed out her chair, got up and went to the door that led to the funeral rooms. She crossed the foyer. Beyond the heavy red curtain, the service room was empty except for a black rectangular casket with an arrangement of lilies and ferns on top. Desmond waited inside, ready to host his final party for his friends and family the next morning. Alice's father was nowhere to be seen. She padded across the carpet and listened at the door of the consulting room where he held meetings. That was silent, too. She went into their office.

Thaddeus was in there, using a lint roller on a navy-blue suit that hung by its coat hanger on a hook. 'Oh, hello, Alice.'

'There you are, Dad.' She looked at the suit. 'Do we have a new body?'

'Yes. Mr Ray Bolland came in this morning – "Stingray" to his friends. His service will be on Thursday. His sister just dropped off his suit and a couple of things for

the casket.’ Thaddeus put down the lint roller and turned his attention to a yellow envelope, pulling out something small from inside it. It was a knife.

Alice leaned in to see it better. ‘The handle seems to be made from oyster shell.’

‘Yes, it looks like it. Mother-of-pearl, it’s called. This is an ornamental blade, I think – not a weapon. Perhaps it’s a sentimental item. Stingray was a marine biologist.’

Alice looked up. ‘Really?’

‘Yes.’ Thaddeus smiled. ‘Not fossils, however. He was more interested in living organisms. I believe he was well known and made some significant discoveries during his lifetime.’

Alice took the oyster knife from her father and turned it over so the silver blade glimmered. It was quite blunt. She closed it in her hand to see if it might be resonant with the dead man’s memories, as trinkets such as this often were. She didn’t feel anything out of the ordinary, but that wasn’t surprising. Normally, to feel resonance from an object and learn about its owner’s life, she had to be close to the corpse – preferably right beside it.

She turned towards the preparation room. ‘Can I help you work on Stingray?’

‘Of course.’ Thaddeus rubbed his chin, observing her. ‘Why so eager?’

‘I’m interested in him,’ she answered honestly.

‘Oh. Well, if you’ve done your homework, then yes, you can help me dress him.’

She gave the knife back to her father and headed for the preparation room, snatching her apron off the hook on the way. Alice donned the apron, washed her hands and pulled on some gloves. Her father followed suit. By

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the time he joined her at the table, Alice already had the leakproof body bag unzipped. They peeled it back together and manoeuvred it out from beneath the body.

Alice moved back to the top of the table. ‘Hello, Mr Bolland.’

As expected, Stingray Bolland said nothing. His face and hands were tanned and lined from exposure to the sun and wind, but the rest of his skin was pale. There was a small tattoo of a stingray on one forearm and a bird on the other. Alice thought it was a seabird at first, but on closer inspection, realised it was a chicken.

‘I understand he spent a lot of time in a full-body wetsuit,’ said Thaddeus. ‘That’s why his face and hands are tanned but his body’s pale.’

‘I see.’ Alice studied Stingray’s face again. Dead people’s faces became soft and relaxed after a few days, with their mouths ajar because their muscles didn’t work anymore. Alice thought the man looked intelligent, nevertheless. He had lines like little brackets around his mouth that suggested he’d smiled a lot. ‘How did he die? Was he sick?’

Thaddeus looked at Stingray sadly. ‘He was perfectly healthy, but he drowned while scuba diving. Sometimes the air mix in the oxygen tank can cause your brain to become confused. It’s called nitrogen narcosis.’

Alice didn’t feel sad – she hadn’t known Stingray personally, after all. But she was sorry to see her father sad. ‘At least he died doing something he loved,’ she reminded him. ‘That must be a good way to die.’

Thaddeus shot her a quick look. ‘True. But it’s still a shame when someone’s life is cut short by an accident.’

Alice helped her father wash Stingray’s body and dry it down, then stood by with moisturiser while Thaddeus

massaged the limbs. Dead people went through a stage called *rigor mortis*, which made their bodies completely stiff. It went away by itself after a day or two, but sometimes a little stiffness remained. Massage was needed so the limbs could be bent while dressing the body. When Stingray was clean, dry and looking dapper in his navy suit, Alice went for the bag on the bench.

‘Is it just the knife to place in the casket?’

‘There’s a book, too – on my desk. But can you do his makeup first, please, Alice?’

The makeup! How could she forget? For the first time in her life, Alice was impatient to get this over with. But she did the makeup with her usual care, picking out a few different shades of foundation, pouring a little ivory base into the airbrush’s funnel and placing squares of fabric to protect Stingray’s collar and hair. She switched on the airbrush and sprayed the ivory makeup from Stingray’s chin to his forehead, using circular motions.

Next, she used bronzer, brightening Stingray’s tan so it was warm and golden. Seeing a lifelike hue come to a corpse’s face always made her heart beat a little faster. Alice took special care over the nose. Noses could be difficult terrain. She cleaned out the bronzer and dripped Orchid Blush into the funnel. With the setting on ‘fine’, she worked on brightening the cheeks and lips with the very faintest of pink. The challenge with corpse makeup was to make it look like the body was not wearing makeup at all.

Last, Alice used some Moist-n-Glow. This added a faint sheen to a corpse’s complexion so it wouldn’t appear unnaturally dry. She misted it over Stingray’s visage – a splendid word she’d recently discovered, which meant

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the shape and expression of a face. His visage was now as warm and peaceful as if he'd dozed off in a deck chair during an afternoon sail.

'Oh, Alice!' Thaddeus joined her at the table and gazed at Stingray. 'You really have become an aficionado of cosmetics.'

'A fishy-what?'

'Africanado? It means someone who devotes themselves to something and becomes rather an expert in the process.'

'Thank you.' Alice was itching to find out if the oyster knife was resonant by this time. 'Let's get him into the casket.'

She and her father clipped the straps of their lifting apparatus beneath Stingray, and she steadied the body as Thaddeus cranked the handle. They lowered Stingray into his mahogany casket.

At last! Alice hurried over to the bench and retrieved the little knife. She stood by the casket, holding it, waiting for the resonance to begin.

Nothing.

Alice put her hand on Stingray's chest, pretending to brush lint off his lapel. She clutched the oyster knife more firmly.

Still nothing. Alice frowned.

'Is everything all right?' Thaddeus was watching her in puzzlement.

'Yes.' But she heaved a silent sigh. She'd been *sure* it would be resonant.

She placed the little knife in Stingray's breast pocket. You couldn't see it in there, but a knife, blunt or otherwise, might look strange sitting out on the body. The important thing was that Stingray had his special object with him.

Her father had fetched from his desk a little book with tatty pages and a blue cover. It didn't have a title.

'Is that a journal?' Alice asked.

'Yes – but not a personal journal. It's a nature journal from when Stingray was a boy. His sister wanted it to go in with him.'

Alice took the book and opened it up to the first page, where handwritten words read: *Ray's Book of the Sea*. The book immediately began to hum in her hand. She grew still and listened to Stingray's story.

As a child, his family had a beach house near a salt marsh, where he and his siblings would swim and play through the long, wonderful, lazy days of summer. The children had free rein to explore the channels and low reefs, canoeing or wading across a sandbar to the bay. Stingray and his sister Marcia were fascinated by the rockpools. Their brother Finn also loved the ocean, but he was more interested in fishing and messing around in the family's dinghy.

Stingray kept the blue journal, using it to describe and draw the creatures he and Marcia found. He took it seriously, recording dates and measurements. But he also invented creatures at times, drawing and writing descriptions of mermaids or giant mythical serpents – just for fun and to entertain his sister. Stingray once spent hours documenting a whale-like kraken with enormous tentacles, and Marcia helped him think up the scientific name *Octowhale giganticus*. Ray used a code in his journal: if the animal he described was mythical, he would draw a little smiley face at the bottom of the page – to show it was a joke.

Stingray first got his nickname when he took an after-school job cleaning tanks at the Damocles Cove

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Aquarium. He knew even before he finished school that he was going to be a marine biologist. He was entranced by the organisms of the ocean, and especially loved diving among the seagrass plains in the deep water of the cove. He was a friendly man, but he didn't have enough interest in humans to seek a spouse. Despite Marcia's attempts to introduce Stingray to her eligible friends, he remained happily single.

Soon after he finished his studies, he found a job doing biological research in Scandinavian waters. Stingray worked in Norway for several years but eventually got a job near his childhood home, monitoring ocean health. As the lead scientist on the project, he was assigned a research vessel called the *Nautilus* and an assistant. Around the same time, his brother Finn bought a passenger boat and started running tours around Damocles Cove. Stingray kept up the habit of maintaining his blue-covered nature journal. These days, it was more like a formal scientific logbook, and he used it to make notes on his discoveries and observations.

Stingray died on the sea floor, near the mouth of an underwater cave. He'd been on the verge of a major breakthrough in his work – something new and surprising about a little-understood species. But Stingray became disoriented and took off his mask while he was still underwater. His last moments had been spent gazing wonderingly upwards through the ocean's blue haze. A dark shape moved above him – something like a dolphin or seal – undulating gently away through the watery depths.

Alice came back to the present to find herself holding the blue-covered book tightly. She placed it in the casket then withdrew her hands and gave Stingray Bolland a

meditative look. Her father hadn't noticed her reverie, or if he did, he didn't say anything. He was reviewing and ticking off instructions in Stingray's file.

Alice peeled off her gloves. 'What did you say Stingray's last name was?'

'Bolland. Ray Bolland.'

Alice headed straight for the kitchen table, where she'd left the marine fossil book. She went to the index and ran her finger down the alphabetical list. There it was – just a few words below *belemnites*.

Bolland, Ray, p. 24.

A creeping feeling was rising between her shoulder blades. Alice shrugged it off and located page twenty-four. There was a photo dated about two decades earlier, showing a young man in a wetsuit, squinting and smiling at the camera, a diving mask pushed up to the top of his head. In his hands was a large, white creature that looked like a cross between an armadillo and a woodlouse. The caption read:

Marine biologist Ray 'Stingray' Bolland (now the foremost expert on organisms of the south-western oceans) with a giant isopod. It hitched a ride on a submersible exploration device off Norway. Giant isopods have evolved so little over the last few million years, they are considered living fossils.

Alice became briefly immersed in the description of the giant isopod, a deep-sea creature that could grow as long as half a metre and go five months between meals. Then she remembered what she was doing and examined the young Stingray Bolland. He looked different now, of

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course – it was an old photo. He must have been a newly qualified scientist back then, perhaps even fresh out of university. She double-checked the index, but that was the only reference to Stingray Bolland in the whole book.

Alice put the book aside and sat down, looking up at the picture on the wall. In the past, Victoria had seemed to find ways to tell her when something wasn't quite right. Why had an experienced scuba diver drowned? What was the dark shape Stingray had been looking at in the water as he died? Perhaps more lurked below the surface than anyone realised when it came to Stingray's death.

This might be a good distraction for someone in danger of developing an unhealthy obsession.



CHAPTER 3

The Importance of Sandwiches

To Alice's frustration, she wasn't able to attend Stingray Bolland's funeral. It was being held at two o'clock on Thursday, and she wouldn't get home from school until at least 3.15. Funeral services never went for longer than an hour, so the best she could hope for was that she'd get there in time to see some lingering funeral-goers finishing their tea and sandwiches.

With this new mystery on her mind, it was hard to pay attention to Cal and Violet's conversation at lunchtime. They were enthusiastically discussing something involving meeting times and places, Violet's pale-blue eyes bright behind her protective veil and Cal fiddling feverishly with his snake ear spike.

'Is that okay with you, Alice?' Cal asked eventually.

'Is what okay?'

'Haven't you even been listening?' Violet laughed. 'Can you meet us at the entrance to the Quay tomorrow morning at ten? We'll show Hana around the shops then grab some lunch.'

'Oh. Yes, that should be fine.' Alice had already gained permission from her dad to meet her friends on their pupil-

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free day. She looked at her watch: 1.15 pm. People would start arriving for Stingray's funeral in the next half hour.

'Did you remember to ask Hana whether she likes *gayo* yet?' Violet asked Cal.

'Huh?'

'*Gayo*. That's what Korean people call Korean pop music.' She glanced at Alice, who nodded approvingly: Violet had done her research.

'Oh, no, sorry. I forgot again.' Cal frowned at his takeaway container of leftover fried rice. 'Hana's changed a lot in the last few years, to be honest. I mean, she still likes gaming, but she's *really* into outdoor activities now – adventurous stuff.'

'That sounds like fun,' said Violet.

Cal shrugged. 'I guess so, but she wants *me* to do the adventurous stuff with her. She heard they run parasailing tours from the Quay. She keeps talking about getting tickets but it's a bit expensive. I'm saving up for a new game at the moment.'

'Parasailing. Is that the thing where they tie you to the back of the boat and then you go up in the air as it gets faster?' asked Violet.

'Yeah.' Cal looked glum.

'I'm sure she'll understand if you don't want to spend your money on that,' said Alice. 'You might be able to go along and take photos while *she* parasails.'

'Yeah, maybe. She really, *really* wants me to do it too, though.'

'We could take her to play mini-golf tomorrow,' Violet suggested. 'It's not adventurous, but it's sort of fun – and cheap. There's a course at the Quay.'

Cal scratched his head, leaving a section of his spiked

black hair leaning over to one side. He'd managed to get a little bit of rice stuck on his ear spike. 'Yeah. I'll ask her.'

As soon as the final school siren sounded, Alice rushed out of the classroom, colliding with Kimberly Larsson on the way.

'Do you *mind?*' Kimberly demanded, then muttered something about not wanting to smell like dead people, too.

By now, Alice was 99.7 per cent certain she didn't smell like dead people, despite Kimberly's repeated comments over the years, so she ignored the remark and hurried towards home.

She arrived within twelve minutes – her fastest time ever – although her weak leg ached and she was sweating as she fumbled her key into the lock. A few cars were parked on the street, which meant some people might still be at Stingray's funeral. Alice scrambled out of her school uniform and into her work clothes – black and white – but skipped scraping her hair into its usual sombre low ponytail. No time for that. She dashed for the funeral room door and whipped it open, casting her eyes eagerly around the foyer.

A handful of people were in there: a blond man with his back to Alice, speaking to a woman. A small, wiry fellow in a black turtleneck, leaning on a walking stick. A younger man talking to a fair-haired woman in the corner. And a girl of perhaps ten years of age, playing on a portable game console. Patty was at the tea table, transferring the few last sandwich triangles from half-empty dishes onto one platter. This was a process Patty called 'consoli-plating', which always made Thaddeus laugh.

'Can I help?' Alice asked breathlessly as she arrived at Patty's side.

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‘Well!’ Patty exclaimed. ‘You’re home early!’

Patty’s voice tended to be a little loud, and her words made the last few mourners glance across the room, including the man who’d had his back to Alice. A jolt of recognition went through her, and Alice almost dropped the plate of sandwiches she’d picked up. Looking back at her was the same face she’d seen on the preparation table: the face of Stingray Bolland. But he was dead and inside the box behind the big red curtain, wasn’t he?

The man turned back to his companion.

‘Who is that?’ Alice asked Patty in a whisper.

Patty glanced over. ‘That’s the dead bloke’s family. His brother and sister, Finn and Marcia. And the little girl is Marcia’s daughter. I don’t know who those others are. Friends and family, I suppose.’

Alice helped move a few sandwiches so she appeared busy. ‘His brother looks *exactly* like him.’

‘Twins.’

‘Alice?’ It was her dad’s voice. He’d arrived at the tea table in his usual workplace clothes: a formal dark suit with a crisp white shirt underneath. It was nothing like his preferred bright Hawaiian-style shirts with amusing patterns. Alice often regretted the fact that, as a funeral director, Thaddeus had to dress in a way that was so much out of character.

Her father checked his watch. ‘You’re home early – and Patty has everything under control. You’re not rostered on, you know.’

‘I know. I’m not expecting to be paid. I just wanted to help Patty out.’

Patty brightened. ‘What a good kid! You go and offer that lot a last bit of coffee – I’ll clear these empties.’

Dodging her father's puzzled gaze, Alice took the jug of coffee over to the group. Finn, Stingray's brother, shook his head when she offered the jug, but Marcia gave Alice a small smile and held out her cup.

'I'm just glad Mum and Dad aren't around to see this day,' she said to Finn. 'It would have broken their hearts to see him taken so young.'

When Alice checked Finn's face, he was nodding, his jaw working as if he were holding back a sob. Her heart twinged in sympathy: he'd lost his twin, and Alice knew what that was like.

'Do *you* know what Stingray was working on?' Marcia asked him as Alice poured her coffee. 'He was so excited, but he refused to tell me what it was. He said I'd have to wait until the findings were published, just like everyone else.'

'No.' Finn stared at a funeral program discarded on a chair, Stingray's face smiling up at them from the photo. 'He learned to be secretive about his scientific discoveries a long time ago.'

Alice finished pouring and hovered for a moment, pretending to wipe the lip of the jug with a napkin so she could eavesdrop for as long as possible.

'How's the tour business?' Marcia lifted her coffee cup to her mouth. 'Are things improving?'

Finn shrugged. 'It's been a bit busier. Still not as many customers as I'd like.'

'And the bank?'

'I'm meeting with them in the next couple of weeks.'

Alice turned to offer coffee to the small man with the walking stick, but he was no longer there. He'd headed back to the tea table to load up his plate. Maybe he'd been waiting for the crowds to clear before eating. That was

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what Alice did in buffet situations. It meant you were left with the inferior food, but at least you didn't have to jostle through a bunch of people.

Marcia's daughter was absorbed in a game that featured cute animals picnicking in the woods. Alice headed over to the young man and the fair-haired woman in the corner. Could these be more relatives of Stingray? They didn't look much like the rest of the family. The man was sturdy and brown-haired, with bright green eyes that were made to twinkle. The woman, who looked to be in her mid-twenties, was thin and rather fragile-looking. She seemed worried. Alice had a hobby of selecting the perfect coffin for people she met. For this woman, she imagined an ivory coffin with soft bevelling and gauzy netting liner. Brass handles in the style of an old ship. Lotuses and reeds for the floral arrangement.

'You can't say that, Cora,' the man was telling her earnestly. 'Life's got to go on.' He had a thick Scottish accent and Alice immediately pictured a Douglas fir coffin with green velvet lining. Purple thistle and wild heather for the floral arrangement, tied with a tartan ribbon.

'It's disrespectful, plain and simple,' Cora retorted, her voice wobbling with emotion.

They noticed Alice and both fell silent. 'Coffee?' she offered.

The man held out his cup. 'Thanks, lassie.'

Cora declined. They waited for Alice to move away before starting up their argument again, their voices low.

Alice returned to the tea table. The small man in his black turtleneck was standing there, devouring the last of a tuna sandwich. He flicked Alice a slightly shamefaced look, then turned away, wiping the crumbs from his mouth.

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Finn cleared his throat – and Alice was startled all over again to see a face so much like Stingray’s. ‘Right, shall we get going?’ he asked. ‘They’ll be waiting for us back at the tavern.’ He turned to the man who’d just finished the sandwich. ‘Nigel, do you have a ride?’

‘We’ll take him, Finn,’ the Scotsman called across the room.

‘Come on, Ariel, pack that away,’ Marcia told her daughter. ‘We’re going to have dinner with Uncle Ray’s friends.’

The girl obeyed, following her mother and uncle to the door. Thaddeus was already there, shaking hands with the mourners and wishing them well as they departed. Alice took the leftover sandwiches into the kitchen, where Patty was clattering dishes in a sink of soapy water.

‘They seemed like interesting people.’ Alice sighed a little. ‘I wish I’d found out more about them.’

‘You needed to watch what sandwiches they ate,’ said Patty, scrubbing at a bit of avocado dried onto a plate.

‘Pardon?’

‘Sandwiches. You can tell a lot about a person from the sandwiches they pick. That lady, Marcia – the dead bloke’s sister, for example. She went for multi-grain; salmon and avocado. She’s done well for herself. Got an education, made a bit of money. She stopped her daughter from gorging herself on biscuits, too, and made her have a wholemeal chicken-lettuce triangle. Takes care of herself and her family, but doesn’t indulge them – not a bit.’

Alice was astonished. ‘Go on.’

‘Finn, the brother. Too distraught to eat, took a white-bread-with-cucumber. Easy to hold, won’t fall apart, you

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can nibble an edge and drop it in the bin without too much fuss. Absolutely broken-hearted about something.'

'Well, his twin brother just died.'

'Yes. Might be that. Might be remorse. Failure. Even guilt.'

'And the small man with the walking stick?' Alice pressed her, agog.

'Hungry fella. Hasn't seen a decent meal in a few days, I reckon. He ate whatever he could get his hands on. Brown, white bread, didn't matter to him. I even saw him take a gluten-free. He favoured fishpaste and tuna, I noticed. Maybe grew up on fish – could even be from a fishing family.'

Alice wished more than anything she could know if this was accurate. So much information – all gleaned from the sandwiches people ate at a funeral! She promised herself to pay more attention to people's eating habits in future.

'Then there was the young Scot,' Patty continued. 'He asked if there were any cheese-and-sauce ones first, and when there weren't, he made the best of it and had a curried egg. He's an optimist. Egg can be risky. Luckily, it was one of *my* curried egg triangles and he came out the winner. The young woman hanging around him – she's a worrier. Hovered over the sandwich plate, trying to decide which to choose, then finally picked a curried egg like the fella, but I doubt she was confident enough to try it. She'd've left it on a napkin – mark my words.'

Alice raced to the kitchen door and peered across the foyer. There, in the corner where the young man and woman had stood, was an empty coffee cup – and a napkin containing a single triangle of sandwich. She couldn't tell

from this distance, but she wouldn't have liked to bet money that it wasn't curried egg.

'Amazing!' She returned to Patty's side. 'How did you learn all this, Patty?'

'You get to be quite an expert in human nature, serving tea at funerals.' Patty clattered another plate onto the dish rack.

What a shame Alice hadn't known this about Patty before. It might have been useful in untangling other puzzling deaths. Now Alice just had to work out a way to see the family and friends of Stingray Bolland again – then she could dig a little deeper and find out if Patty was right.

But how was she to see them again? She touched her pendants and hoped Victoria had answers. Something about Stingray's death seemed a little fishy.