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DAUGHTER OF THE DEEP

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HARDING-PENCROFT ACADEMY

HOUSE DOLPHIN
communications, exploration, cryptography,
counter-intelligence

HOUSE SHARK
command, combat, weapons systems, logistics

HOUSE CEPHALOPOD
engineering, applied mechanics, innovation,
defensive systems

HOUSE ORCA
medicine, psychology, education, marine biology,
communal memory

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THE FRESHMAN CLASS OF HARDING-PENCROFT

HOUSE DOLPHIN

Ana Dakkar, prefect
Lee-Ann Best
Virgil Esparza
Halimah Nasser
Jack Wu

HOUSE SHARK

Gemini Twain, prefect
Dru Cardenas
Cooper Dunne
Kiya Jensen
Eloise McManus

HOUSE CEPHALOPOD

Tia Romero, prefect
Robbie Barr
Nelinha da Silva
Meadow Newman
Kay Ramsay

HOUSE ORCA

Franklin Couch, prefect
Ester Harding
Linzi Huang
Rhys Morrow
Brigid Salter

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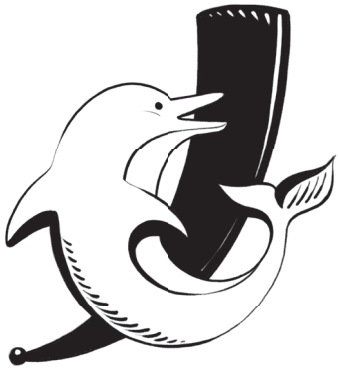

CHAPTER ONE

Here's the thing about life-shattering days.

They start just like any other. You don't realize your world is about to explode into a million smoking pieces of awfulness until it's too late.

The last Friday of my freshman year, I wake in my dorm room at five a.m. as usual. I get up quietly so as not to disturb my room-mates, change into my bikini and head for the ocean.

I love the campus in the early morning. The white concrete facades of the buildings are turning pink and turquoise in the sunrise. The quad's grassy lawn is empty except for seagulls and squirrels waging their eternal war for the snack crumbs we students have left behind. The air smells of sea salt, eucalyptus and fresh cinnamon rolls baking in the cafeteria. The cool Southern California breeze raises goosebumps on my arms and legs. It's times like this I can't believe I'm lucky enough to go to school at Harding-Pencroft Academy.

Assuming I survive this weekend's trials, of course. I might wash out in disgrace, or die tangled in a net at the bottom of some underwater obstacle course . . . But, hey, it's still better than ending the term doing five jillion multiple-choice problems on some state standardized test.

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I follow the gravel footpath that leads to the ocean.

A hundred yards past the naval-warfare building, the cliffs drop into the Pacific. Far below, white surf ribs the steel-blue sea. Waves rumble and reverberate around the curve of the bay like the snores of a giant.

My brother, Dev, is waiting for me at the edge of the cliff. 'You're late, Ana Banana.'

He knows I hate it when he calls me that.

'I *will* push you off,' I warn.

'Well, you could try.' When Dev grins, he does this lopsided squint, like he can't equalize the pressure in one ear. The other girls tell me it's adorable. I'm not convinced. His dark hair is spiky in front, like a sea urchin. He claims it's his 'style'. I think it's just because he sleeps with a pillow over his face.

As usual, he's wearing his standard black HP wetsuit with the silver Shark logo on the front, indicating his house. Dev thinks I'm crazy to make the dive in a bikini. In most ways, he's a tough guy. When it comes to cold temperatures, though, he's kind of a baby.

We do our pre-dive stretches. This spot is one of the few places along the California coast where you can free dive without getting smashed to pieces against the rocks below. The cliffs are sheer, plunging straight into the depths of the bay.

It's quiet and peaceful this time of morning. Despite Dev's responsibilities as a house captain, he is never too busy for our morning ritual. I love him for that.

'What did you bring for Socrates today?' I ask.

Dev gestures nearby. Two dead squid lie glistening in the grass. As a senior, Dev has access to the aquarium's feeding supplies. This means he can sneak little treats for our friend under the bay. The squid are about a foot long from tail to tentacles – slimy, silver and brown like oxidized aluminium.

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Loligo opalescens. California market squid. Lifespan six to nine months.

I can't turn off the data stream. Our marine biology professor, Dr Farez, has trained us too well. You learn to remember the details because everything, literally *everything*, will be on her quizzes.

Socrates has another name for *Loligo opalescens*. He calls them breakfast.

'Nice.' I pick up the squid, still cold from the freezer, and hand one to Dev. 'You ready?'

'Hey, before we dive . . .' His expression turns serious. 'I have something I want to give you . . .'

I don't know if he's telling the truth or not, but I always fall for his distractions. As soon as he has my attention, he turns and jumps off the cliff.

I curse. 'Oh, you little –'

Whoever jumps in first has a better chance of finding Socrates first.

I take a deep breath and leap after him.

Cliff-diving is the ultimate rush. I free-fall ten stories, wind and adrenalin screaming in my ears, then punch through the icy water.

I relish the shock to my system: the sudden cold, the sting of the brine on my cuts and scrapes. (If you don't have cuts and scrapes as a student at HP, you haven't been doing your combat exercises right.)

I plunge straight through a school of copper rockfish – dozens of frilly orange-and-white bruisers who look like punk-rock koi. But their tough looks are just for show, since they scatter with a massive burst of YIKES! Ten metres below me, I spot the shimmering whirlwind of Dev's bubble trail. I follow it down.

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My static apnoea record is five minutes. Obviously, I can't hold my breath that long when I'm exerting myself, but still, this is my environment. On the surface, Dev has the advantage of strength and speed. Underwater, I've got the endurance and agility. At least, that's what I tell myself.

My brother floats above the sandy seabed, his legs crossed like he's been meditating there for hours. He's keeping the squid behind his back, because Socrates has arrived and is nuzzling Dev's chest as if to say, *C'mon, I know what you've got for me*.

Socrates is a gorgeous animal. And I don't say that just because my house is Dolphin. He's a young male bottlenose, nine feet long, with bluish-grey skin and a prominent dark streak across his dorsal fin. I know he isn't *actually* smiling. His long-beaked mouth is just shaped that way. Still, I find it unbelievably cute.

Dev produces his squid. Socrates snaps it up and swallows it whole. Dev grins at me, a bubble escaping from his lips. His expression says *Ha-ha, the dolphin likes me best*.

I offer Socrates my squid. He's only too happy to have seconds. He lets me scratch his head, which is as smooth and taut as a water balloon, then rub his pectoral fins. (Dolphins are suckers for pectoral-fin rubs.)

Then he does something I'm not expecting. He bucks, pushing my hand up with his rostrum in a gesture I've come to read as *Let's go!* or *Hurry!* He veers and swims off, the wake from his tail buffeting my face.

I watch until he disappears into the gloom. I wait for him to circle back. He doesn't.

I don't understand.

Usually he doesn't eat and run. He likes to hang out. Dolphins are naturally social. Most days, he'll follow us to the surface and leap over our heads, or play hide-and-seek, or pepper us with

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squeaks and clicks that sound like questions. That's why we call him Socrates. He never gives answers – just asks questions.

But today he seemed agitated . . . almost worried.

At the edge of my vision, the blue lights of the security grid stretch across the mouth of the bay – a glowing diamond pattern I've grown used to over the last two years. As I watch, the lights wink out, then flicker back on. I've never seen them do that before.

I glance at Dev. He doesn't appear to have noticed the change in the grid. He points up. *Race you.*

He kicks for the surface, leaving me in a cloud of sand.

I want to stay under longer. I'm curious to see if the lights go out again, or if Socrates comes back. But my lungs are burning. Reluctantly, I follow Dev.

After I join him on the surface and catch my breath, I ask if he saw the grid flicker off.

He squints at me. 'Are you sure you weren't just blacking out?'

I splash his face. 'I'm serious. We should tell somebody.'

Dev wipes the water from his eyes. He still looks sceptical.

To be honest, I've never understood why we have a state-of-the-art electronic underwater barrier across the mouth of the bay. I know it's supposed to keep the sea life safe by keeping out everything else, like poachers, recreational divers and pranksters from our rival high school, Land Institute. But it seems like overkill, even for a school that produces the world's best marine scientists and naval cadets. I don't know exactly how the grid works. I *do* know it isn't supposed to flicker, though.

Dev must see that I'm genuinely worried. 'Fine,' he says. 'I'll report it.'

'Also, Socrates was acting weird.'

'A dolphin acting weird. Okay, I'll report that, too.'

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'I could do it, but, like you always say, I'm just a lowly freshman. You're the big, powerful house captain of the Sharks, so –'

He splashes me back. 'If you're done being paranoid, I really *do* have something for you.' He pulls a glittering chain from the pouch of his dive belt. 'Happy early birthday, Ana.'

He hands me the necklace: a single black pearl set in gold. It takes me a second to understand what he's given me. My chest tightens.

'Mom's?' I can barely say the word.

The pearl was the centrepiece of Mom's mangalsutra, her wedding necklace. It's also the only thing we have left of her.

Dev smiles, though his eyes get that familiar melancholy drift. 'I got the pearl reset. You'll be fifteen next week. She'd want you to wear it.'

This is the sweetest thing he's ever done for me. I'm going to start weeping. 'But . . . why not wait until next week?'

'You're leaving for your freshman trials today. I wanted you to have the pearl for luck – just in case, you know, you fail spectacularly or something.'

He really knows how to ruin a moment.

'Oh, shut up,' I say.

He laughs. 'I'm kidding, of course. You're going to do great. You always do great, Ana. Just be careful, okay?'

I feel myself flush. I'm not sure what to do with all this warmth and affection. 'Well . . . the necklace is beautiful. Thank you.'

' 'Course.' He stares at the horizon, a flicker of worry in his dark brown eyes. Maybe he's thinking about the security grid, or he really *is* nervous about my weekend trials. Or maybe he's thinking about what happened two years ago, when our parents flew over that horizon for the last time.

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'Come on.' He musters another reassuring smile, as he has done so often for my sake. 'We'll be late for breakfast.'

Always hungry, my brother, and always moving – the perfect Shark captain.

He swims for shore.

I look at my mother's black pearl – her talisman that was supposed to bring long life and protection from evil. Unfortunately for her and my father, it did neither. I scan the horizon, wondering where Socrates has gone, and what he was trying to tell me.

Then I swim after my brother, because suddenly I don't want to be alone in the water.