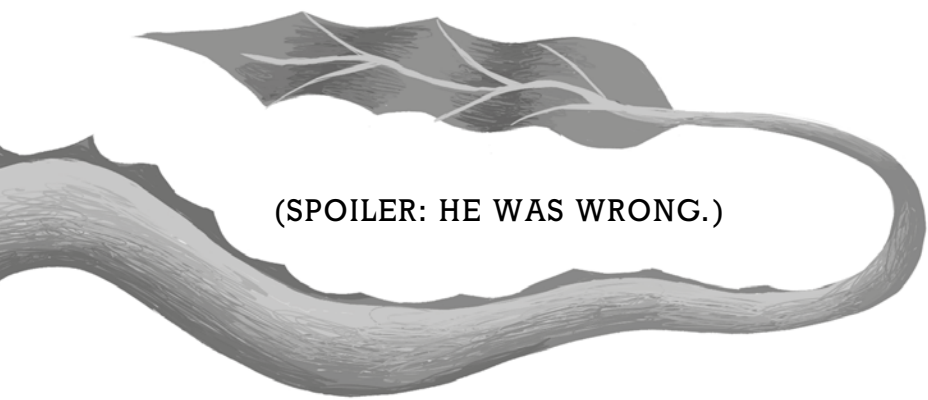
ALEX NEPTUNE
DRAGON THIEF

"THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SEA MONSTER," ALEX SAID FIRMLY.



(SPOILER: HE WAS WRONG.)

For Teddy,

Hard-earned, well-deserved, so loved.



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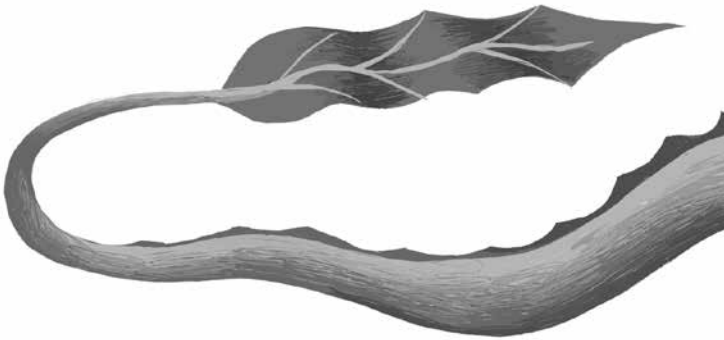
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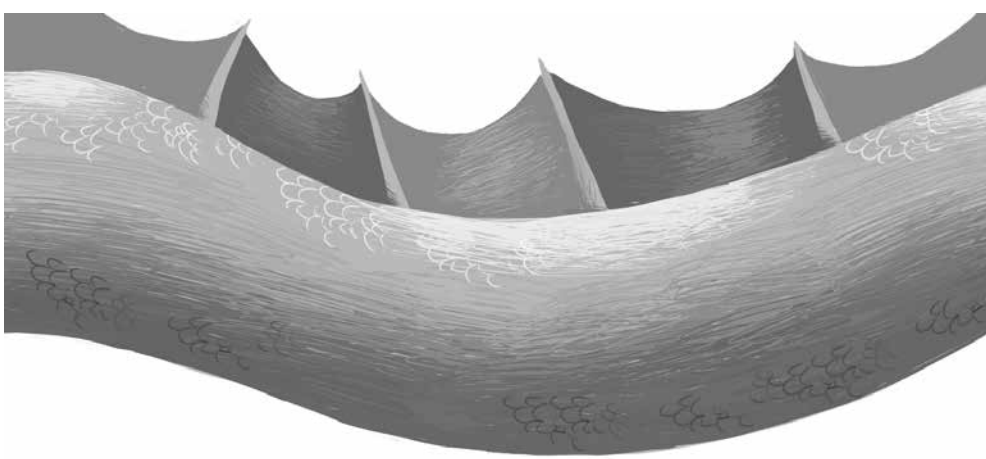
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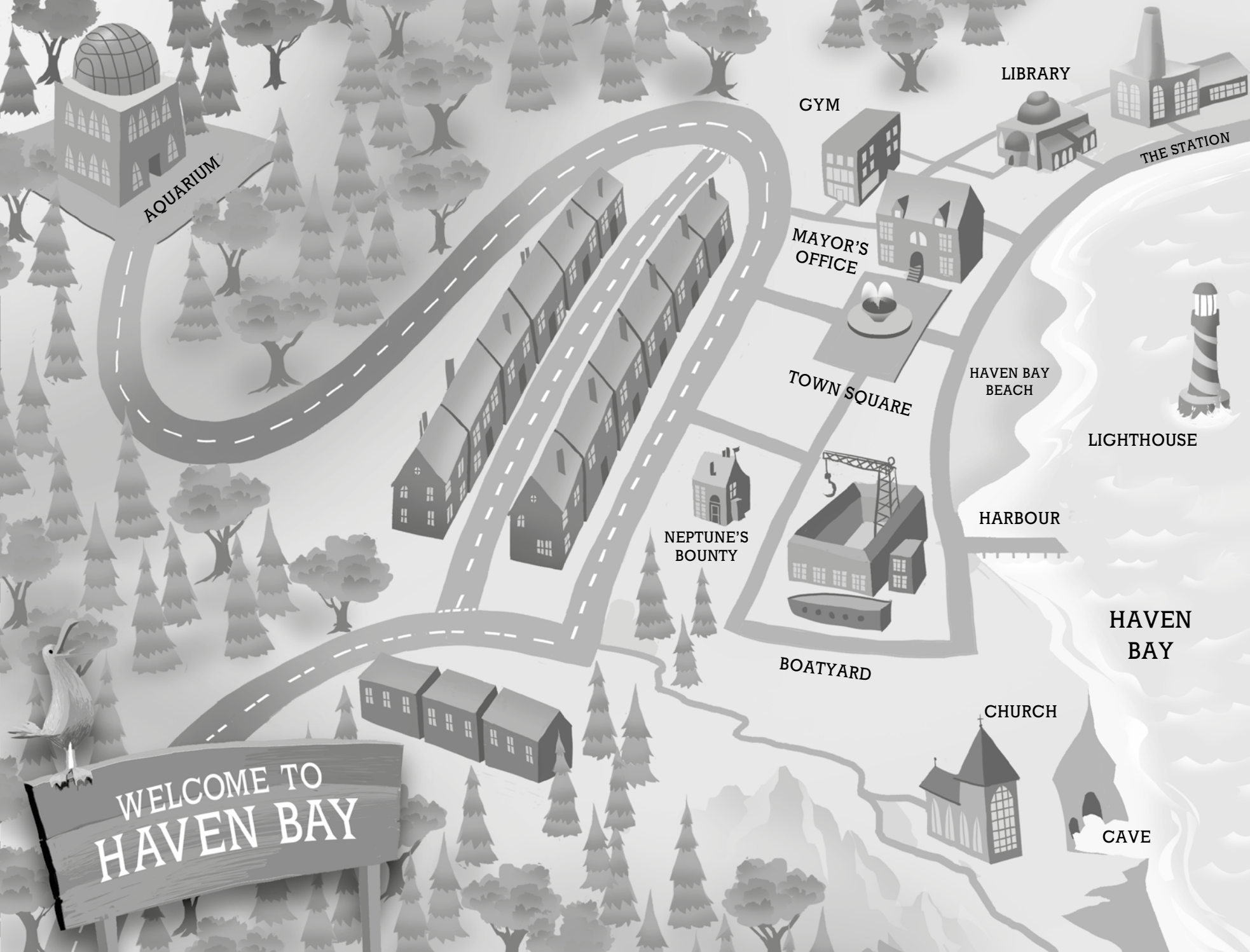
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AQUARIUM
GYM
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THE STATION
MAYOR'S OFFICE
TOWN SQUARE
HAVEN BAY BEACH
LIGHTHOUSE
NEPTUNE'S BOUNTY
HARBOUR
BOATYARD
HAVEN BAY
CHURCH
CAVE
WELCOME TO
HAVEN BAY



CHAPTER ONE

For as long as Alex Neptune could remember, the sea had been trying to kill him.

The very first time he dipped a toe into the ocean, a rogue wave had crashed over his head and swept him off his feet. Ever since, a gentle paddle would summon the tide foaming high to drag him out of his depth, a timid swim inviting seaweed to wrap fast around his legs and haul him under. His mere presence could provoke vicious currents and monstrous swells from the calmest seas.

Everybody told Alex it was just bad luck. Only he knew the truth.

The ocean wanted him dead.

The cause of this maritime grudge remained a mystery,

so his best chance of surviving it was to stay away from the water altogether.

Which was a problem when he had lived his entire life in the seaside town of Haven Bay.

"I got my underwear wet."

Zoey Wu, his best friend, squelched up the beach from the waterline. Although her clothes were dripping wet, the sea had failed to wash away the black grease smeared across her cheeks or the sawdust shavings stuck in her straight black fringe. She lived at the local boatyard with her dad, who handled repairs and sold spare parts to fund his dream of becoming an artist, creating bizarre sculptures from scrap metal in his spare time. Zoey spent the summer holidays pretending to help, while secretly stealing bits and bobs to transform into what she claimed were brilliant inventions. Alex had lost count of the number of times she had accidentally burned off her eyebrows.

"Can you *please* hurry up?" Alex pressed his back against the sea wall, as far away from the lapping tide as he could get.

"You shouldn't hate the ocean so much," Zoey said. "It hasn't tried to murder you in ages."

Alex didn't *hate* the ocean. The repeated assassination attempts – as well as Grandpa expressly forbidding him from going anywhere near it – had simply left him terrified

of it. Sometimes he was sure the ocean actually taunted him. Waves pealing against shore, wind whistling over rocks, seagulls cackling in wheeling circles – it all felt as if the water was beckoning him into its clutches so it could finish him off for good.

He shivered and turned away towards town. Haven Bay was an old fishing village built on a hill that lifted steeply from the ocean. It rose in layers: first, the wide sea wall bounded the beach, topped by the wooden-framed shops and cobbles of the high street, with the old harbour and the boatyard at one side of the bay.

The next layer up the hill was multicoloured houses, faded to pastel shades by countless summers, tottering against each other like a pirate's crooked teeth. Above those was a thick strip of trees and bushes rising steeply up until the hill flattened at its highest point.

There, Alex could just see the domed glass structure housing the aquarium. The unlikely location had been selected a century before by an eccentric mayor who believed visitors would enjoy the panoramic sea view. Unfortunately, this made the aquarium extravagantly expensive to operate and it had finally closed down a few years ago. Now the empty tanks inside the grand glass walls had been left to rot.

"Let's find out what's *really* in the water." Zoey had

collected a jam jar of seawater. It had taken months of begging before her dad had agreed to buy her a chemistry set so they could perform some tests. Now she busied herself wedging test tubes into the sand and filling them up.

While she squeezed droplets into the tubes, Alex gazed out across the bay. The shifting waves smouldered under the broad disc of the setting sun. An unruly formation of seabirds was making its raucous return to roosts in the nearby cliffs.

It would have been beautiful, were it not for the litter that smothered the water. Carrier bags and plastic bottles, tins and crisp packets, yoghurt pots and cotton buds formed floating bands of filth. Oil glistened on the surface of the waves. The lapping water left a shifting black tideline of gunk along the beach.

Barely a year had passed since Mayor Humbertus Parch took control of Haven Bay and approved construction of a mysterious facility known as the Station. The grey concrete building perched on the water's edge like an unsightly barnacle. Apart from the arrival or departure of the occasional boat, nobody was ever seen going in or out. Security guards in black uniforms stood watch outside every hour of the day.

The mayor claimed the Station monitored water quality. But shortly after it was built the water turned foul and

tourists stopped showing up. It couldn't be a coincidence. In the pub, cafe and chip shop, locals grumbled their suspicions about the Station. But whenever anybody tried to investigate, key documents would conveniently disappear and professional water-testing teams would find their equipment sabotaged overnight.

Alex and Zoey hoped that Mayor Parch wouldn't notice two kids with a chemistry set. If they could prove the Station was to blame, Alex was sure the town would rise up and fight to get it shut down.

"What the heck?" said Zoey, snatching his attention.

The water inside the test tubes had turned a series of bright colours: orange, purple and a particularly sickly green.

"All of those are normal. This is the only one I don't understand." Zoey picked up the last tube in the row. The water inside had turned sludgy and grey like blended mussels. "There's a substance in the water I don't recognize."

"Could *that* be why it's so filthy?" asked Alex. "There can't be anything living out there by now. Nobody can even go swimming any more."

"At least that means they can't get eaten by sharks," said Zoey.

"We don't have sharks here," replied Alex. Over the years he had researched every sea creature in the world

capable of killing him. He figured there was no harm in being prepared. "And I've already told you, they hardly ever attack people."

"That's what the sharks want you to think," Zoey countered. "People go out there all the time, right, so it must be safe. And then *snap!* They get chomped the heck in half."

Alex shuddered. "There are way more dangerous things living in the ocean."

"Like the Water Dragon?"

Like most old seaside towns, Haven Bay was rife with stories and legends handed down over centuries. Alex knew all about them from the books his family sold in their souvenir shop. And every single local legend was tied to a mythical sea monster called the Water Dragon that had supposedly created the bay.

The story went that hundreds of years ago the people who lived along this shore forged a connection with a dragon that ruled over the waves. It gave them powers, allowing them to breathe underwater, live unnaturally long lives and communicate with the sea creatures they lived alongside.

All of that changed when the people betrayed the Water Dragon. In its fury, the dragon took an enormous bite out of the coast, destroying their civilization and forming the bay.

It would be a century before the dragon returned to Haven Bay.

Alex had always loved the stories, but now he was older he suspected they had been invented by bored fishermen and their hazy details exaggerated as they were handed down through the generations.

"There's no such thing as sea monsters," he said firmly.

Which was exactly when they heard a terrible gargle and turned to find a monster with an octopus for a head staggering along the beach towards them.