

DARKNESS

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ISBN 978-1-338-74629-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

First printing 2021

Book design by Keirsten Geise

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THE ISLAND

“Get ready,” said Hannah, pointing out into the gray.
“Here comes a big one.”

Alec found the wave she was pointing to, swollen and topped with white foam. He watched the water roll forward in a towering bulge. Just before it hit the rock spires, he did as Hannah had instructed and closed his eyes. In the blank world behind his eyelids, the wave made a *CRASH*, and for the first time he could hear what she was talking about, the deepness

of the sound, how it seemed full of tinier noises, how it echoed through the dark.

Alec opened his eyes and smiled at Hannah. His friend grinned back at him, her excitement making all the freckles around her cheekbones and nose form a shallow U.

“You heard it that time, right?” she said. “The heartbeat. I *swear*, there’s a heartbeat behind the way the waves crash.”

“I *think* so,” he said. He stared out at the white foam and dark water sucking away from the edges of Cathedral Rock, whose two tall, spiked towers climbed out of the water about a quarter mile from shore. From where Alec and Hannah sat atop the cliffs on the island’s south coast, Cathedral Rock was like a set of black horns, the seabirds ducking in and out of the nests they made in the towers’ surface like white ants. “Does the sound come from the stone that Cathedral’s made of? All the weird pores in the surface?”

“No, you *dork*,” said Hannah with an exaggerated sigh. “It’s because when you starve your eyes, you can hear all the little details of it. It’s about tricking your ears, not *rock science*.”

Alec wanted to groan at how she said *rock science* the way some people said *cockroaches*. “Rocks are cool,” he said softly.

“Yeah, I’m aware that you think that,” said Hannah. “I’m going to agree with you only so you don’t go further into *why*, or what *made* the Cathedral.”

He couldn’t help himself. “It’s probably some kind of igneous rock from a volcanic—”

“I will *pay you* not to talk about rocks,” said Hannah.

Alec laughed, and Hannah joined him. He liked that laugh, all the heart she put behind it. It was part of why he let her poke fun of his nerdy hobby—he knew if he really wanted to tell her about rock formations, she’d listen. She was like the island that way, hard around the edges, not *sweet* or *easy* the way places were supposed to be.

They listened to the crashing waves awhile longer, swinging their feet over the edge of the cliffs. Alec watched the swirling overcast sky and the slate-gray deep of the sea stretch off into the distance until they met with the dotted shoreline of Seattle in the distance. He felt the yawn of the cliff beneath him, the pull of the

open air and the eighty-foot drop below. Then Hannah whipped out her phone—sequined to death with a giant PopSocket on the back—and checked the time.

“I gotta help my mom with dinner stuff,” she said, climbing to her feet.

“Isn’t it, like, eleven thirty?” he asked. “You haven’t even had lunch yet.”

“Yeah, but she’s making stew, and that takes all day,” Hannah replied. “You wanna come help? You can explore the house like a scientific weirdo.” She smirked. “Or hang out with Big Gran.”

Alec shuddered at the image of Hannah’s spooky great-grandmother, but the thought of getting free rein to wander around her endless old house was too much to pass up.

“Count me in,” he said.

They got on their bikes—Hannah’s caked with scabs of rust from the seawater in the breeze, Alec’s just starting to bloom with red—and rode off toward town. Alec took a deep breath of the crisp, salty air and watched the old, flaky houses of Founders Island pass him by, leaning this way and that on half-sunken foundations and rotten-wood porches. When he and

Mom had arrived on the ferry six months ago and moved into their own ramshackle, sea-sagging home, he'd been so bummed out, so angry about trading their clean white San Francisco apartment for this barnacle-covered sinkhole of a town. Now, even though he wasn't sure he *loved* the drafty old place, it was beginning to grow on him . . . like a barnacle. He'd never seen anything else like Founders Island, all gray and lopsided. And so far, he'd only seen it in winter, which was never a great time to judge a seaside town.

They sailed through the village—mostly a collection of boarded-up antique shops waiting for tourist season, though Mr. Merka waved to them through the windows of the grocery store. Then they pedaled up over the hills toward the northeast shore. They turned onto a sandy dirt road, and Alec could see Hannah's house on its hill in the distance, all gables and chimneys and shutters, like three wooden houses had crashed into one another. People in town called it the Honeycomb because of how many secret passages and small rooms ran through it. Besides examining the island's countless unusual rock formations, exploring the 'Comb was Alec's favorite thing to do here so far.

Hannah saw the stone come rolling out onto the road before Alec did, and swerved. Alec's mind tried to juggle the pieces at once—Hannah's bike skidding up dirt, the huge gray rock tumbling into their path, the laughter coming from behind a bush—but in the end he was too late.

His front wheel hit the stone, bit into it, and sent the back of his bike flying up. He had just enough time to twist his body so that he landed on his side and not his head.

Wham. A flash of white crossed Alec's eyes, and the air shot out of his lungs. The sandy road burned at his points of contact—his cheekbone, his elbow, the back of his hand, his knee. When he finally slid to a stop, he tried to scramble back to his feet but was so shocked and winded that he found he could barely move.

"Alec!" cried Hannah. He heard her bike scratch to a halt, then felt her kneeling next to him, her cool hand on his cheek. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," he croaked, trying to get his wits back. "What *happened?*"

"Yeesh, newbie, you gotta be careful!"