

Josephine AGAINST THE Sea

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CHAPTER 1

It's 4:58 p.m. and Daddy still isn't back from his date. I should have never allowed him to leave home.

He's been gone for two whole hours. Two hours we could have spent watching the cricket match on TV! But nooo, he *had* to go out and have ice cream with "a friend." We have good cherry-vanilla ice cream right here in the freezer. He could have eaten that with me.

With my binoculars, I see Jalopy, his old white Jeep, coming from at least two minutes away. I yank the binoculars away from my face and glance at the old brass clock.

4:59 p.m.

He promised to be back by five.

He's officially going to be late.

I peer through the binoculars again and notice a woman with big, curly hair in the passenger seat. *And he's not alone.*

I growl under my breath and prepare to defend my territory. Across the street, I notice Ahkai, my neighbor and best friend, taking out the garbage. His face is almost as sour as mine.

I can guess what's in that bag. It's Saturday, which means his mother's made steamed flying fish and corn-meal cou-cou for his entire family.

That's when an idea hits me.

Operation Slime!

I'm going to make sure that "friend" gets a small taste of life with a fisherman like my daddy. I do my evil laugh—it starts with a low chuckle and climbs into a roaring cackle.

Ahkai looks up at my window, shakes his head, and hurries back inside.

He knows what's coming...

I scramble to message him from my walkie-talkie under the bed.

"Come in, Ahkai. Over."

I let go of the button and wait.

Just static.

The old brass clock ticks.

“Ahkai, youuu better ANSWER ME! Over.”

Silence.

Oh, right. I forgot Ahkai insists on using code names.

“Come in, Alpha Mike. Over.”

Static, and then—

“This is Alpha Mike. Alpha Mike. Alpha Mike . . .” I wait for Ahkai to finish whispering his code name exactly five times. That’s just how he is. He’s on the— what’s it called again? It reminds me of something wonderful . . . Awesome? Rhythm? Autism! That’s it. He’s on the autism spectrum, and I am one of the few people Ahkai utters a word to.

People think he’s odd, but I don’t mind. He’s my best friend in the whole world. Actually, he’s my only friend in the whole world, which is fine by me.

“Alpha Mike, retrieve the stinky garbage and bring it to my location. Over.”

I waste precious seconds trying to persuade Ahkai to hide in the hibiscus bushes. I don’t know why he bothers to protest. He never turns his back on a mission.

Though the bush is about four feet high, it completely covers his short, slight frame. He’s dressed the part of a good lookout, wearing a dark green shirt and black

jeans. I push a red hibiscus flower into the black knitted tam on his head to make sure he's fully camouflaged.

Then, I hear a jackhammer rattling in the distance. That's Jalopy, coughing its way home. I really didn't need binoculars—I can hear that engine coming from a mile away. I rush inside to get into position at the top of the stairs.

Soon, Ahkai chimes in on the walkie-talkie.

“The target has left the rickety vehicle. She is approaching the red *Hibiscus furcellatus* bush and ascending the stairs. She will reach your location in approximately ten point three seconds. Nine point six seconds. Eight—”

I put the walkie-talkie on the floor and pick up my battered cricket ball. Since “the incident,” I'm not allowed near Coach Broomes's equipment room, so I'm forced to hunt for rejected cricket balls like some kind of cow-leather scavenger. I had fished this one out of the bushes when Jared, the best cricket player at my school, hit it for six. Almost all the thread is gone, and I get little bounce when it hits the grass. But I don't need bounce now; I need precision.

The bucket of slime on top of the fridge has to tip at just the right angle.

I grip the cricket ball between two fingers for a

straight throw. I've heard people on TV compare cricket to baseball because both sports use bats, but cricket is FAR superior. For one thing, cricket balls are much harder and heavier, which will come in handy to move the full bucket.

Focus. Precision. Speed.

Every good bowler knows the best type of delivery to hit the target, and unfortunately for Daddy's date, I'm the best bowler in the village.

The back door opens, and I know my daddy—the gentleman that he is—will let his “friend” inside the house first. I am overwhelmed by the smell of fruity, cheap perfume.

Now!

I release the ball and watch as it speeds toward the target.

Yes! Yes!

Nooo . . .

The ball misses the rim of the bucket by a whisper. I hope that its wind is enough to make the bucket lose balance from the edge of the refrigerator, but it's not my lucky day. Instead, the ball continues across the kitchen and crashes through the window.

The glass shatters.

Daddy's date screams and tries to duck, but she's

wobbly on her six-inch heels. Daddy grabs her by the arm, steadying her. He looks at the broken glass on the floor, and then glares at me.

“Josephine Elisabeth Zara Cadogan!”

Through the open door I see Ahkai diving from the hibiscus bushes, scrambling to get away before he’s discovered. As usual, he trips over his two left feet, decides to stay on the ground, and crawls through the gate next door.

“Ow much times I must tell you not to throw balls in the ’ouse!” Daddy slaps the side of the fridge in frustration.

I gasp as the bucket rocks. Daddy glances up and manages to jump out of the way just before the bucket tips over.

I guess it’s my lucky day after all.

All the contents—the fish guts and scales—fall on Daddy’s date. It looks like a brain has exploded on top of her head, with one particularly long, fat piece of entrails sliding down her ear and plopping onto her bare shoulder like a vomit-colored earthworm. I can’t help but gag at the putrid smell of the fish intestines. A swarm of flies zips through the back door and dances above her head, eager to feast on the foul, rotting flesh.

“Omigod omigod omigod!” she cries.