



RUBBY RED FORT

TAKE YOUR
LAST BREATH

LAUREN CHILD



RUBY LAUREN CHILD **REDFORT**

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

For **Helena**

The Old Seafarers' Legend

**They say it can lure a
child to a watery grave,
that it can strangle
the breath from the
strongest man. Some
say it can persuade
a stranger to tell his
darkest secret.**

Coming Up for Air

THE SUN FLICKERED ON THE OCEAN, cutting bright diamonds of light into the surface of the indigo water. A three-year-old girl was peering over the side of a sailboat, staring down into the deep. The only sounds came from her parents' laughter, the singsong hum of a man's voice, and the clapping of the waves against the yacht.

Gradually the sounds became less and less distinct until the girl was quite alone with the ocean. The water seemed to be pulling her, drawing her to it . . . confiding a secret, almost whispering to her.

She barely felt herself fall as she tipped forward and slipped into the soft ink of the sea.

Down she twisted, her arms, her legs above her like tendrils. The water felt smooth and perfectly cold; fish darted and silver things whisked by — her breath bubbled up as transparent pearls.

Then suddenly, like a snap of the fingers, all the fish were gone: it was just the girl in the big wide ocean.

But she wasn't quite alone.

There *was* something else.

Something calling to her, but she couldn't see what. *It* saw *her* though, with ancient eyes unblinking as it steadily pulsed its way through the blue. Something with long, long snaking arms hovering between her and nothing.

And then, vine-like, the thing coiled a limb around her ankle and tugged her firmly in the direction of infinity. Down to who knew where.

Oops, thought the child. And on she spun. Bubbles fizzed about her, and her head began to throb. Her breath almost gone.

And then *yank!* Something grabbed her arm, *someone* grabbed her arm. The strangling-things released her — suddenly she was coming up for air, breaking through the surface of the ocean.

She found herself slapped mackerel-like onto the hot deck of the boat, coughing saltwater from her lungs. Her green eyes blinked open and she smiled up at two troubled faces. She felt the water dribble from her ears, and heard the sound of the gulls screaming in the sky above.

An Ordinary Kid

WHEN RUBY REDFORT WAS FOUR, she noticed something unnoticeable while reading the back of the Choco Puffles box. What looked like a word-search game to every other breakfast-eating kid, she could see a glance was in fact some kind of message — a code.

It took Ruby five days and seven helpings of Choco Puffles to puzzle it out, and when she had, this is what she read.

Fill in this coupon and win a lifetime supply of Choco Puffles. Entry address can be found somewhere on this package. WARNING: you will have to search long and hard to find it.

Ruby found the address in thirty-two seconds, cut out the coupon on the side of the box, filled in her name and address, popped it in an envelope, and asked her father to mail it.

He forgot.

Ruby discovered this thirteen and three-quarter months later when she was searching her dad's pockets for confiscated Hubble-Yum bubble gum. There, in his gray suit jacket, was the slightly battered envelope, addressed in her handwriting, stamp in the top right-hand corner. The deadline had long passed.

Ruby took the letter up to her room and slipped it into the secret hiding place she had made with the door frame of her bedroom. It was a shame about the lifetime supply of Choco Puffles; they were, after all, her favorite breakfast cereal.

Some several years later . . .

Don't Back Away or They Will See You as Prey

"IT'S PERFECT WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR SHARKS," announced the dive instructor. "So don't be surprised if you run into one or two. Don't go panicking or anything."

Ruby Redfort spat in her diving mask and rubbed at the lenses, rinsing them with seawater. Her fellow students were checking their gear, zipping up their wet suits, and snapping on fins.

Ruby, a newly recruited Spectrum agent, was attending a dive camp at a secluded location on one of Hawaii's many islands. The dive master was an affable sort; he had tutored so many agents during his years as an instructor that they all sort of merged into one, with the exception of Ruby.

Agent Redfort kind of stood out from the crowd.

A thirteen-year-old schoolgirl not even five feet in fins, sleek dark hair parted to one side, neatly secured with a barrette above her right eye, it was hard to ignore *her*. Aside from anything else, she was the only dive student here still attending junior high. Everyone else had long since graduated high school; everyone else was in full-time Spectrum employment. Ruby hadn't even heard of Spectrum six weeks ago.

This, in itself, wasn't surprising. Not many people had heard of Spectrum. It was an organization so secret that access to its headquarters could change from day to day, hour to hour. Once you exited, you could never be quite sure you would ever find your way back: which was just the way Spectrum liked it.

Spectrum — a spy agency set up to foil the plots and plans of evil geniuses capable of grand theft, extortion, fraud, and murder — did not employ agents who were less than a hundred percent smart and a hundred percent discreet. As far as LB was concerned, "You mess up, you leave forever."

LB — the big cheese, the top dog, the head honcho in charge of Spectrum 8 — was not big on second chances, so the odds of getting kicked out were high, and Ruby would have lost her agent status almost before she'd begun if it hadn't been for one thing: she was brilliant.

Actually, brilliant was an understatement. Ruby Redfort was a genius: her specialty lay in puzzles and codes. In fact, she had won the Junior Code-Cracker Championships when she was just seven, and the following year was offered a place at Harvard University, though she had turned it down flat. She didn't want to be regarded as some kind of geek freak.

It was because of this phenomenal skill at cracking codes that LB had recruited Ruby. The Spectrum 8 boss had no desire to employ a kid. Kids could be trouble, LB knew that — but what choice did she have? Her ace code breaker, Lopez, had been murdered at the hand of Count von Viscount, a villain she dreaded that one shivered to speak his name.

When one dared to speak his name at all.

Ruby had first encountered LB about a month ago, on her first visit to the Spectrum offices. The spy boss had been dressed entirely in white and sitting behind a huge desk that dominated an entire white office; the red polish on her toenails being the only flash of color in the room. At fifty something she looked both beautiful and intimidating: one tough cookie. Ruby was a confident, somewhat fearless kid, but she instinctively knew that in LB she had met her match: an intelligent woman who did not suffer fools gladly. In fact did not suffer them at all.

It was fair to say Ruby hadn't exactly followed orders during the weeks spent working on her first Spectrum assignment, but she had foiled the Fool's Gold Gang and prevented Count von Viscount from stealing the priceless Jade Buddha of Khotan.

It was for this reason that LB had granted Ruby Redfort a second chance, and for this reason that she was now being trained at the Spectrum dive camp.

"If you do come face-to-face with one of our ocean friends," continued the dive instructor, "the just stay where you are. Don't back away. If it comes toward you, then swim toward it. He'll probably get the message."

"Oh, yeah," said Ruby. "And what message is that?"

"That you aren't lunch. Lunch usually swims in the other direction," said the dive instructor with a wink.

"And what if this shark ain't so smart?" asked Ruby. "What then?"

"Then," said the dive master, "it will probably try to explore you with its teeth. That's how they check things out. Only you don't really want them to do so as it could mean waving bye-bye to an arm or a leg."

"Well, I kinda need my arms for waving — my legs sorta tend to come in handy too," said Ruby.

"So that's why I suggest you swim with this stick." The instructor picked up a retractable aluminum pole. "If said shark gets too near, just prod him and he'll most likely back off."

"And if he doesn't?" asked one of the other divers — a guy named Bosco. He was trying to sound casual, but you could tell the whole mentioning of sharks thing had him worried.

The dive master smiled. "Then try to look unappetizing."

Ruby rolled her eyes.

"Don't you worry, Redfort," said the instructor, chuckling. "It's highly unlikely they'll want to snack on you — far too small."

"On the other hand," said Kip Holbrook, another of Ruby's fellow trainees, "maybe the kid's the perfect bite-size portion."

"Funny, really funny," said Ruby. She pulled down her mask and fell backward off the boat.

Ruby Redfort was not scared of sharks — not yet anyway.

One Drop Could Save Your Life

NOW, THERE ARE A FEW LOGISTICAL PROBLEMS involved in being a schoolkid secret agent, the most obvious of which being: how to get enough time off class to carry out your secret-agenting missions.

Not easy. But Ruby Redfort was a good persuader: she could convince most people of most things. She avoided “complete” untruths if at all possible, preferring to steer clear of certain topics. Her tactic was to leave out various details, keep the picture blurry; this wasn’t so much lying as being economical with the facts. As far as this particular trip went, Ruby’s friends believed her to be on a family vacation over spring break. She hadn’t told them that she was with her family; she hadn’t told them she was on vacation; they had just put two and two together and come to this conclusion.

As far as Ruby’s parents were concerned, Ruby was on a school dive trip: “An opportunity not to be missed,” was how Ruby had sold it to them. She had not actually told them that it was a school dive trip, but they had naturally made this assumption.

RULE 65: PEOPLE BELIEVE WHAT THEY WANNA BELIEVE.

In other words, if they expect you to be on a school dive trip, then they’ll assume that that’s where you are.

Ruby’s personal dive instructor was Agent Kekoa. Ruby had never seen Kekoa in anything but swimming gear or dive suits, and her hair — black, long, and sleek — was always tied neatly back from her face in a practical way.

Kekoa was the strong, silent type, not what you would on the whole call blabby; she only spoke when there was something she really needed to say. Perhaps this was a habit developed in the ocean, where talking was not an option. Or perhaps she had found the career that perfectly suited a person who didn’t particularly need to share.

Ruby, on the other hand, was indeed a talker. She often found it hard to keep her mouth shut, and so to her, Agent Kekoa was a conundrum.

“But what if I need to tell you something — urgently I mean?” said Ruby.

“Signal,” replied Kekoa.

“Yeah, but I mean, how many signals are there?”

“Enough,” said Kekoa.

“But I mean, what if I need to say something that there isn’t a signal *for*?”

“Then keep it for later.”

“So you’re saying there’s no gadget for underwater talking?”

“There is,” replied Kekoa. “But I don’t use it. Much better to listen with your ears, your eyes, your hands; use all your senses and keep your mouth shut. Just . . .” Kekoa drew her fingers across her lips. Her meaning couldn’t have been clearer: *keep it to yourself*, *zip it*, or *shut your cake hole*, depending on how polite you thought she was being.

Ruby shrugged, put her regulator in her mouth, and sank beneath the waves. Of course, Kekoa was right. Signals did the job fine. There was no need for words down here, and Ruby, despite her talkative nature, enjoyed this watery universe full of sounds rather than voices.

As they swam deeper into the ocean, they saw some incredible marine life, passed cities of corals

met creatures that were beautiful, a few that were lethal, and several that were both. Useful to know the difference, but the general rule seemed to be, don't touch! A lot of these things could sting, and some of these stings could kill.

If you *were* unfortunate enough to brush tentacles with something unfriendly, then there was still hope. Each Spectrum agent was equipped with a tiny vial of anti-sting Miracle antidote, just enough to save a life if administered at once. It came in a little fluorescent orange envelope bearing a tiny logo of a fly, with a picture showing the canister attached to the zipper of a dive suit. It was very discreet and looked like it was just part of the design, a tag or something.

The label said:

ANTIDOTE SERUM FOR SEVERE UNDERWATER STINGS

Administer fast for successful results.

CONTAINS ONE DOSE.

Followed by the caution:

Attach canister to wet-suit zipper and

DO NOT REMOVE.

Kekoa repeated this particular instruction more than once. "Keep it attached to the zipper on your dive suit and never be without it. These few drops could be the most important liquid you ever taste. You understand?"

Ruby had nodded. She had no intention of letting go of the tiny life-saving tincture. Why would she? Only a total bozo would deliberately part company with a piece of gear that could prevent his or her death.

Once the dive basics had been mastered, Ruby picked up other skills. She learned how to navigate underwater in daylight and in moonlight and, finally, in pitch-dark swimming through underwater caves. It was here that Ruby came up against the one thing she was *truly* afraid of.

Small confined spaces. Spaces that might be short on air. Spaces where you might find yourself gasping for breath. Spaces where you were highly likely to die.

They brought on her deepest fear: her claustrophobia.

As Ruby discovered, claustrophobia made cave navigation *particularly* challenging. A large part of underwater caving was about discovering ways in: fissures in rocks that led to secret caves, to spaces inhabited only by sea life. Sometimes the rock entrance would appear impossibly small, but with a certain amount of contortion and expertise one could make it in and hopefully out. How to look for telltale signs of ways *out* was a key part of the training, for obvious reasons. Ruby had rarely been so grateful to learn anything before.

The less time she had to spend in underwater caves, the better — in fact, she wished quite fervently never to have to go in one again.

It was a wish that wasn't going to be granted.

Plankton and Sea Cucumbers

DURING DIVE TRAINING, Ruby was also given instruction in unarmed underwater combat. This was even harder than it might sound. Punching underwater was a little like running in space. The trick seemed to be to disable your opponent by cutting off their air supply, or releasing their dive weights. Kekoa was an expert: she was slight and she was fast, and Ruby mastered dodges and grips and tackles.

Agent Kip Holbrook was Ruby's in-training dive partner, and the two of them spent a whole lot of time winding each other up.

"Redfort, you call that a punch? I coulda sworn I just got patted on the nose by a plankton."

"Holbrook, you call that a nose? I coulda sworn I just spotted a rare and ugly sea cucumber."

They got along like a house on fire.

Ruby particularly looked forward to mealtimes. Ruby Redfort might be shrimp-size compared to the other trainee agents, but she'd always had a big appetite, and Spectrum camp food was surprisingly good. On the whole, she was having a pretty good time; her fellow trainees were a friendly bunch, and hanging out on a Hawaiian island was no huge chore. Everything was swell.

Well, except for Sergeant Cooper.

"Redfort! Get your sorry behind out of that bunk before I inhale my next breath or tonight you and your bed ain't even gonna make contact."

This order — given every daybreak by Sergeant Cooper, the drill sergeant employed by Spectrum — "motivate" — was beginning to wear.

Oh, brother, thought Ruby. She was not a natural early bird, and so would reluctantly and with some effort drag herself from her uncomfortable bunk. More than once she had found herself scrubbing the bathroom floor with an orange toothbrush (her own) — punishment detail.

If Sergeant Cooper wasn't impressed by Ruby's time-keeping, then her flouting of the camp dress code really got him marching up and down. His least favorite item was a T-shirt printed with the words: ***could you repeat that? I wasn't actually listening.***

"Redfort, how many times have I told you about that T-shirt of yours?"

"I'm sorry Sergeant Cooper, I haven't been counting, but I can take a wild guess if it's important to you."

Sergeant Cooper was keen to put Ruby "back in her box" whenever he got the chance. He was under the misguided impression that this hard-nut approach would instill respect in the kid.

He was wrong about that.

One such time was when Ruby had done particularly badly in her free-dive training, free diving being the art of swimming underwater unaided by any breathing apparatus. Ruby's parents were big fans of free diving; indeed, her father, Brant, had gone to Stanton University on a free-diving scholarship.

In fact, free diving was how Ruby's parents had met. Brant had been working with a famous Italian marine biologist, free-diving from his yacht off the coast of Italy. Sabina had been sailing single-handed around the Mediterranean and had bumped into Brant underwater. She was pretty good at holding her breath too, championship good.

As a result, there wasn't a lot that Ruby didn't know about breath-hold diving, but for the life of her she just couldn't begin to contemplate holding her breath for a whole lot longer than seemed entirely sensible. It went against everything that was natural and sane. Dive down 220 feet without oxygen? No, thank you. It was a claustrophobic's nightmare. The free-dive training involved a lot of slow, rigorous preparation — years of it, in fact. It was a difficult and dangerous technique to master, and Ruby wasn't about to risk her life for something that seemed so wrong. Diving to great depths with scuba gear: no problem. Diving with a snorkel and fins: a breeze. But ask her to hold her breath for more than one minute and one second? No way was she gonna do that. She didn't have the lung capacity which, combined with the darkness at great depths, made her feel claustrophobic.

On Thursday she resurfaced just as Sergeant Cooper walked by. This chance encounter was not a good one.

COOPER: *Well, well, well, look who it is. Agent Redfort coming up for air.*

REDFORT: *Jeepers, I should have stayed down a few minutes longer.*

COOPER: *I doubt that you are capable of that, Redfort. I hear you can only make one minute, hardly a record.*

REDFORT: *If I'd known I was going to be coming face-to-face with a giant sea cucumber when I next took a lungful, I might have put some effort in.*

COOPER: *You don't know what effort is, Redfort. Now, Bradley Baker, he really could hold his breath. Seven minutes, I heard. Years and years of hard work and training.*

REDFORT: *No kidding. Were you standing there holding the towel?*

COOPER: *It would have been a privilege to hand that young man his towel. You should take note: Baker also started his Spectrum duty as a kid — younger'n you an' smarter'n you too.*

REDFORT: *What? That's meant to bug me?*

But of course, it did bug her. This Bradley Baker guy bugged the life out of her. Of course, he had long since grown up, become the most versatile agent Spectrum ever trained, loved and admired by all — the youngest, smartest agent Spectrum had ever hired, and no one was going to let her forget it. To make matters worse, Bradley Baker had tragically met his end, dying in a plane crash in the line of duty, and so had died a hero's death. If Bradley Baker's ghost didn't haunt Ruby, then his legendary status certainly did.

Of course, no one got away with speaking to Sergeant Cooper this way, and Ruby found herself scrubbing all the latrines in the camp for the following three days. Kip Holbrook, who despite all the constant metaphorical hair-pulling was actually a nice guy, was kind enough to wade in and help her out. He didn't exactly know why but he found himself liking this kid from Twinford.

“Can I give you some advice, Redfort?” he asked in the middle of day three's latrine scrubbing. “You might wanna learn to keep that mouth of yours shut. It gets you in some unsanitary situations.”

“I can't help saying what's on my mind,” replied Ruby. “It's the way I am.”

“Then buy yourself a pair of good rubber gloves, because it looks like you're going to be scrubbing latrines for many years to come,” said Holbrook.

Having endured a week of what she saw as drill sergeant Cooper's poor attitude, Ruby wasn't exactly grief-stricken when one day she swam up through the clear ocean water to see a sign.

Well, to Ruby Redfort it was a sign: to the mere mortal it was just a donut on a plate sprinkled with candy numbers. The numbers she recognized without rearranging them: they were all digits that

together and in the right order made up one long familiar number. Without any hesitation she crammed the donut into her mouth and made her way hurriedly to the bank of telephones outside the canteen.

One of the phone booths had a half-drunk milk shake balanced on top of the phone and next to it a stack of coins. Ruby picked up the receiver and dialed the number. The phone was answered on the third ring.

“Double Donut, Marla speaking.”

“Hey, Marla, it’s Ruby.”

“Hang on, I’ll get him — he’s right here.”

One minute and twenty seconds later a man’s voice came on the line.

“Hello.”

“What took you?” Ruby said.

“Kid, can’t a person eat a donut in his favorite diner without getting harassed?”

“I believe you wanted me to contact you,” said Ruby.

“Glad you can still read the signs,” he said. “So how are the plankton?”

“Oh, the plankton are OK — it’s the sea cucumbers I’m having trouble with.”

“Sergeant Cooper?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I gather he isn’t your biggest fan.”

“I’m not too fond of him either.”

“Well, this is your lucky day, Redfort. Dive school is done with you and Twinford Junior High would like you back Monday at eight a.m. pronto. So slip out of your fins. You’re on a plane back to Twinford in . . . oh, seventeen minutes.”

Ruby Redfort smiled, but before she hung up, she asked, “So, Hitch, why didn’t you just leave a message with the camp coordinator, like a normal person? It’s not like you’ve gotta be covert about it because everyone knows you’re my sidekick.”

“Kid, you can fool yourself that you have a sidekick, but you’ve got a long way to go before you’re going to fool me, LB, or anyone else in Spectrum.”

“OK man, I’m just kidding with you. I haven’t forgotten that you are Spectrum’s number one *numero uno* action agent — I was only asking. Why all the secrecy?”

“Just keeping you sharp, kid. Don’t want you getting sloppy.”

Ruby smiled. Yep, that was Hitch all right — one royal pain in the behind.

The Recurring Dream

THE DREAM HAD BEGUN IN THE USUAL WAY: Ruby alone, treading water in a bottomless ocean, an ethereal voice whispering to her, almost singing. She would turn this way and that, but she could never see “the thing” until it was too late.

Suddenly she would feel something grab her leg, and she would spin down, down, down into the indigo depths. And the miniature man who appeared in the water just couldn’t save her. And all the while the calling, like someone whispering a song to the ocean.

The vision was so real that whenever she awoke, she felt sure it had happened, the whispering so familiar that she could believe that she must have heard it once before, a long, long time ago, perhaps in a past life.

Ruby sat up in bed. She was covered in perspiration, freezing cold, and her head was thudding. She put out her hand and blindly felt around for her flashlight. But somehow the beam it shone just made things worse, more dramatic. She fumbled for the switch on the lamp beside her bed.

Click.

The room was bathed in light, and Ruby could breathe again. Through the blur of her less-than-perfect vision she was reassured: there was the comic she was working on, spread out on her desk; there were the floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with books, hundreds of them — fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, codebooks, puzzle books. Her record player, her records, her telephone collection — eccentric designs, from a squirrel in a tuxedo to a conch shell — all perched haphazardly on shelves and furniture. There was the jumble of clothes on the floor. She was definitely in her room and not miles beneath the heavy ocean, sinking through indigo.

Ruby lay back on her pillow, sighed a deep sigh, and drifted back into sleep, this time dreamless; her glasses still perched on the end of her nose. She was only wrenched from her slumber when her subconscious tuned in to the sound of screaming, coming from the backyard.

Ruby scrambled to get out of bed, tripped over the tangle of discarded clothes, and limped to the window. There she saw clouds of seagulls swooping and diving around the house, filling the air with their wings, legs trailing, ready to land. Seagulls are sizeable birds, and as they dodged and swooped their gray and white feathers almost made contact with the glass, and Ruby found herself instinctively backing away.

The noise they made was enough to drown out most other noises, but not the screaming — this was coming from a small elderly woman who was darting around the yard waving a broom.

It was Mrs. Digby.

Mrs. Digby was the Redforts’ housekeeper and she had been with the family forever, which is to say longer than Ruby had existed, longer, even, than Sabina had existed. No one could do without her, and no one wanted to do without her: she was the family treasure.

Ruby stood transfixed, watching the tiny woman attacking the birds, shouting abuse at them and generally telling them where to go. It seemed that they had made the mistake of settling on her freshly laundered sheets, and this had got her hopping mad.

“I didn’t get up before six in the a.m. and work my fingers to the bone only to have you feathered vipers do your business all over my clean linen!”

It was fair to say Mrs. Digby was furious.

Just then a well-groomed man came into view. He was wearing a beautifully cut suit and appeared entirely unruffled as he calmly strolled out into the yard, a tiny device in his hand. He held this up to the sky, depressed a button, and suddenly, in a deafening screech, the birds all rose as one and squawked their way back in the direction of the ocean.

Ruby pushed open the large square picture window that made up most of the wall beside her desk (the Redfort house was a miracle of modern architecture) and leaned out.

“Wow!” she said, somewhat sarcastically. “I didn’t know you could talk to the animals.”

The man looked up and winked.

“Hey, kid. Surprised to see you up before noon.”

“Oh, you should know, Hitch. Early bird catches the worm and all that.”

“Too late for worms,” said Hitch. “Gulls got ’em, but I can rustle up some pancakes, kid.”

Ruby pulled on her clothes: jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt printed with the words **honk if you’re happy, hoot if you’re not, toot if you couldn’t care less** and scooted down the stairs two at a time. Mrs. Digby and Hitch were already in the kitchen and discussing the avian invasion.

“So what is that?” asked Ruby, sliding into her chair. “Some kind of bird-banishing gizmo?”

“Works on the same principle as a dog whistle. It emits a sound that humans can’t hear and birds can’t stand,” replied Hitch, tucking the device into his shirt pocket.

Ruby was impressed — not a bad gadget to have up your sleeve when the wildlife went wild.

“I might have to get myself one of those,” said Mrs. Digby. “Where’d ya buy it — SmartMart?”

“Well, they do say SmartMart’s the smart place to shop!” said Hitch, quoting the store’s tagline.

“Well, all I can say, child,” said Mrs. Digby earnestly, “is that it’s just as well your parents ain’t here to see this. Your mother would have a three-cornered fit if she witnessed what those critters have done to her sheets.”

Mr. and Mrs. Redfort were currently away — as they so often were — this time on a mini cruise that was taking them and the local historical society around Twinford’s coast. Dora Shoering was giving a series of on board lectures about the smugglers’ caves, the famous Twinford shipwrecks, and various other seafarers’ legends.

“Don’t you give those sheets a second thought, Mrs. D.” said Hitch. “I’ll get the laundry service to pick up the linen — no need for you to waste your valuable energy on that.”

“Shucks and fiddlesticks,” said Mrs. Digby. Which didn’t really mean anything, but often translated as, *If you insist.*

It had been less than two months since Hitch had joined the Redforts as house manager (or butler, Sabina Redfort preferred to think of him) but to look at Mrs. Digby you might have thought he had been there always. She had accepted him at once and woe betide anyone who said a bad word about him. As far as she was concerned, he was the best darned butler, house manager (or whatever else he wanted to call himself) this side of anywhere.

Of course, what Mrs. Digby didn’t know was that Hitch was actually an undercover agent, sent by Spectrum to protect and work alongside Ruby. She had no idea that the butlering was just a cover — that really would have impressed her.

But it was a Spectrum imperative that Mrs. Digby should never know, never even suspect, that the alarmingly attractive man might not be all that he seemed. Although Ruby and Hitch had got off to a somewhat rocky start, they made a dynamic team. LB had seen this: she was a smart woman, and she knew that unflinching loyalty was what made a good agent, and agents who were loyal to each other made for a solid agency.

“So,” said Hitch to Ruby. “How are you going to get yourself in and out of trouble today?”

"I'm not," said Ruby. "I'm gonna lie low, take it easy, probably hang out with Clancy."

She went over to where the kitchen phone sat, picked up the receiver, and dialed a number she had dialed approximately several thousand times.

"Hey, bozo, meet me, usual place, just as soon as." She replaced the receiver.

"And they say the art of conversation is dead," commented Hitch, shaking out the newspaper.

Mrs. Digby looked at Ruby and shook her head. "It's a crying shame," she said. "All life's good manners and fine etiquette gone to pot. I tried to raise this child a nice child, but I probably got an accept failure here."

"Ah, Clancy don't mind," said Ruby. Which was true: Clancy Crew was Ruby Redfort's closest friend, and they understood each other without words — though that said, they spent most of the time "nonstop yacking" as Mrs. Digby would often comment.

For this reason there was very little Clancy Crew didn't know about Ruby Redfort, though another reason was that it was almost impossible to keep a secret from him. Ruby was good at keeping secrets, but Clancy always sniffed them out. So, despite all her efforts, Clancy had managed to find out about her recruitment to Spectrum. Ruby had been forced to assure LB that from now on she would keep her mouth shut, that she would not blab to him again, that she would keep it zipped at all times.

But Hitch was astute enough to know that this was a promise Ruby Redfort just couldn't keep. So they had made a little agreement: LB must never know that Clancy knew everything, and Clancy must never tell anyone anything, on pain of death. He never would; there was no question about that. Clancy Crew knew how to keep it zipped.

However, Ruby did still have one secret that not even Clancy Crew was aware of.

She kept it in her room under the floorboards, and not one living creature except perhaps a spider or a bug knew anything about it. Since Ruby was just a kid of four she had written things down in little yellow notebooks. Not a diary exactly, but a record of things seen or overheard, strange or mundane. She had just completed notebook number six hundred and twenty-three, which she had placed underneath the floorboards along with the other six hundred and twenty-two. The one she was working on now, six hundred and twenty-four, was kept inside a compartment concealed in the frame of her bedroom door.

Now, Ruby went upstairs and took the notebook out.

The way Ruby saw it, you just could never be sure when something inconsequential could become the missing link, the key to everything. **RULE 16: EVEN THE MUNDANE CAN TELL A STORY.** Though usually it was just inconsequential.

She opened the notebook and wrote:

Sixty or seventy seagulls invaded the yard.

She added other important details she had noticed and replaced the notebook in its hiding place. She was just about to exit via the window when she heard Mrs. Digby calling.

"Ruby, you troublesome child, you better not be about to climb out of that window! I want you down here on the double!"

Now, Mrs. Digby was one of the few people Ruby could not always twist around her little fingers. Sometimes Ruby just had to do things Mrs. Digby's way, and today, unfortunately, was obviously going to be one of those days.

The Shape of a Condor

AFTER APPROXIMATELY FORTY-FIVE MINUTES of running errands, dropping things off, and picking them up, Ruby finally pointed her bike toward Amster Green and rode the short distance to the small triangle of grass where a big old oak tree grew, its vast branches reaching off in every direction. She leaned her bike against the railings, quickly looked around just to make sure no one was watching, and then, in a blink, swung herself onto the branch above and up and out of sight before you had time to think you had seen her.

“What kept you?” came a voice from high in the tree.

“Mrs. Digby,” said Ruby, climbing up the tree.

“Oh,” said the voice. “I was about to give up on you. I’d just finished writing you a message.”

“Yeah? What did it say?” she asked, still climbing.

“Here,” said the voice, and a piece of paper fashioned into the shape of a condor came floating toward her. She unfolded it.

Ec spgkwv kxoss kzi ulabtwwyj’w klmj srv hrvjv llw emiojkevsrpoc uej xo avv eedp*

*LIKE BOOK 1, THIS IS A WGENÈRE CIPHER, BUT THE KEYWORD HAS CHANGED!
CLUE: IT SWIMS IN THE SEA BUT IT’S NOT A FISH. IT WAS ONCE ON THE SURFACE, BUT NOW IT’S ON THE BOTTOM.

“No kidding?” said Ruby, impressed. The paper, like most of the messages they left each other, was folded into an origami shape, the words encoded using their own Redfort-Crew code, which no one but no one knew how to decipher.

“So how did training camp go?” asked Clancy.

“Good,” replied Ruby.

“Good? That’s it?”

Silence, and then Ruby’s head appeared through the leaves. She shuffled along the oak’s limb where a skinny boy sat, binoculars around his neck and a sun visor shielding his eyes.

“Good to see you, Clance. What’s up?”

“Truth is, it’s been kinda boring without you, but I’ve been making it work — getting by,” said Clancy.

“Glad to hear it,” said Ruby.

Clancy was eager to get back to the subject of Ruby’s agent activity, but Ruby just wanted to hear about Twinford life and what was going on with Clancy and his efforts to train his dog, Dolly, and how his sister Minny managed to get out of trouble or was she going to be grounded for life?

Clancy saw Ruby wasn’t in the mood to talk about herself, and if she wasn’t in the mood, then there was no point trying.

So instead they talked about Clancy’s week, and after that they discussed Redfort home affairs: in particular how Consuela, the brilliant if temperamental chef loathed by Mrs. Digby, had resigned in the most dramatic of ways and left to go work for the Stanwicks.

And when they had exhausted these topics, they talked about the amazing events of just one month ago, the museum, the bank, the gold, and the Jade Buddha of Khotan. They talked about Nine Liv Capaldi and the diamond revolver she had held to Clancy’s temple.

They talked about Baby Face Marshall, now safely incarcerated in a maximum-security prison.

somewhere far from Twinford. And they shuddered when they remembered the Count, still at large and free to practice his evildoing. Where in the world was he?

When the sun had gone down and it was beginning to get chilly, Clancy and Ruby climbed back down the oak, picked up their bikes, and set off in opposite directions.

“So see you tomorrow!” shouted Ruby.

“My place or yours?” Clancy shouted back.

“Mine!” called Ruby as she disappeared around the corner.

An Ocean of Fear

THE NEXT DAY WAS A SCORCHER. It came out of nowhere, and the whole of Twinford seemed to have unfolded their lounge chairs and lit their barbecues.

Ruby Redfort and Clancy Crew were sitting on the roof, reading comics. It was late afternoon, but the sun was still warm and Clancy was sporting a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses; they were his sister Lulu's. Nothing wrong with a thirteen-year-old boy wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, nothing at all. Plenty of hip boys his age might want to express their sense of style and individuality by wearing heart-shaped sunglasses. But Clancy wasn't wearing them as a style statement: he didn't know what a style statement was; they were simply the first thing in the form of eyewear that came to hand. No one could accuse Clancy Crew of vanity — he always wore exactly what he felt like wearing. Didn't matter how ridiculous he looked. It was one of the things that Ruby liked most about him.

"Hey, Rube," he said. Ruby was concentrating hard on the RM Swainston thriller she was reading and didn't respond.

"Rube! Can you hear me?" He prodded her with a stick.

"Huh?" She peered up at him. The large red floppy sunhat obscured most of her face, and she managed to appear at the same time comical and stylish — neither look, however, was intentional. Like Clancy, she wore what she liked; unlike Clancy, she had an innate sense of style. Style was just something she had. She even managed to lend a certain chic to her T-shirt, which bore the less-than-elegant words *shut your piehole*. Most of Ruby's T-shirts were emblazoned with upfront messages of this kind; her mother, in particular, loathed them.

"So?" said Clancy.

"Huh, what?" said Ruby.

"You were gonna tell me about your training in Hawaii, remember?"

"Oh, that," said Ruby. "It's kinda confidential. I'm sure you understand."

Clancy started flapping his arms. "What are you saying, confidential? You promised me you were gonna tell me — you promised, Ruby, you weasel."

"I'm just kidding with you. Don't get your underwear in a bunch," said Ruby.

She put the book, *The Strangled Stranger*, under her chair, took a breath, and paused; she did this not only for the sake of drama, but also because, well, everything she was about to tell Clancy was strictly confidential. Classified information. Spectrum had forbidden her to tell *anyone anything* about the code breaking and undercover work she was doing for them, but then Clancy Crew was not *anyone*. Clancy Crew knew how to keep his mouth shut. Clancy Crew would rather die a painful death than betray a secret.

Ruby sucked the last dregs of her banana milk up the clear curly straw sticking out of her glass, swallowed, and said, "OK, the training basically involved scuba diving."

"Really?" said Clancy. "That's kinda cool. So you actually went in the ocean?"

"Yeah, Clance, *I went in the ocean*. Where'd ya think I went, a kiddie pool?"

Clancy had a deep fear of the ocean: it wasn't just the sharks, it was everything.

Though it was *mainly* the sharks. He had once read a book when he was younger, a novel, that had given him cause for many sleepless nights. Admittedly, the book had been one his mother was reading and not recommended for fourth graders. He had spotted it on her nightstand and was lured in by the

image of the huge shark's head shown on the front cover, its dead eyes staring up at a lone swimmer. It had made quite an impression. Clancy had found it to be unputdownable and read all six hundred and forty-nine pages in four sittings while locked in the bathroom. He had paid for this every night of his life for the next 1,366 days — his dreams invaded by this great white monster.

Ruby always did her best to reason with him.

"Clance," she said. "Sharks are not interested in human flesh — most attacks happen by accident. The shark spots a swimmer, mistakes it for a seal, and goes over to investigate. The problem comes because sharks explore with their teeth. More often than not they take a bite and think better of it."

"That's very reassuring, Rube — I feel a whole lot better. Just wait while I go dive into the ocean."

"What you gotta do," continued Ruby, ignoring her friend's sarcasm, "is try not to pee — they take this as a sign of vulnerability. Failing that, if he's got you in his jaws, bop him on the nose with your fist. The nose is very sensitive on a shark. He'll soon let go — on the whole sharks can't be bothered to fight. They're not used to it."

"Well," said Clancy, "that must be the only thing that sharks and I have in common."

"In any case, it's very rare. I mean, you probably have the same likelihood of being trampled to death by a rhinoceros."

"Yeah, well, the difference is I would see the rhinoceros coming. At least I could run for it."

"Well, you say that, Clance, but rhinoceroses are awful fast runners. Personally, I'd rather take my chances with the shark."

Perhaps *because* of his terror, Clancy also had a deep fascination for anything to do with the sea. He liked to read about all those things that kept him awake at night sweating with fear. Killer jellyfish, killer whales, poisonous coral, giant squid, killer squid, killer-giant-squid, tuna fish, anything aquatic. He was a bit of an expert.

So he listened eagerly as Ruby told him about the stuff she had learned, the dives she had been on, the depths she had swum to, and the things she had seen.

"So did you — you know — come face-to-face with any of our toothy friends?" said Clancy, his eyes all wide with anticipation.

"Yeah, but they were only small ones — just little reef sharks — nothing to write home about," said Ruby.

"You *wanted* to see them?" said Clancy, flapping his arms again.

"Sure I did. It's all part of the experience of the ocean."

"Prehistoric things with razor-sharp teeth swimming toward you — yeah, I can see how you wouldn't wanna miss *that* experience."

"Anyway," said Ruby, "I'm not a bad scuba diver now. I've done my advanced training, and I'm a set for nearly any underwater mission Spectrum chooses to send me on."

"So your next mission will be underwater?" Clancy shuddered.

"Well, I would hope so," said Ruby. "I'm gonna look pretty dumb in scuba gear anyplace else."

"So you aren't trained for anything other than diving?" said Clancy.

"Give me a break, Clance. I've only been in training a month — I guess I'll be covering other things soon. I mean, I'm not sure when they're gonna teach me skydiving, but I imagine jumping out of a plane is off limits until they have."

Clancy fanned his face with the comic he had been reading. "Boy! Am I burning up."

Ruby looked at him sitting under the giant parasol, his feet in a bucket of cold water, a glass of iced lemonade to one side of his lounge chair.

Just about her whole life Ruby had had to put up with her friend's complaints about being too hot

being too cold, not being just right; Clancy was a regular Goldilocks. He seemed to have been born without a thermostat.

“What’s *wrong* with you?”

“Can we please go indoors?” he whined.

Ruby rolled her eyes heavenward and struggled up from her very comfortable deck chair.

“OK, OK, let’s go watch some TV before you evaporate,” she said. “At least it might take your mind off your ocean fears for five minutes.”

But, as Ruby would be the first to point out: **RULE 1: YOU CAN NEVER BE COMPLETELY SURE WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT.** As it happened, Clancy’s ocean fears were about to get a lot bigger.

Dolphins, Sharks — They're All the Same

RUBY LIFTED THE HATCH ON THE ROOF and, barefoot, the two of them made their way down the open-tread staircase to Ruby's room. It was perfectly cool in the house. Bug, the Redfort husky, was sleeping on the large beanbag that sat in the center of Ruby's bedroom. He pricked up his ears when he heard Ruby and Clancy's footsteps and decided to follow them to the kitchen. There was a good chance someone might drop a cookie on the floor, and Bug was quick. There was no chance of Mrs. Digby sweeping up before he had gotten to it.

Ruby and Clancy padded into the kitchen, drunk from the sun and exhausted from doing nothing. The transistor radio on the counter was tuned to Twinford Talk Radio and was blaring out some news story about Twinford City Square. Mrs. Digby always had the set turned up too loud because she was a little hard of hearing — though she claimed it was “'cause those radio folk always mumble.”

“SO, KELLY, HAVE YOU SEEN THOSE GULLS IN TWINFORD SQUARE? CREATING QUITS. A RUMPUS I BELIEVE.” “YOU’RE NOT WRONG THERE, BOBBY. I CAN’T SAY I’VE SEEN THEM, BUT I’VE CERTAINLY HEARD THEM! NO ONE CAN FIGURE OUT JUST WHAT HAS BROUGHT SO MANY SEAGULLS INTO THE CITY CENTER. PERHAPS IT’S THE UNUSUALLY SCORCHING WEATHER. BACK TO YOU, BOBBY.” “THANKS FOR THAT INSIGHT, KELLY. MOVING ON TO ANOTHER ANIMAL-RELATED STORY, SEVEN DOLPHINS WERE DISCOVERED IN TWINFORD HARBOR THIS MORNING, AND DESPITE ALL BEST EFFORTS FROM THE AQUATIC RESCUE TEAM, THEY SEEM TO BE REFUSING TO MOVE ON.”

Clancy grimaced.

“What’s with the face?” said Ruby.

“Dolphins,” said Clancy.

“What have you got against dolphins? Everyone likes dolphins. What makes you such an individual?”

“Just don’t trust them,” said Clancy.

“Oh, Clance, don’t tell me you’re scared of them — no one’s scared of dolphins.”

“I am,” said Clancy firmly.

“Why?” said Ruby. “What possible reason could you have for being scared of a dolphin?”

“For the following reason: I could be out swimming one day and spot what I think is a dolphin, and get lulled into a false sense of security only to find out it’s actually a shark.” Just a month ago Clancy had been waiting at the dentist’s office, killing time leafing through the old magazines, when he had stumbled across a story about a man who had unfortunately mistaken a shark for a dolphin. The consequences didn’t bear thinking about, but Clancy couldn’t stop thinking about them.

“And how is that the dolphin’s fault?” asked Ruby.

“It’s got a fin,” said Clancy, folding his arms. “They make themselves look like sharks.”

“The fin shape is totally different,” said Ruby. “Look in any encyclopedia and you’ll see.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll remember to do that next time I’m swimming along.”

“Well, you know what, Clance? It’s never gonna be a mistake you get to make because you’re never gonna be swimming along; you never go anywhere near what might or might not be a shark. You

never even dip your toes in!”

Mrs. Digby emerged from the pantry, where she had been lining up canned food in alphabetic order. The Redfort housekeeper liked to run a tight ship (as she put it) and keep an A–Z larder.

“Hi, Mrs. Digby,” said Clancy.

Mrs. Digby put her hands on her hips. “Well, howdy. And what can I do for you? Since I don’t imagine either of you have come in here to volunteer for potato peeling. Am I right or am I right?”

“Just wondering if you might have some kinda snacky type of a thing up your sleeve?” said Ruby, her eyes all big and innocent.

The old lady clucked her tongue, pretending to disapprove, but actually loving nothing better than preparing food for Ruby and her friends — they were always so appreciative.

Mrs. Digby had known Ruby since Ruby was a minute old, and there was nothing she wouldn’t do for her. Not that she was any kind of pushover — she was most definitely not. One tough old bird, in fact. Only a month ago she had been accidentally kidnapped during a robbery, but it was like water off a duck’s back to Mrs. Digby.

“Been through a whole lot worse during my long and mainly miserable life,” was all she had said about the incident. Mrs. Digby always described her life as miserable, though in fact this was not the case, certainly not for the past fifty years anyway.

The housekeeper set about making what she called a “Digby Club,” which was actually just a regular club sandwich, but with her own homemade mustard mayonnaise, and topped off with a pickle and a gherkin. For some reason it tasted a whole lot better than any other club sandwich that you might ever have tasted, and anybody who ate one never forgot it.

“By the way,” she said, pulling something from her apron pocket, “I found that watch of yours on the front stoop; you oughta be more careful with your possessions, child, or you’ll have nothing left to call your own.”

“Darn it!” said Ruby. “The clasp is all bent, so it keeps coming loose. I told them to fix it.”

“Told who?” asked the housekeeper.

“Um . . . the fixers,” said Ruby. She was being cagey because this watch was no ordinary watch; it was a Spectrum-issue Escape Watch (also known to agents as the “rescue watch”) and had once belonged to the wonder kid Bradley Baker. It was a clever piece of equipment; it looked like nothing more than a child’s watch, but this timepiece, though old and not the latest in terms of spy gear, was still a gadget to be reckoned with. It had saved more than a few lives in its time. It had a bright red and blue striped strap and an interesting clasp. The second hand was a fly and the watch face was colored enamel with cartoon eyes. The eyes followed the hands as they ticked tirelessly around. Spectrum had repaired the malfunctioning rescue features, but had neglected to fix the faulty clasp, so it was always coming loose.

Ruby took the watch and fastened it around her wrist, making sure that the clasp clicked home.

“Well,” said Mrs. Digby, “mind you fix it or you’ll be sorry. A stitch in time saves nine, is what they always say.”

The housekeeper popped the sandwiches on plates and slid them across the countertop like she was a short-order chef.

Ruby and Clancy were sitting at high stools still chatting about dolphins and sharks. They paused their conversation only to convey their appreciation, picked up their plates, and made their way to the living room. Mrs. Digby nodded and started chopping up vegetables for the evening meal.

Both kids flopped down on the floor and, propping themselves on their elbows, tackled their snacks. Ruby reached for the remote and flicked on the TV. Clancy gave directions through mouthfuls of

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