

Chapter One

“This handwriting is utterly disgraceful.”

I hear the words but they seem far away. As if they are being shouted through a wall. I continue to stare at the piece of paper in front of me. I can read it. I can make out every word, even through the blurriness of tears. I can feel everyone in the classroom watching me. My best friend. Her new friend. The new girl. Some of the boys are laughing.

I just keep staring at my writing. Then, suddenly, it's gone.

Miss Murphy has snatched it from my desk and is now ripping it up. The sound of the paper being torn is overly loud. Right in my ears. The characters in the story I was writing beg her to stop, but she doesn't. She crumples it all together and throws it towards the classroom bin. She misses. My story lies in a heap on the scratchy carpet.

“Do not EVER write so lazily again,” she shouts. Maybe she isn't even shouting, but it feels that way. “Do you hear me, Adeline?” I prefer being called Addie. “Not ever. A girl your age knows better than to write like that; your handwriting is like a baby's.”

I wish my sister was here. Keedie always explains the things that I cannot control or explain for myself. She makes sense of them. She understands.

“Tell me that you understand?”

Her shouts are so loud and the moments after are so quiet. I nod, shakily. Even though I don't understand. I just know it's what I'm supposed to do.

She says nothing more. She moves to the front of the class and I am dismissed. I can feel the new girl glancing at me, and my friend Jenna is whispering to her new friend, Emily.

We were supposed to have Mrs Bright this year; we met her briefly before the summer holidays. She would draw a little sun with a smiling face beside her name and would hold your hand if you looked nervous. But she got sick and Miss Murphy came to teach our class instead.

I thought this new school year would be better. That I would be better.

I take out my pocket thesaurus. It was a Christmas present from Keedie. She knows how much I love using different words and we laughed because the word ‘thesaurus’ sounds like a dinosaur. I read different word combinations to calm down, to process the shouting and the ripping.

I find one that I like. Diminished.

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On days like this, I spend lunchtime in the library. I feel the other children in the class watching me as we tuck in our chairs and leave the room, the school bell screeching so loudly. Loud noises make my head spin, they feel like a drill against a sensitive nerve. I walk through the corridors, practicing my breathing and keeping my eyes straight ahead. People talk so loudly to their friends, who are right next to them. They get too close, they push and clamour, and it makes my neck hot and my heart too quick.

But, when I finally get to the library, it's all quiet. There is so much space. There is one window open to let in a little fresh air. There is no loud talking allowed. The books are all categorised and labelled in their proper places.

And Mr Allison is at his desk.

“Addie!”

He has curly dark hair and big glasses, and he is tall and skinny for a man. He wears old jumpers. If I were to use my thesaurus to describe Mr Allison, I would say he was kindly.

But I like to just say that he is nice. Because he is. My brain is very visual. I see everything in specific pictures, and when people use the word “nice”, I think of Mr Allison, the librarian.

“I have just the thing for you!”

I like that he never asks boring questions. He doesn't ask how my holidays were or how my sisters are doing. He just gets straight to talking about books.

“Here we go.” He walks over to one of the reading tables and puts a large hardback book down in front of me. I feel all the horrid feelings from earlier disappear.

“Sharks!”

I flip it open immediately and stroke the first glossy page. I told Mr Allison last year that I love sharks. That they are the most interesting thing to me, even more than the ancient Egyptians and the dinosaurs.

He remembered.

“It's a sort of encyclopaedia,” he tells me, as I sit down with the book. “An encyclopaedia is a book that tells you a lot about one subject, or one area of study. This one is all about sharks.”

I nod, somewhat dazed from excitement.

“I suspect you know everything that's in there already though,” he says, and he laughs after he says it so I know that he's joking.

“Sharks don’t have bones,” I tell him, caressing the photograph of what I know is a blue shark. “And they have six senses. Not five. They can sort of sense electricity in the atmosphere. The electricity of life! They can also smell blood from miles away.”

Their senses are sometimes overpowering. Too loud, too strong, too much of everything.

I turn the page to a large photograph of a solitary Greenland shark, swimming alone in the ice-cold water.

“People don’t understand them.” I touch the shark’s fin. “They hate them, actually. A lot of people. They’re afraid of them and don’t understand them. So, they try to hurt them.”

Mr Allison doesn’t say anything for a while, as I read the first page.

“You take that home with you for as long as you would like, Addie.”

I look up at him. He is smiling, but his eyes don’t match his mouth.

“Thank you!” I make sure to put all the glad that I am feeling into my voice so that he knows I really mean it. He moves back to his desk and I become engrossed in the book. Reading is the most calming thing after an overly loud and unkind classroom. I can take my time. There is no one rushing me or barking at me. The words all follow rules. The pictures are bright and alive. But they do not overpower me.

When I am trying to sleep at night, I like to imagine diving beneath the cold waves of the ocean and swimming with a shark. We explore abandoned shipwrecks, underwater caves and coral reefs. All of the colour, but in a wide-open space. No crowds, no pushing and no taking. I would not grab their dorsal fin. We would swim alongside one another.

And we would not have to speak a word. We could just be.