

THE PECULIAR TALE OF THE
**TENTACLE
BOY**

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Chicken
House

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For Lucy and James

A decorative illustration at the top of the page features stylized, dark grey seaweed with circular patterns and teardrop-shaped leaves. Several small, light grey fish are scattered throughout the scene, swimming in the water.

CHAPTER ONE

Liar

*M*arina Minnow loved to tell tales. How else was a girl supposed to have any fun in a quiet seaside town like Merlington? The place was so uneventful that the local paper was dominated by the yo-yoing prices of pollock, and so obsessed by fish that on the seafront alone there were seventeen fish-mongers all vying for power. In Marina's opinion, having to grow up somewhere as dull as Merlington

without any imagination was a fate worse than death.

Most people knew they had to take what Marina said with a pinch of salt. ‘She’ll be a great writer one day,’ her mother Sally would tell strangers as they walked down the beach, Marina loudly translating the cries of a seagull or musing on the alien origins of a peculiar-looking shell. Though it was a budding talent in her mother’s eyes, Marina’s tales drove some people round the twist, especially her school friends and their narrow-minded parents. She would never set out to cause harm with her stories, or to intentionally mislead someone – but the trouble was she could be quite convincing.

At the last summer fair, when her classmate Peter Featherfin had polished off a family-sized eel pie all by himself, Marina had launched into such an extraordinary tale that he’d been convinced he would wake the next morning with a jellied stomach and puff pastry hair. ‘You’ll turn into an eel pie!’ she’d cried, as he licked the last crumbs from the plate. Marina had been dragged from her bed and round to the Featherfin home to apologize, so that Peter too might finally get some sleep. It always seemed

worthwhile, though, as the thought of life in Merlington without a healthy dose of drama was more boring than Marina could possibly imagine!

It was never exactly busy, but by October the town was dead. Today, just a few solitary fishermen lined the surf as they pulled in their final haul of the day – crabs, plaice and shrimp – and the multicoloured fronts of the shabby beach huts glinted in the fading sun. Marina and her classmates, Edie, Wendy and Daisy, had been wandering aimlessly through the cobbled streets since school had finished an hour earlier, picking at a polystyrene tray of soggy chips. Now they weaved a ragged path along the beach of shells and pebbles, which ran from the pub at the harbour's edge to the cliffs that rose sharply from the water once the shore was lost at high tide.

Marina could feel the story on the tip of her tongue before she even knew what it was.

'Make sure you throw that tray in the bin,' she called to Wendy Whitby, a know-it-all girl with sharp features like a bird. 'If it's washed into the sea, a jellyfish might fall in love with it. You'll only be helping to break the poor thing's heart in the end.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Wendy,

rolling her eyes. 'It's a piece of rubbish, why would a jellyfish think it was another jellyfish?'

'They don't have eyes; how could they know? Jellyfish are sensitive creatures,' Marina insisted.

Eddie laughed, sensing the elaborate story which was building in her best friend's mind.

'I heard that fish sometimes get stuck in those plastic six-pack rings for beer cans,' said Daisy Baitman, a quiet girl who rarely got involved in Marina and Wendy's disagreements. As soon as she realized that she'd spoken up, her mouth dropped into a perfectly formed 'o' and she hid her face behind her braids, backing silently away from the group.

'That's true!' insisted Marina. 'Humans are always invading the ocean and causing damage to the delicate life. There was once an eel . . .'

Oh, here we go, thought Wendy.

' . . . a huge, great, slimy rope of an eel that sat still for almost a decade. He'd hang his head from the nook of his cave and hardly move for anything. Tiny fish would swim by and not even know he was there before they suddenly found themselves halfway down his throat. The eel sat still for so long he was almost welded to the rock, making a wonderfully comfy

home for barnacles. Weeks, months, years would pass, and he'd barely open his eyes – just his mouth, which opened and closed with the tide. It wasn't until one day, when a deep-sea diver was exploring the reef, that the eel, in a moment of curiosity, opened his eyes to be greeted by the man's huge glass diving helmet. But the eel didn't even notice the man. All he could see in the dark polished mask was his own quizzical face reflected straight back. He'd never seen another eel before, having not left his cosy cave in such a long time. He didn't even know what it was he was seeing, but he immediately fell in love.

'Yet it was in that moment that the diver turned, flapping his strange plastic feet, and made a break for the surface. Up, up, up, he swam in a cloud of bubbles. The eel did not know *what* to think, or know where his new love had gone, but for the first time in what felt like for ever he swam. He swam free of his rocky home, tearing a whole miniature village apart around him as barnacles and seaweed flew aimlessly through the water. He swam after the diver as fast as he could, as the world ahead grew brighter and warmer than he'd ever thought possible. His cloudy, tired eyes ached at the light, but he knew nothing except the

fear he'd never get to see that beautiful face again. Then, as the strange rippling surface came into view the light was blotted out by a huge shape on the water and . . .

‘Nothing.

‘The eel thrashed and pulled but he was no longer in control of his own movements. He was being dragged out of the sea in a rough, heavy net, and hoisted into the cold air that whipped his skin painfully.’

Marina’s friends stood around her in a tight semicircle, their mouths hanging open as she hooked them to attention. All except for Wendy, who had wandered slightly down the beach and had taken to throwing chips at a dozing seagull in irritation.

‘What happened to him?’ cried Thea Marigold, a small girl from the year below who had joined the group mid-story with an unseasonably huge strawberry ice cream.

‘He was thrown in a cool box and driven down the Thames,’ continued Marina, matter-of-factly. ‘He ended up at the Dagenmoor pub in east London. Three pounds for a pie and mash on Mondays.’

At this final indignity, Wendy, who was daughter

of the local pub landlord, could take it no longer. ‘That is a complete load of rubbish!’ she cried. ‘How could you possibly know all of that? You’ve never even been to London.’

‘She’s right,’ Daisy added, having found her confidence again. ‘My parents take me there every Christmas and a pie and mash would cost way more than that.’

‘It so is true,’ snapped Marina. ‘Everything in London is half-price on Mondays – it’s because the city workers all take a packed lunch of their leftover Sunday roast.’

‘I can’t bear it any more!’ bellowed Wendy, scowling at the group. ‘Eels, beer cans, polystyrene tubs . . . I’m sick of all your stupid stories. Why can’t you live in the real world like the rest of us? Your mum is just another fishmonger, like everyone else in this town. Why do you think you’re so special?’

Marina could feel the back of her neck beginning to grow hot.

‘Wendy, give it a rest,’ Edie begged, running a hand through her long, dark hair in frustration. ‘You know it’s just a bit of silly fun.’

‘It isn’t fun, though,’ Wendy barked, turning to

Marina. ‘All you do is tell great big lies, and everyone laps it up.’

‘I think they’re funny,’ smiled Thea.

‘That’s because you’re a child!’ cried Wendy, knocking Thea backwards – a dollop of ice cream dropped to the floor with a sloppy squelch. ‘The whole town lets her get away with murder. She thinks she can make up any old story and everyone will just believe it. And you guys think she’s funny? Well, I think she’s a no-good liar. A *liar!*’

‘I am *not* a liar!’ burst out Marina, anger surging through her bones. Without even realizing, she had picked up a clump of wet seaweed from the ground and it was flying through the air before she could do a thing about it. A shrill scream rang across the water as the seaweed hit Wendy square in the face with a damp splosh.