



SON of the SEA

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Chicken
House

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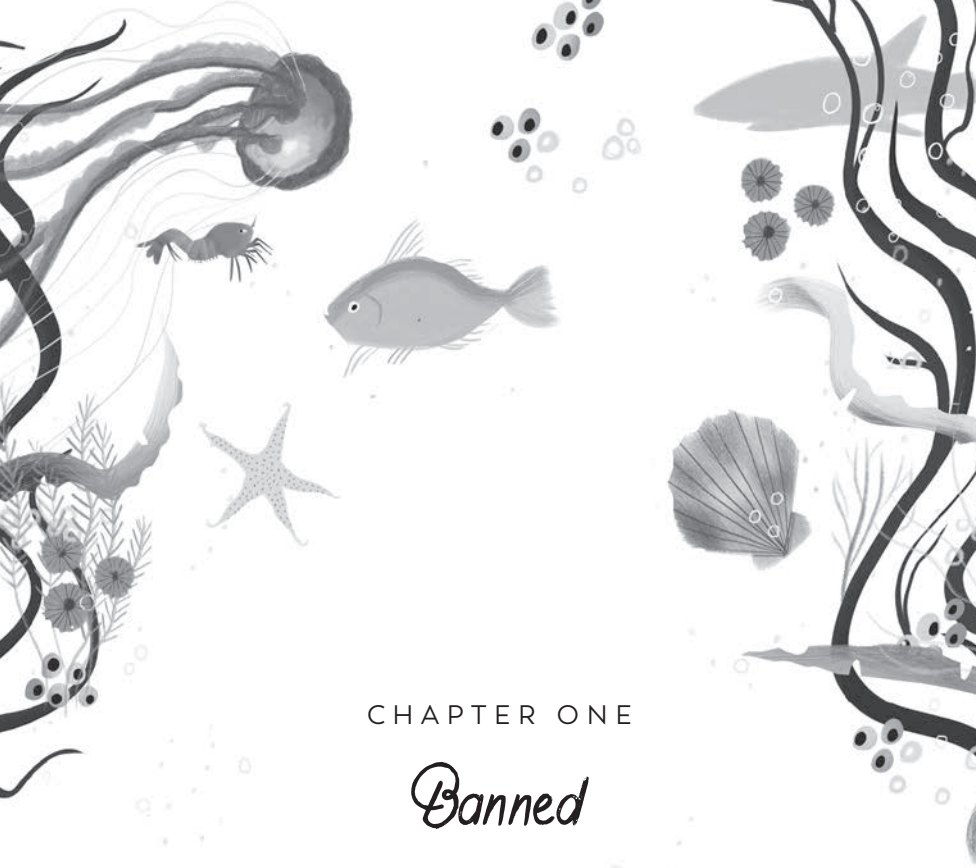
*For Granny Pat, who loved her beach hut,
and Granny Norma who loved the sea.*



The background of the page is a light, textured grey with scattered white dots, suggesting an underwater environment. On the left side, there is a vertical strip of dark, stylized illustrations including a large, curved shape resembling a tentacle or a piece of coral, several circular patterns, and some leaf-like structures. In the lower half of the page, there are more detailed illustrations: a fish with a prominent dorsal fin, a five-pointed starfish, a small crab-like creature, and various pieces of coral and seaweed.

ALSO BY RICHARD PICKARD

The Peculiar Tale of the Tentacle Boy



CHAPTER ONE

Banned

Casper scrutinized the water, his eyes straining to see past the light cloud of condensation which had settled on the inside of his swimming goggles.

Forty-nine more flutter kicks and then I'll switch to rotators, he thought, his large feet working up a small tsunami behind him as the water splashed all around. His arms were stretched out in front while his long legs did the hard work.

Forty-four, forty-three, forty-two.

Casper had been submerged for more than three hours, though he didn't plan on drying off any time soon. Not until he heard the familiar sound of Mrs Marsh's clapped-out car reversing into the driveway.

Thirty-seven, thirty-six.

Suddenly, Casper felt a small patch of pressure on the back of his head. He released a lungful of bubbles in surprise, and lifted his face from the water. A large frog, which had only just landed among his shaggy hair, leapt down on to his left hand – which clung to the bank of the pond.

'Thanks very much,' he said. 'You've made me lose count.'

Casper sat up, allowing himself to rest a little early. He lifted his goggles and popped them on to his forehead with a small *thwack* of the elastic. His knees sank down into the sludge, which lined the small pond and its bin-bag-padded bottom. They rolled in the mush with a satisfying squelch.

The garden seemed quieter than normal this morning.

A few dragonflies buzzed about the reeds that grew in long stalks by Casper's feet, but the newts

which made their home in Mrs Marsh's ornamental pond were nowhere to be seen. Casper had once counted twenty-seven snails on the bottom, but even their numbers had dwindled. The water was certainly more murky than last Thursday, during his afternoon of dolphin kicks . . .

He felt something tickle his shoulder and flicked the pond skater crawling up his skin into the water with a deep breath.

'Better get back to it,' he said, snapping the goggles down over his eyeballs. 'Who knows how long it will be before—'

Casper stopped short, the thought silenced by the sound of a car door slamming shut. It had come from the other side of the large house which stood between the road and his makeshift swimming pool.

He leapt from the water, showering the neat lawn in dirty splashes while he sprinted for the garden fence in great long strides. Once he reached it, Casper threw himself face first across the wooden trellis and landed in a knotted heap in the next neighbour's pristine yard.

'CASPER DELMARE, I *SEE* YOU!'

The disembodied but furious voice of Mrs Marsh

sailed over the fence. Casper could hear her shuffling frantically, tearing through the bramble bushes on her way to the edge of her property.

‘I’m calling your parents this instant!’ she yelled, snagging her dress on the spiky thorns which she’d planted as a Casper-deterrent. ‘Do you know how long it’s taken me to get the pH balance of my pond back to normal?’

Casper continued to run, leaping across the neighbouring garden’s plastic neon furniture like Olympic hurdles. He made his way towards the green hedge, almost face-planting into its branches after catching an ankle on the outstretched claw of the pink flamingo fixed in the shrubbery. Righting himself, he forced his way through the sharp twigs and thorny leaves.

Just in time.

Mrs Marsh’s reddened face peered furiously over the slatted wood of her own fence. ‘Don’t think I didn’t see you, Casper Delmare! You’ll pay for this, you rotten little delinquent! You *hooligan!*’

Casper had made it to the safety of his own concrete garden – a courtyard of grey nothingness – collapsing on to his back with a laugh. Adrenaline

coursed through his body, closely followed by a rush of relief.

But . . . Mrs Marsh had said she'd be phoning his parents.

Casper sprang up and bolted towards the house, where he grabbed hold of the black drainpipe with both hands. Using his large but nimble feet, he quickly pushed his body up the brick wall and reached the open window of his bedroom. He hurled himself through and on to the carpet with a crash.

In the same moment, the downstairs telephone burst into life with a shrill ring that vibrated through the floorboards. Casper sat still, too scared to move a muscle in case he made even the slightest bit more noise until—

‘CASPER!’ his mother yelled up the stairs.

‘Yes, Mum?’ he called innocently, jumping on to the bed. He threw the thick duvet over his soaking wet body, just as his mother burst through the bedroom door.

‘Don’t “Yes Mum” me. You’ve been swimming in Mrs Marsh’s garden pond again! She says you’ve swirled up all the silt, *and* caused her newts to relocate to the bird bath at number 23. She’s at her wit’s end!’

‘Mum, I’ve no idea what she’s talking about,’ said Casper, his eyes wide. ‘I’ve been in bed all morning.’

‘Then why is your hair soaking wet?’ his father asked, appearing in the hallway. ‘And *why* are you wearing swimming goggles?’

‘Oh.’

‘Come downstairs,’ said Mum. ‘We need to talk.’

For as long as he could remember, Casper had been banned from swimming. The problem with this was that swimming was pretty much the only thing he cared about. His love of the water was so immense that he found himself unable to resist the urge to dive into a pond at every possible occasion! It didn’t matter how much it embarrassed or annoyed his bossy parents . . .

They both waited in the kitchen, their arms folded and with matching frowns.

‘We’ve told you a thousand times,’ his mother sighed. ‘It isn’t safe for you to go in the water.’

‘But I have to swim,’ Casper groaned in frustration, stomping green pond scum across the tiled floor. ‘The water is in my blood. Swimming is what I was *born* to do!’

‘You were *born* to make our lives an anxious mess,’

grumbled his dad, Roger. He stole a glance at his wife, Sophie, whose own expression had similarly thawed from anger into quiet unease.

‘We’ll keep you inside for the whole summer holiday if that’s what it takes,’ Mum promised. ‘The last thing we want is to give the neighbours another reason to talk. I can almost hear them muttering as we speak . . .’ She ran to the window and peeled back the lace curtain, squinting into the sunlit street.

‘But I’m always careful,’ protested Casper. ‘No one knows anything except that I really like a swim. Even Mrs Marsh has never seen my feet!’

It was Casper’s feet that made him certain swimming had been coded in his DNA from birth. He had been born with the most enormous pair of flippers! A fantastic set of webbed toes that helped to propel him through the water with the greatest of ease, rocketing Casper between the weeds and rubbish of ponds and fountains like a salmon swimming up a very dirty stream. But it was Casper’s feet, too, that proved to be his biggest obstacle.

His parents were determined to keep them a secret.

‘You’ve been lucky so far,’ his father started. ‘But

you can bet the neighbours will know something's up when you smell like a pond until it finally rains on Thursday. We've already checked the forecast.'

'There's not the slightest sprinkle for the next five days,' groaned Mum. 'I've had to cancel my badminton match again, since the sports centre showers are out of order.'

Swimming wasn't the only thing banned in the Delmare house. The building had been water-free for almost three years, forcing the family to shower in the back garden whenever it happened to rain. As for their thirst, Casper's mum would pummel every fruit or vegetable she found through an enormous juicer in an attempt to stave off dehydration. On a good day that meant a glass of orange juice, but as the weekly shop drew nearer Casper would have to pinch his nose and guzzle down a glass of pureed aubergine.

'I wouldn't have to jump in ponds and smell like a duck for days on end if you'd just let me swim,' continued Casper. 'I hate hiding who I am, but I do it for *you!*'

He had raised his voice – forcing his dad to press a finger to his lips and eye the kitchen wall which was shared by the neighbours.

‘Please,’ said Mum. ‘You need to be more careful.’

Casper lifted his chin. ‘I love my feet.’

‘We know!’ said Dad. ‘But the world isn’t so accepting, Casper. We can’t just let those titanic toes flap about in the breeze like a string of sausages.’

‘Webbed feet aren’t so uncommon,’ he insisted, heading over to the fridge. ‘Frogs and ducks have them, don’t they?’

‘But people don’t,’ his father countered. The sound of Roger’s heavy shoes slammed on the kitchen tiles as he paced back and forth. Casper pulled open the fridge door. ‘People dislike large feet at the best of times, but your gargantuan paddles? You’d be a laughing stock! You’d end up in a laboratory, or at some grubby seaside aquarium. Have you seen what those places charge per visit?’

Casper rolled his eyes, his face hidden from his parents within the fridge. ‘It’s not as if I’m asking you to dig a swimming pool, or take me on holiday to Spain. The only time that I’ve ever even *seen* the sea is in my sleep! You’ve never let me go near it.’

Casper often visited the ocean in his dreams, when the longing to dive into its deepest blue would cause his heart to pound so hard that he’d wake up with a start.

He continued to rummage through the fridge, searching for something to drink among the stacks of Tupperware containers that each contained a different gloopy liquid. Even bottled water was banned after Casper had poured a litre of Highland Spring on the floor, and attempted to breaststroke the length of the kitchen.

‘Of course we haven’t let you near the sea!’ laughed Mum. ‘Why do you think we chose to move to Bramble-in-the-Oaks in the first place?’ She paused, tapping her foot impatiently while she waited for Casper’s full attention. ‘There’s a jug of pressed potato juice on the bottom shelf!’

His parents had barely made it past Casper’s first birthday before they’d stuck a drawing pin in a map of Great Britain and found themselves the furthest town from the coast in the whole country! *Bramble-in-the-Oaks*. A barren smudge without so much as a river in sight, forcing Casper to get his watery fix from the neighbour’s pond instead.

‘Where did we live before?’ asked Casper, grabbing the container and pouring himself a glass of cloudy, beige liquid. His parents blushed and their eyes quickly found each other, widening as they did

each time this topic arose. Casper knew that the question was forbidden, but he was sick of never getting answers.

‘Casper, that’s enough,’ his dad snapped, marching loudly from the room. ‘Consider yourself grounded for the rest of the week!’

‘What?!’

His mother followed closely, leaving behind a haze of citrus perfume from the dry lemon peel that she’d rubbed on her neck that morning.

Alone, Casper took a sip from his glass of milky potato juice and shuddered at the starchy taste. He sighed, rippling his toes in the small puddle of murky pond water which had pooled on the floor around his flabby webbed feet.