

**FISH OUT OF WATER  
(EXTRACT)**

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Paperback published by Redback Publishing, March 2019

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A CIP record for this book is available at the National Library of Australia.

Edited by April Sieczkowski.

Cover Design: Redback Publishing

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## PROLOGUE

“I’m a fish! Look, Mummy and Daddy!” Dina tried to catch her parents’ attention. She floated on her back, waving her arms around like a starfish. She felt very grown up at seven, being allowed in the water alone. She poked her head over the edge of the pool, but her parents were deep in conversation, oblivious to her scales and tail.

The summer breeze carried snippets of their conversation over to the water’s edge, her mother’s voice higher than normal.

“She’s special, Doug. She’s not like other children.”

“All kids are special, Amanda.”

“Not like Mae. Do you have any idea what her IQ means?”

Dina turned her gaze to her little sister who was poking a stick into the garden nearby. What was so special about that?

“Of course I do. It’s why we need to be careful. We need to protect Mae.”

Dina’s mother seemed very excited. “Doug, we have a very special child.”

“Mandy, we have two.” He noticed Dina watching them and gave her an awkward smile. “How’s my little undine?”

Dina sank under the water. The world went quiet. The noise disappeared. This is what she loved. This is where she was herself. Not on the surface. Not out of the water. Didn’t her mother think she was special too? She pushed herself off the wall and propelled herself along the length of the pool. She didn’t need to come up for air. Not for a while. Perhaps never.

She reached the end of the pool, twirled and swam back, finally coming to the surface for a breath. That’s when she saw her parents, standing by the edge, mouths agape. She had their attention now.

**D**ina McNamara stared at her passport photo. She barely recognised herself. The girl in the photo was a stranger. Slim, tanned, light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail... a determined stare, as if she had the world at her feet. Dina felt sorry for her. She'd had no idea what was in store for her when that picture was taken.

She closed the passport and slipped it and her boarding pass into the side pocket of her carry-on bag. Her eyes drifted towards the airport exit. How easy it would be. She could cry toothache, or migraine or Zika Virus. Anything. She didn't want to board the plane. She didn't want to go overseas. Not that there was any reason to stay in Sydney.

She noticed her sister, Mae, mouthing something at her.  
*Get me out of here. Help.*

Dina couldn't help but grin back at her. Their mother was fussing around Mae, fixing her bag and making her take extra money. Mae ducked as their mother patted her hair, as if that would change the pale pink pixie cut.

Dina could see that Mae was annoyed by the attention but still felt a tug of envy. She couldn't remember the last

time her mother had shown her any affection. Not that she could blame her. She'd been a real disappointment, unlike Mae, the golden child. Any glimmers of gold around Dina had disappeared the day she stopped swimming. The day she'd failed everyone.

Dina's mother had acted as if Dina had tried to hurt her. "All those years of me being your taxi driver... what for? For this?"

Dina never responded. How could she? There was an element of truth. Her parents had made great sacrifices for her, only for her to mess everything up.

So Dina stayed out of everyone's way. She rarely left her bedroom. She spent her days watching movies on her laptop and ignoring the poster of the Olympic rings on her wall. A reminder of how, only months earlier, she'd had dreams. She went to sleep each night wondering what had happened to them, where they'd disappeared to and what this dreadful emptiness was that had replaced them. She'd never spent so much time at home. Without her gruelling schedule, without the daily training, she really was nothing... Her father called her a fish out of water. He was trying to be supportive, but he was right. She didn't belong in this new life she'd been thrust into.

Then, a month ago, her parents said they needed to discuss something with her. The three of them sat at the kitchen table. Her mother was holding her umpteenth cup of coffee for the day. It was no wonder she was as jittery as a toddler on sugar. She had a constant flow of caffeine being fed into her system. One day she'd ditch the cup and simply hook up to an IV drip. On the other hand, her dad looked tired. She noticed greys sprouting along his hairline, and new lines beneath his eyes.

"Dina, you know how Mae and her friends want to go

travelling?” Her mother flicked her shoulder-length hair back off her face, as if it was annoying her on purpose. “They’ve shown us the itinerary. It’s a much bigger trip than we realised.”

Dina fought the urge to roll her eyes. They couldn’t go on schoolies like normal teenagers, could they? Weirdos. “I thought you said Mae is too young to go.”

“She is too young to go by herself.”

Dina’s father interrupted here. “But we recognise how hard she’s worked for this. She’s saved a lot of money. It’s important to her.”

“What’s this got to do with me?”

Her father smiled. “We’re willing to let her go, if you go too.”

Dina stared at her parents as if they’d just asked her to eat a live kitten. “Me? Travel with Mae and her friends?”

“We think it would be good for you. It’s something to do while you’re waiting for...” Her mother’s voice tapered off, the pain evident on her face.

Which made Dina angry. This had all happened to her, not her mother. “While I’m waiting for what? My life back? I can help Mae get on with her life while mine’s on hold?”

“We think it will do you the world of good,” said her father, ever the optimist.

“I’m not spending *my* money on *her* trip!” Dina knew that was mean. It wasn’t Mae she was angry with. Dina did have some money saved, but she had to be careful with it now that both her sponsorship deals were in doubt.

“We don’t expect you to pay,” her father said. “You’re doing Mae a favour... and us, so we’ll pay for you.”

Dina crossed her arms, deflated. How dare they offer to pay for her to travel the world! How the hell was she going to refuse that?

*Easily!*

She knew most people would jump at this opportunity, but she wasn't most people. She didn't need to visit new countries. She was already in a new place. She was... in limbo. And that's where she planned to stay.

Her plan was to catch up on the hours of television she'd missed over the years with her early nights to bed so she could get up at 4 am to train. She was only up to season three of *The Walking Dead* and hadn't even started *Game of Thrones*.

"There's no point moping around the house for the next few months," her mother said.

"I'm not moping," Dina said, moping.

"You have every right to be angry and upset," said her father. "But hanging around the house won't change anything. This trip might."

Dina felt even more trapped now, forced into another situation beyond her control. "So, what you're saying is that Mae can't go on this trip unless I go with her?"

"Well... yes." At least her father had the decency to look guilty.

It left Dina with no choice. Dina adored her sister. Mae was the one person she could never disappoint.

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She turned her attention to her new travelling companions. Feisty Frankie in her hippy-like clothes stood to one side, taking selfies alone. Apparently, her parents didn't *do* airport goodbyes. Frankie seemed cool with that. She'd spent most of her childhood being home-schooled while travelling the world, so was extremely relaxed about the trip.

Unlike Ada, who was clinging to her mother as though she was heading off to war. Her mother was placating her

with promises about how safe travel was. Dina had never understood what Ada had to be worried about in life. She was an absolutely stunning blonde. Her looks didn't just open doors, they tore doors from their hinges. She could have the world at her pretty feet but instead she was always so anxious. About everything. Joining her friends on this trip had been Ada's mother's idea. She'd grudgingly agreed to go, but right now it was clear from her sobbing that Ada still might change her mind and refuse to board the plane.

Dina looked over at Hana, who was pocketing a wad of cash from her father. Dressed head to toe in expensive designer labels, Hana looked like an ad for Chanel. You'd never know that her father was Hiro Honda who owned Hi Ho, Australia's largest surf and skate brand. There was nothing surf and skate about Princess Hana.

And finally, Dina turned to Mae, her sister. Mae was small and pretty with huge blue eyes and pink hair. One look and it was clear that Mae was different. But it took getting to know her to really understand the truth of that. Mae was gifted. A genius. She was a freak of nature who their parents adored and had grand plans for. Dina had always been 'the sporty one'. No dummy, but no Mae. As much as it had hurt Dina and shaped her over the years, she couldn't bring herself to resent Mae. If anything, Mae was the one really good thing in her life. Dina could be quite serious, but Mae was a clown and made Dina laugh. They shared affection and secrets... everything really. Their bond ran deep. It's why, as difficult as it was to give into her parents' demands, Dina had agreed to this trip. She didn't want to let Mae down. Mae was desperate to go travelling with her friends, but, having skipped a few grades, she was only sixteen. Her giftedness was now propelling her into an adult world, but she was still in many ways a child. There

was no way their parents would agree to her travelling alone.

Dina was meant to be the responsible adult on this trip. The mature one, although no one in the family really believed that. For months she'd barely bathed. She lived in her pyjamas. But as her father had said, "You can be extremely disciplined. Reliable. I'm counting on that person to look after Mae".

Dina felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She knew who it was. She'd been expecting it all day.

*We have the footage. It's damning. I admire you for moving ahead with this, Dina. Everything is in place. Go and enjoy your trip, and we'll be in touch once the results are back.*

Relief flooded her, followed by that ache of betrayal that had been residing in her chest. She wanted to respond, but her mother was now watching her like a hawk, so she slipped her phone back into her pocket. She'd deal with it later.

"Hana's brother will pick you up from the airport," her mother said.

"I got that memo three thousand times."

"Did you get the memo about not doing anything stupid?"

"Those memos usually came together." Clearly her goodbye from her mother wasn't going to be as affectionate as the one Mae just got. Dina decided that the airport wasn't the place to argue. "You can trust me, Mum."

Her mother looked doubtful but pulled her in for a brief and awkward hug. It would've been less painful to receive no hug at all. She was used to her mother kissing her as though she had cold sores: quickly and with no actual contact. But she was about to board a plane to travel to the

other side of the world. Was it that hard to express some emotion?

“Just stay in touch,” her mother said.

Her father was next, and his hug was heartfelt. He always tried to make up for his wife’s lack of warmth. “Be safe, Dina. And enjoy yourself. This is your trip as well.”

Dina rolled her eyes, but he grabbed her shoulders and stared straight at her.

“I’m serious, my girl. This is your journey, too.”

Dina didn’t respond. She couldn’t. She didn’t want to cry. She’d leave the tears to Ada. Her howls were getting embarrassing now. People stopped to stare at the young woman who looked like a movie star but was acting like a toddler. Dina watched as Mae pried Ada out of her mother’s arms.

“Come on, Addy, you’ll be fine once you’re set loose in the duty-free shops,” Mae said, a firm grip on Ada’s hand.

Ada’s mother looked like she was holding on by a thread herself. “You’re with Mae, honey. Be brave and have fun.”

With one final wave, Mae led Ada towards the departure gate. Ada kept turning, teary eyed, to see her mother.

“Be strong,” Ada’s mother called, her voice wavering. “You can do this.”

*Millions of people every day do it*, Dina thought, but kept her mouth shut and picked up her bag.

Mae virtually dragged Ada through the gates without so much as a glance backwards. Frankie and Hana followed behind. Frankie wore a battered pack on her back while Hana pulled a red Louis Vuitton cabin bag behind her. They looked like the most mismatched travelling companions in history, and yet Dina would be blind to miss the ease with which they chatted and laughed, excited about their holiday. The way they lovingly rallied around Ada.

She felt a pang for that type of friendship but brushed it aside.

“Call us from Tokyo. Let us know you arrived safely.”

“I’m sure you’ll hear about it if we don’t arrive safely.” Dina started to walk off, but then paused. Would it kill her to leave them with hope? “I promise I’ll look after Mae.”

Dina was shocked to see her father appear choked with emotion.

“Look after yourself too, little fish.”

Dina followed the others through the departure gates. There was no turning back now.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Tara is a wanderer at heart. She has lived in six countries and travelled all over, in-between. Both her sons have been Worldschooled.

Jane has published over seventy children's books, a number of plays, and seven novels. She also writes children's books under the name Jane Hinchey. Jane lives with her two sons in Sydney.

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