THE STRANGE SIGHTING

An Alice England Mystery – Book 3

ASH HARRIER

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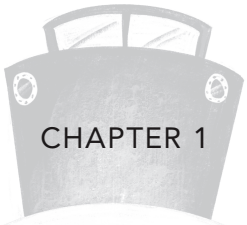

CHAPTER 1

Questions About Persephone

It was 8.19 on Thursday morning, and Alice was taking her usual three minutes to pat next door's cat. Little black and orange Maya was always punctual for their school-morning appointments. She would appear from beneath the camellia bush when Alice stepped out the door and paused beside the old brass plaque that read 'England's Funeral Parlour'. Alice had worked hard to build Maya's trust over the past year and they now enjoyed an agreeable exchange of strokes, purrs and *mrrps*. Alice rarely glimpsed Maya's owners – a young couple who seemed to work long hours.

At 8.22, she wished Maya a good day and went out the wrought-iron gate, across the road and along the footpath towards school. The morning air was fresh on her cheeks, bringing a faint salty scent from the cove. Wrens flitted in and out of the bushes and played in the sprinklers on someone's front lawn. This was Alice's favourite time of year – late summer, when the harshest of the heat had faded but the days were still long and warm. And she had double science with Ms Littlejohn to look forward to.

Every morning for the past few weeks, Alice had used the walk to school to think up questions about her

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 7 3/10/23 6:29 pm

mother. In the summer holidays just gone, she'd been watched – not once, but three times – by a woman dressed in dark clothing. When Alice had told her father about it, he thought it was most likely her mother, Persephone England.

Alice had no memory of her mother. Persephone had left soon after her twins were born – red-haired Alice and dark-haired Victoria, who never took her first breath. The umbilical cords had been wrapped up tight around Victoria's neck and Alice's leg. Alice was still troubled by her weak leg. It meant she couldn't run as fast or balance as well as able-bodied kids, and she needed to rest her leg regularly because it ached.

Alice and her father, Thaddeus, had lived contentedly together in their home, now called Tranquillity Funerals, for thirteen years – just the two of them. People always expected undertakers to be solemn and rather invisible, which was how Thaddeus behaved at work. He was sympathetic to his customers and worked hard to make funerals as lovely and inexpensive as they could be. But when it was just him and Alice, he was actually a cheerful, joking sort of dad who wore brightly coloured novelty shirts and made an excruciating number of puns. Nevertheless, Alice was proud of her father and looked forward to the day when she would work full time in the funeral home herself. She had big plans for the business.

Thirteen years – then, quite suddenly, Persephone had shown up, once standing at a bus stop, once lurking behind a tree on their street, then finally *following* Alice and her friends to the Quay. Alice didn't like being followed and watched. It wasn't that she thought her mother had evil intentions; it was just a strange thing to do, creeping

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 8 3/10/23 6:29 pm

around and hiding like that. Why not simply come up and say hello, if she wanted to know how Alice had turned out? But Thaddeus had explained that Persephone didn't generally do things in a straightforward manner.

Alice's curiosity about her mother was intense – so intense, she'd asked her father many, many questions. It got to the point where Thaddeus suggested Alice keep her questions to once a week, at dinner on Sunday. Sunday was a strange day that didn't know if it was the end or the start of the week, which made it a suitable day for strange conversations.

Alice now spent much of her spare time working on questions to ask on Sunday evenings. Along with future question ideas, she'd written down what she considered important points about her mother in a dedicated notebook:

- Persephone England, born in the Tormenting Coast area.
- Blue-green eyes, pale complexion. Dark hair with a natural auburn streak on one side.
- Wears black habitually and has done since Dad knew her.
- Loves the sea and always liked to live in coastal areas.
- Preferred a quiet, indoors lifestyle. Did not socialise much.
- Dad won't tell me her last name from before they got married.
- He was surprised to find she was in the country. He thought she'd gone to live overseas.

It was good to learn a little more about herself through these facts. For instance, Alice had brown eyes like her father, but she was quite pale, which she must have

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 9 3/10/23 6:29 pm

got from her mother. Alice also had hair the colour of overcooked pumpkin, which her father called 'auburn' – and her mother had that auburn streak; whereas Thaddeus had brown hair, going a little grey at the sides.

Alice's mum and dad weren't in contact anymore. To stop Persephone from following Alice around Damocles Cove, Thaddeus had put a notice in the classified section of a magazine he thought she would probably read. She'd always read it when he knew her, he said. The magazine was called *Illuminated* and, Alice discovered with an unpleasant shock, contained a whole lot of silly conspiracy theories about aliens, ghosts, secret societies and supernatural creatures. This was something Alice most definitely did *not* have in common with Persephone, and she wasn't sure what to think about her mother reading magazines like that.

The notice Thaddeus placed said:

> To Persephone. Please contact me to arrange access visits.
> Otherwise please refrain from unarranged approaches.
> Regards, Thaddeus

Alice waited with interest to find out how her mother would respond. So far there had been no reply, but Persephone no longer seemed to be following her. Alice hadn't told her friends about Persephone yet. It was her business – hers and her father's. Besides, she wasn't sure if she was ready for anyone else to know she had a conspiracy-believing, child-following parent whose last name Alice was not allowed to know.

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 10 3/10/23 6:29 pm

At recess, after a science lesson on vascular sea plants and algae, Alice made her way to the best bench in the school. Well, *she* thought it was the best bench. Her friend Violet Devenish said it was *all right* but a bit close to the principal's office. Her other friend Cal Lee thought it was a terrible spot, and often tried to get them to choose another place to meet.

'We're a target for Ms Goodwill, sitting here,' he would complain.

Alice quite liked Principal Goodwill, especially since she'd helped them solve the Malkin Tower mystery during their summer break. And while she *was* excessively positive and chatty, Ms Goodwill was usually too busy managing the students who wrote on the toilet walls or did parkour in the quadrangle to give Alice and her friends much of her time – so Cal really didn't need to worry.

Today, Violet was already on the bench, nibbling a raisin muffin under her veil. Being allergic to UV light, Violet wore protective gear all through the day. 'Hi,' she called, picking a raisin out of her muffin and tossing it to a family of ravens that had recently moved into the courtyard.

'Hello, Violet. Are raisins good for birds?'

'They're fruit, so I'm sure they're fine. Have you seen Cal this morning?'

Alice shook her head, pulling out her carrot sticks and hummus. Her father was enthusiastic about healthy food and liked to help pack her school snacks. 'Not yet.'

'Maybe he skipped school to go and meet Hana's train.'

Cal's cousin Hana was coming to stay with him for two weeks. Violet seemed almost as excited as he was. She was a fan of a Korean pop group called Moon Squad, and since

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 11 3/10/23 6:29 pm

hearing Hana came from the same part of South Korea as one of the group's members, Violet had been bursting to meet her.

It was hard to stop thinking about algae, seagrass and her mother, but Alice made an effort to focus on Violet's words. 'Is Hana coming to Damocles Cove on the train? I thought her parents would drive her.'

'Her parents are staying with Cal's dad in Port Cormorant and Hana's coming to Damocles Cove by herself.' A raven gobbled another raisin and cawed at its sibling in triumph.

'You know, Violet, I don't think the concentrated sugar in raisins is healthy for birds.'

Violet stopped tossing the raisins. 'I really hope Hana likes K-pop, too.'

'In Korea, would K-pop just be called "pop"?' Alice asked. 'They wouldn't add the K for Korea to their own music, would they?'

Violet frowned. 'Hm, I don't know. I wish I had my phone so I could check. I don't want to sound clueless when I talk to her about it.' Phones were handed in at the start of the day at Damocles Cove High School.

Cal arrived at that moment, loping up to them with his black coat flapping. He had a couple of new ear spikes these days, including one that was a silver snake. It pierced his ear and peeked out from behind it, and Alice liked it immensely. Cal always looked a bit untidy, but he was much more alert than when they had first met him. He used to stay up all night gaming, which made him overtired and late every day, but when he got his pet snake, his mother had Cal agree to a deal: he'd stick to reasonable bedtimes and she'd help pay for Ziggy the python's food and equipment.

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 12 3/10/23 6:29 pm

'Hi, Ultra-Violet, Zombie Queen.' Cal slumped down between them onto the bench. 'Ugh, I just had double history.'

Violet shuffled over to make more room. 'Has Hana arrived yet?'

'No, she gets in late tonight. Hey, I was thinking – there's a pupil-free day next week. Do you want to take Hana to the Quay with me? We can get fish and chips for lunch.'

Violet was already nodding eagerly. 'I'll come.'

'Yes,' said Alice. 'I'll come too, if I'm not working.'

'Good. She's really looking forward to meeting you both. I already told her how the three of us practically run a detective agency together, and how our clients are usually dead people.'

Alice wasn't sure he was representing them to Hana accurately. That made it sound more official than solving a couple of odd mysteries they'd stumbled across. Cal dug a squashed-looking muesli bar out of his bag and gave it an unhappy glance, so Violet passed him her leftover piece of muffin.

'Thanks, Ultra.' He picked out a raisin and tossed it to the ravens before Alice could mention the sugar content. 'It'll be good, catching up with Hana. I haven't seen her for about seven years. Hopefully she likes horror games now. We used to play a lot of *Forest Picnic* together – but I've grown out of that, obviously.'

'I'm sure she's grown out of it, too,' said Violet.

'It's weird when you haven't seen someone for a long time,' he said. 'I keep wondering if she's the same or different.'

Violet nodded. 'I always feel awkward before I catch up with my cousins. I only see them at Christmas time. But it

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 13 3/10/23 6:29 pm

just takes a few minutes, then we're laughing and talking like we haven't even been apart.'

Alice, who didn't have cousins, had no personal experience to contribute. She wondered if her mother had any brothers or sisters. Maybe Alice *did* have cousins she'd never met.

She pulled her mind back to the conversation. 'I expect you and Hana will slip easily into your old friendship again, Cal. However, it *will* be convenient if Hana has also grown to like playing horror games all night.'

'Yeah. We might be in trouble if she hasn't.'

'I'm sure you'll have other things in common.' Alice considered Cal's range of hobbies. 'Perhaps she'll also like snacking, wearing skull rings, caring for reptiles, complaining about history class or watching videos about the occult.'

Violet burst into laughter and Cal grinned lopsidedly. 'Thanks, Zombie Queen. Nice summary.' He threw a raisin in the air and tried to catch it in his mouth but it bounced off his nose. An enterprising raven snatched it before it hit the ground. 'Anyway, I just hope Hana hasn't turned out, you know …'

'Loud?' suggested Alice. Her mind was already wandering back to the idea of relatives she'd never met.

'Hair flicky?' said Violet, clearly thinking of their unpleasant classmate Kimberly Larsson, who called Violet a vampire.

Cal tossed another raisin and, this time, caught it. 'Boring. If there's one thing I can't handle, it's *boring*.'

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 14 3/10/23 6:29 pm

Alice tried to be patient while she waited for Sunday night question time. She thought a lot about cousins, trying to imagine what they might look like and how old they might be. Were they nature-lovers? Did they like cats, K-pop or gaming? Were they interested in marine science?

On Thursday night, she filled some time reading a book she had on loan from the library – *Ancient Life of the Deep Ocean* by Elvira Marchamley. Alice was interested in the deep ocean. Well, any part of the ocean, really. She glanced up at the display of items she'd found on the beach that now lived on her desk. Dried anemones; driftwood; shells both whole and broken, round and jagged; ammonite fossils; smooth, pale pebbles; bits of old rope; seaglass; and desiccated starfish. Cal and Violet called it her collection, but Alice didn't think of it that way. It felt disrespectful, somehow, to call it a 'collection'. It was a variety of fascinating natural objects that shared her bedroom space – like roommates. A *lot* of roommates. There were so many things on her desk, they'd started spilling over onto her bookshelf and nightstand. She could do with a glass display cabinet to keep it all in, really.

Alice was pleased to learn from her book that Damocles Cove was part of a region rich in marine fossils. There was a deep ocean canyon not far from the coast. She told Violet and Cal about it at Friday lunchtime, but they wanted to talk about Hana. Cal told them his cousin was still fun and easy to talk to. He'd come to school late that morning, looking extremely tired. Apparently, Hana was very much a fan of playing horror games long into the night, and they'd played them so late that he found himself falling asleep at the computer desk.

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 15 3/10/23 6:29 pm

Saturday was busy with work. There was a funeral service in the morning – many attended and they ran out of sandwiches, which sent their assistant Patty cursing back into the kitchen to rustle up another two platters. But as Patty was the fastest sandwich maker in the region (perhaps even in the world), it wasn't a problem for long. On Sunday morning, Alice helped her dad prepare a man named Desmond for his funeral, which would be held during the week.

Finally, it was Sunday afternoon, then *finally* it was dinnertime. Her dad turned off the oven, wiped the bench and got himself a glass of kombucha. Alice preferred water.

She waited until a plate of tofu and vegetable loaf was sitting in front of her and Thaddeus had taken his seat opposite, then could hold back no longer. She fixed her father with a steady gaze.

He seemed to sigh slightly as he picked up his fork. 'All right, Alice. Go ahead.'

'Does my mother have any siblings?'

'No. She had a brother, but he died.'

'Did her brother have any children?'

Thaddeus shook his head. 'No, he died when he was young – a long time before I met your mother.'

'Oh.' Over the past few days, Alice had practically convinced herself she had a bunch of secret aunts, uncles and cousins. It was a major disappointment to realise she was as cousin-less as ever. But her curiosity was sparked by her father's last comment.

'How *did* you meet my mother?'

'It was at the Funeral Fair.'

Alice sat up straight. 'What's that? And why have I never been to one?'

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 16 3/10/23 6:29 pm

'They don't have them anymore, but they used to be held every two years by the Association of Embalmers and Morticians. It was a kind of conference where you could learn about new technology and products, listen to experts speak, and so on. They had an awards night and a dinner dance. It was the highlight of the funeral industry calendar.'

Alice sat imagining the Funeral Fair: a sea of gleaming coffins and caskets of every hue; majestic floral arrangements; advanced sound systems; innovative guest gifts and mementos; delightful canapés – and endless sachets of sugar and coffee. 'What a shame they don't have it anymore.'

'Yes. It's all moved online these days. Webinars and video conferences.'

Alice tasted her dinner. 'Can I add some more soy sauce to this?'

He nodded. 'Not too much, though. There's a lot of salt in soy sauce.'

Alice went to fetch the sauce bottle. 'How did you start talking to my mother?' she asked when she came back.

'I noticed her sitting alone at the dinner dance and thought she was very pretty, so I went and said hello and asked her to dance with me.'

Alice thought this sounded unpleasant for both parties. 'And she said yes?'

'Yes.' He smiled.

'You were at the fair because you were a mortician – but why was my mother there?'

'She had a stand. She was advertising her services.'

'What sort of services? Did she work in the funeral industry, too?'

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 17 3/10/23 6:29 pm

There was a change in Thaddeus's demeanour, and he shifted in his chair as if it had become uncomfortable. He stared down at his dinner. Alice watched him, waiting, but his silence stretched on. In her lifetime, she'd never asked any question about death, science or human behaviour that Thaddeus hadn't at least attempted to answer. However, when it came to the Sunday night window for questions about Persephone, he often hesitated more, thought longer – and replied less.

'Dad?' she prompted.

The silence grew thicker. At last, he prodded his tofu and vegetable loaf as if no longer hungry and looked up. 'This might be one of those questions that should wait until you're older.' Thaddeus put a smile on his face that didn't look at all natural. 'Now, why don't you tell me a bit more about your marine fossil book?'

It seemed the Sunday night window for questions had already closed.

The Strange Sighting_288_B_3pp.indd 18 3/10/23 6:29 pm