



Ever since the shipwreck, California's golden coast has been filled with treasure hunters. Each one is chasing the same prize: a lost diamond necklace. And none are more determined to find it than Cassie Stein.

But there is something far more remarkable than treasure waiting to be found. A fish, unlike any the world has ever seen, who can understand Cassie's every word. His name is Blue, and his life is in grave danger.

To save her new friend, Cassie must do the unthinkable – accept help from her arch rival, TJ. But with the diamond necklace still up for grabs, can she really trust him?

'Had me enraptured from the very first sentence'

Lui Sit, author of *Land of the Last Wildcat*



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MONSTER DOWN DEEP

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Monster Down Deep

I am trapped.

Who am I?

I do not make a habit of introducing myself to humans, but I am in desperation. I am the one they call Monster Down Deep. This is a very not good name for two very good reasons.

Firstly, I am not a monster. I am a fish. A perfectly fine fish, in fact. I have fins for swimming and fins for walking, a mouth full of hooked teeth and smooth scales. I do not look like other fish, but other fish do not look like me. Do I call them monsters?

I had another name once. It was so long ago that all who knew it are gone. My family. My friends. My whole school. Only I have survived.

Since I was a hatchling, I have had a strong sense of survival. I learned to swim as silently as a shadow; to skim the middle deep without disturbing a grain of sand. I sensed danger when others did not.

Living became my life's work.

All in all, I have been alive for 2,974 circle moons. I do not know the number in human years. Fish do not count years. We count moons. Moons create the tides. The tides lead us afar and the tides lead us home. If I survive twenty-six more moons, I will reach three thousand moons. I have never heard of a fish who lived so long. If I am careful, I will be the first.

I am always careful.

How, then, did I end up here?

You will be wondering, *Where is here?*

I am wondering the same thing.

I am trapped in some type of thick green weed. It has formed a net around me and I cannot get free. Now, the net swims with the tide and I must swim within it.

Two sliver moons have passed and my fear grows. Where does the net take me? At first, I was caught in my panic and saw only glimpses of kelp forests, shadows of black eels and deep ocean trenches. I watch carefully now, but what I *feel* alarms me the most. The water is warmer. I am being dragged into dangerous sun-lit water.

I blame the orange fish.

I blame myself.

No, I really only blame the orange fish.

Because of him, this slithery green mass of weed caught me. With each passing breath, it carries me up. Predators live up. Humans live up. Up is very not safe.

That is the second reason why my name is very not good: I am no longer Down Deep. Instead of Monster Down Deep, I am Very Afraid Fish.

Have I seen my last moon?

Southern California Beachcombers Gazette

Issue 3,287

YACHT SINKS! JEWELRY LOST! MASSIVE REWARD OFFERED!

The yacht of billionaire Clifton Royce III capsized in the waters off the coast of San Diego two days ago. No one was injured, but when the *Spirit* went down, the vessel's contents were lost to the Pacific Ocean.

Or were they?

Yesterday, a local beachcomber found a woman's sandal studded with crystals. The sandal, identified as belonging to Mrs. Clifton Royce III, has raised hopes that more treasure will wash up on the beaches.

The big prize? A 74-carat diamond necklace that once belonged to European royalty. The value of the necklace is listed at \$50 million. In order to discourage unscrupulous characters from breaking the necklace into stones and selling them illegally, the Royce family is offering an unprecedented reward for the return of the necklace, intact: One *Million* Dollars!

Who will fish this treasure from the sea?

1

Cassie Stein looked out at the Pacific Ocean and felt a tingly, fizzy shiver of *maybe*. It was out there—a treasure bigger than anything she'd imagined. She'd been beachcombing since she was three, so she'd imagined a whole lot.

But a royal diamond necklace?

A wave rolled up the beach. White foam gathered at the tip, clung to the sand for a breath, then washed back out. The tide brought squiggly strips of grass and spongy green kelp. The tide also brought other things.

Shiny, diamond things, she hoped.

Cassie squeezed the handle of Sylvia, her metal detector. "Today's the day." She'd said that every day for the past fifteen days, ever since the necklace was reported lost. But today really could be the day.

She set down Sylvia and shook out her Junior Guards beach blanket. Sand flew up like bits of glass in the

sunlight. She anchored one corner with her beach bag then pulled out her phone to text Dad:

Here

School had ended last week which made this officially summer—the first summer she was allowed to come to the beach by herself. Dad still worried, even though he didn't have to. She was almost twelve, they only lived five short blocks away, and Miss Mary was there to keep an eye out. The only real danger was the ocean—but not for Cassie. The ocean had nearly killed her once. She wasn't giving it another chance.

Her phone beeped with Dad's reply:

Fingers crossed. Be careful!

Cassie was always careful.

She adjusted her khaki backpack, feeling the weight rest against her shoulders. Inside was a light jacket, an apple, an insulated bottle of water, a mesh shovel, a sifting pan, a hand rake, a flat brush, nine-volt batteries for Sylvia, and storage bags.

She took a quick look around. Her gaze skimmed over the dozen or so people sitting on beach towels and the clumps of walkers with their dogs. She paused at two older women who were hunting shells, then relaxed. They weren't competition. Further to the left, her gaze snagged on a boy about her age. He didn't look like serious competition, either. He didn't look like serious anything. His hair was blowing in every

direction, an orangey-brown color that clashed with his green shirt and baggy red shorts. He had a pack slung over one shoulder that was too small to hold any real equipment. His skinny legs were shiny with wet sand, and he wore flip-flops.

Rookie mistake. Hunting for treasure required good footwear. She'd ignore him completely except for one thing. The metal detector in his hand was not for rookies.

Mystery Boy had the Hunter Pro Series 2 with three sensitivity settings, a ten-inch search coil, and a water-proof detection depth of twenty-two inches. She knew because it was the same model she carried. Sylvia was a Hunter Pro Series 2.

She'd keep her eye on him, but most kids didn't last long at this. Beachcombing was hard and mostly you found junk. Besides, he was looking in a place Cassie called the Zip Zone because nothing ever turned up there.

She set off toward the far jetty where she'd mapped today's search. The sand reflected the early June sun and warmed her beneath her long-sleeved SPF shirt and board shorts. Sand kicked up with each step, some of it slipping into her water-safe sneakers and tickling under her feet. She loved her beach. The salty taste of the air. The squawk of birds searching for their own treasures. Mostly, she loved how it felt every time she set off with Sylvia and that feeling of *Maybe*.

Cassie used to dream of being an underwater explorer like Sylvia Earle. That was before. But you didn't need to dive two feet, much less two thousand feet, to discover all kinds of treasure. You had to be careful—like Cassie. Strategic. You had to work harder—but also smarter. That's why she was going to find what everyone was searching for.

She wove around a group of high school girls and waved as she passed Miss Mary, checking in.

The older lady waved back from behind her easel, the tip of her paintbrush a bright gold. "Good luck, Cassie!"

Cassie wouldn't mind some luck, but mostly she relied on science. Wind patterns and tidal charts. Search grids and beach geography. She wouldn't learn physics until high school—and she wouldn't start middle school for three months—but she knew the basics. Physics was about how matter moved through space. A heavy necklace would travel through water differently than say, seaweed. That was physics.

A wave crashed ahead of her and she yelped, startled by the force. It was just a random wave, bigger than the others. Still, she glanced back, her breath caught in her throat. She half-expected to see the two Emmas staring at her, their eyes picking her apart. But she didn't see their straw hats with the navy bands—she would know those anywhere. She had the same one at home. She'd been the one to pick them out.

She sighed out a slow breath the way she'd practiced, and flipped Sylvia on. A green light winked hello. "Ready?" she asked. She was possibly too old to be talking to her metal detector. But that was the good thing about working on her own now. It didn't matter what anyone else thought.

Tightening Sylvia's arm band around her upper arm, she gripped the hand hold and started across the beach. The search coil skimmed the sand, the bright red disc the size of a small plate.

Sylvia beeped. A yellow light flared. Cassie jolted with excitement. She stopped, circling Sylvia over the sand. The yellow light grew, filling three squares on the display. There were ten squares in all on the panel—the more squares, the stronger the signal. Three could mean something small. Or something deep.

Crouching down, she yanked open her pack and grabbed her hand shovel. She dug down until she reached damp sand. She brought up a shovel full and shook it. Sand trickled through the mesh face like bits of pepper. With her fingers, she combed through the chunky bits that were left, separating soft from solid.

Nope. Her fingers knew before she got the sand off and the lumps turned into objects. Two bottle caps. She dropped them into her Save Sack. "It's okay. We're just getting started."