

## Chapter 1

A haunting melody of high-pitched clicks and whistles echoed around the submarine, and a thrill of anticipation snaked up Mallory's spine.

"Do you think we'll see them?" Mallory asked, craning her neck to get a better view out of the submarine's viewport. Excitement fizzed through her. She was struggling to sit still.

"I hope so," her dad replied, his eyes fixed on the ocean. "Their calls travel over great distances, but judging from the sonar, they're close."

"There!" called her mum, pointing to the right-hand side of the submarine.

Mallory spun round in her seat, every bone in her body alert. Squinting hard, she could just about make out a shape. No, three shapes. And they were heading this way!

As the orca drew closer, Mallory's heart began to race. Monochrome giants, their midnight coats shone glossily in the lights of the submarine. The smallest orca was still twice the size of their submarine. The largest one was easily the length of a bus. If they had chosen to, the orca could have destroyed the tiny submarine with one flick of their powerful fins. But they wouldn't. They might be called killer whales, but Mallory knew they would never harm them.

She realised that the smallest orca was only an infant. It spun round in circles, bubbles trailing in its wake. Twisting and turning, it seemed to delight in darting in between the older whales. They were gone in an instant, the blue swallowing them up. But then, unexpectedly, the baby orca appeared from the right-hand side of the sub's viewport and swam leisurely

right in front of them. It was so close - only a matter of metres away - it seemed to be weighing them up, as if trying to work out what kind of strange sea creatures they were.

Placing a hand on the porthole, Mallory watched as the curious whale drew closer. Blood whooshed in her ears. She had never imagined getting this close to such an incredible creature. Its face was almost level with hers and she noticed a white splash above its eye, like a puddle of spilled milk.

Mallory looked into its eyes and saw intelligence there. Swallowing, she stared at him, for in her mind it was now a he, both of them suspended in this moment. Time seemed to stretch out and expand. Then with a flick of his powerful tail he was gone, back to the safety of his pod. Mallory breathed out, her eyes wide.

“Glad you came down here, after all?” Mallory’s mum asked, her eyes sparkling.

Mallory didn’t answer. She didn’t need to. The smile on her face said everything. In that moment, she couldn’t imagine why she’d ever want to be anywhere else.

Back home in Devon, her parents had told Mallory about the importance of their underwater mission, to be the first manned crew of an underwater research station, yet she had begged and pleaded to stay with her grandmother. She hadn’t fully understood what it all meant, what it would feel like to experience life underwater. Until now. Seeing the orca, watching the majestic way they moved through the waters, she realised why it meant so much to her mum and dad. She understood why tracking them and monitoring changes to the ocean life was something her parents prioritised, something they had to do.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Mallory glanced over at her mum and dad. Busy taking notes and measurements, their faces were lit up in a way she had never seen before and guilt

shot through her. Up to this point, climate change, overfishing and rising ocean temperatures had been an abstract concern to Mallory. Now she could feel what was really at stake. Why it all mattered so much to her parents. A spark started to burn deep within her. Mallory didn't quite understand what it all meant but she knew this was something she needed to be a part of.

As the day's mission continued, Mallory fell into a dreamlike trance, mesmerised by the surreal, incredible experience. "I can't believe they came so close to the sub," she said eventually, the first words she had spoken since she'd seen the orca.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" her mum said, her eyes bright with excitement. "That feeling never quite goes away. I'm so glad you're here. I knew once you'd seen the whales, you'd be hooked."

Mallory's dad turned round in his seat. "Seconded," he said. "There's so much to see down here, love. You're going to -"

A sharp, screeching sound rang out and cut her dad off. Instantly, her parents were totally focused on the sub. They pressed a series of buttons and began speaking rapidly into their headsets.

"What's happening?" Mallory shouted over the incessant drone of the alarm, her eyes darting between the many flashing lights on the sub's dashboard.

"Air pressure has been compromised," her mum called back. "We need to get back to the Maris. Don't worry."

While her parents worked methodically to stabilise the submarine, the only sign of outward concern was the sheen of sweat on each of their brows. Mallory tried not to panic but she

knew the pressure at this depth would kill them instantly, the breath squeezed out of their lungs as easily as squashing a paper bag. She shuddered.

Holding on tight to the arms of her seat, she scrunched her eyes closed. Around her she imagined the sounds of rivets popping and metal shrinking. Her throat narrowed as her breathing became shallower.

Opening her eyes, she stared ahead into the now empty waters. Tiny dots danced at the edges of her vision, growing larger until an image of the orca's obsidian eye filled her sight one last time.

"Breathe, Mall," she heard her mum say although it sounded far away, as if she were speaking to her through a tunnel. "It's OK, we're OK," but it was too late. Mallory sank into darkness, into nothing.