



4

THE OCEAN

The lurch of the yacht smashed me against the deck, slamming the air from my lungs. I was tossed upwards and sideways. One minute there was solid deck below me, the next it had vanished and I was flying.

Weightless, breathless ...

One terrible millisecond followed another.

Hard pellets of rain stung my face, the life jacket bit into my armpits and the straps of my backpack tugged my shoulders.

‘Theo!’ called Mozzie from somewhere above me. ‘THEO!’

A hard slap of water. Headfirst. The force of my entry shot me deep below the waves. Pulling, twisting and spinning. Salty water soaking through my clothes, my hair. Filling my ears, my nose. Water that weighed heavy on my body.

I thrashed and kicked. My lungs screamed as my sodden clothes dragged me down. Black spots swam beneath my eyelids. Salt burnt the back of my throat.

I threw a hand out, grasping for the surface, and saw something solid floating above me. A shark? A giant eel?

A life ring! Mozzie must have thrown a life ring! Which meant ... she knew where I was! She'd tell the others! I snatched the rope surrounding the life ring then held on – kicking, kicking, kicking – until I burst back to the surface. Along with the life jacket, the life ring kept me upright, bobbing me like a cork in the waves.

‘Help!’ I screamed. ‘Help!’

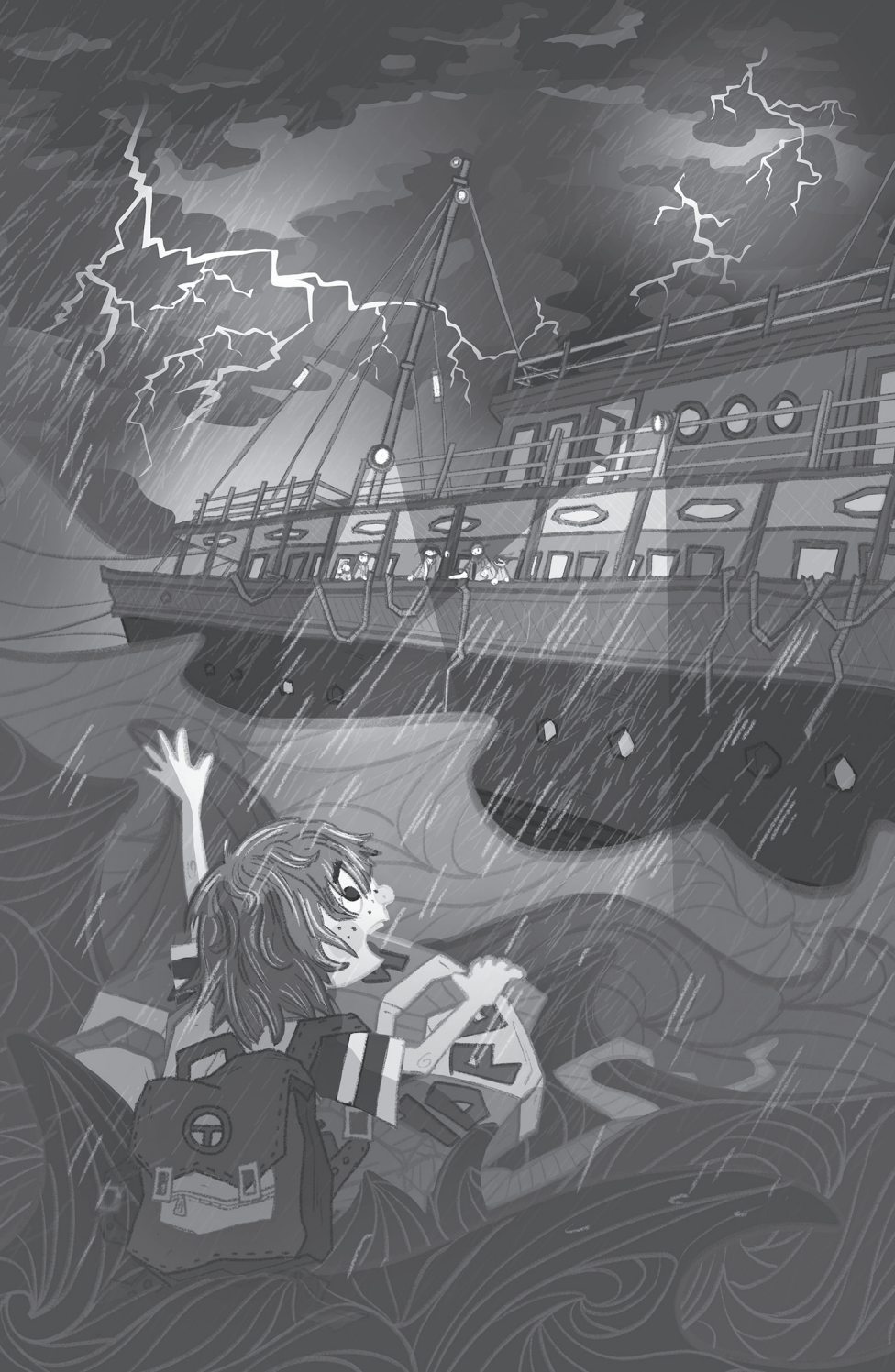
Another huge swell carried me skyward and

sea spray needled my face. I was up high, kicking and flailing, when a beacon of light swept the ink-black ocean. It was the yacht's rescue spotlight!

I hardly had a breath to spare, but I fumbled for the life jacket's whistle, held it in my mouth and gripped the hard plastic between my teeth.

I waited, *steady now, steady*, until I summited another monster wave. The ocean flung me left and right. The thick foam of the life jacket pressed hard against my throat, forcing my chin up and making it hard to breathe. But, as I hoped, the yacht appeared across from me, astride another wave. I blew. And blew and blew and blew. But the sound, so loud and shrill in my ears, was whisked away by the wind.

The yacht dipped in and out of sight. Sometimes it was so close I could see silhouettes in the portholes. Other times I was sure Dad was on deck beside Mozzie, urgently searching the waves. I blew again. And again. 'I'm here! Over here!' I yelled, waving an arm above my head as the spotlight scoped left and right.



I blinked the ocean from my eyes, spat the plastic taste of the whistle from my mouth. The yacht had gone again, disappearing down a valley of waves. Then, just as suddenly, it was back, a large hulk of steel bearing down on my right. Heading straight for me. A wall of metal, so close I could almost touch the side.

I kicked to get away. I *had* to get away. I'd be drawn in and under. But instead of sucking me in, at the very last moment, the bow wave flung me to one side, away and behind the yacht, like a piece of unwanted trash, leaving only me and the surging ocean. 'Help!' I cried. I clung to the life ring, hoping to see the spotlight any second now. But there was no yacht in front, no yacht to the side, no yacht behind me.

'Help!' I screamed. 'Come back!'

But it was no use.

The yacht had gone, leaving me in the dark, alone in the pitching ocean.