

## A SEAL's Secret

“I don't understand why it's wrong if I don't want to make friends at school,” I said.

Dad and I were on our way to therapy like we do every Friday since August when Dad finished his mission and we moved off base.

“Well, it's not wrong, pumpkin, but wouldn't you like to make friends?” Dad asked. I didn't answer him. I was tracing the pattern of the snowflakes sticking on my window.

“If you don't like the kids at school, you could be friends with the girls on your swim team at the Y. Friends help you be happy,” he said.

“I thought that's what Dr. Mosley was for?”

Maybe Dad was looking at something in the road, or a snowflake caught his attention too, because until we got to therapy, all I could hear were the tires slosh through the melting snow. We checked in and waited for our therapists to get us from the waiting room. The Backyardigans was playing on the T.V. and Pablo the penguin and Tyron the moose were going to the beach.

“Do you have friends, Dad?” I asked him. Being in the Navy, I think it's part of Dad's job to always look rigid, but he didn't usually sound that way.

“Used to. That's why I go to therapy too.”

The toys in Dr. Mosley's office covered the bookshelves on all four walls. I sat on my couch, and kicked my feet. I was too short for my legs to reach the floor but it was more fun that way.

“Opal, why don't you tell your parents about Lamia?” Dr. Mosley asked me to draw a picture one day and I drew a picture Lamia and I swimming in the ocean. I liked swimming because no one can watch me, at least I couldn't tell that my parents, or coaches, or whomever,

were watching me with my face down in the water. Here it wasn't just Dr. Mosley, but all the Barbie's and stuffed animals had their eyes on me too.

"They won't believe me," I said with my eyes glued to the floor. I stopped swinging my legs.

"They'll be happy you've made a friend. I promise."

I tried to ignore the gaze of the toys around me and find Dr. Mosley's brown eyes, like mine. She held out her pinky for me to seal the promise.

The world is so quiet above the water. The air in the Y's natatorium is muggy and stale and the pool water lapping on the sides could put me to sleep if it wasn't for the too bright lights on the ceiling. Once I dive in though, the water is deafening. My ears flood with my own humming as I blow air out my nose and mouth while my arms plunge the water ahead and my feet act like motors. Bubbles stamped my face but through them I can see my nail polish shimmer under the water with each stroke. Sometimes, I forget to breathe. Or I accidentally punch the wall at the end of the lane because I wasn't paying attention. That hurts, but it's better than hitting my head. I've done that a few times and once it gave me a concussion and I couldn't swim for four weeks.

When I first met her, she wrote things that I couldn't read behind the glass. There was a thin film that, when wiped away, became clearer like when I write in the dirt on my mom's car. I couldn't understand the symbols she wrote, but I just smiled at her on the days her light was on and placed my hand on the outside of the glass, and one day she placed her hand fin to mine on her side. The glass got cold; she jerked away, her light went out, and I was left staring at myself in the window running out of air.

Dad came to every practice and swim meet because Mom had to take a lot of her paperwork home with her every night and Dad said just being by the water was helpful for him.

After touching Lamia's hand the first time, she still wrote in symbols but began using English too. She wrote 'Lamia' on the glass cluttered by her language and pointed to herself with her finned fingers. The glass on my side was clean so I couldn't share my name. I went up for air but when I returned her light was out. After every practice Dad asked me if I made a new friend, and I finally told him yes, and her name was Lamia. He hugged me tight before we got in the car and he asked all kinds of impossible questions on the ride home.

"How old is she?"

"I don't know."

"Does she go to school with you?"

"No, but she's smart. She knows other languages."

"Which ones?"

"I don't know."

"What do you talk about?"

"Well, we can't talk under water, Dad."

"Fair." He thought she was just another girl in my lane.

Dad had barely shut the door before he told Mom I finally made a friend and she almost spilled her coffee on her paperwork. I ran upstairs before I could be bothered with any more questions, but soon enough my parents were at my door with a bowl of blue moon ice cream with raspberry drizzle.

"We're so proud that you've made a friend." Mom set the bowl on my nightstand next to my dolphin water globe.

“You know you can invite her over to play.” She tried to get me to look at her, but what would I say? I hadn’t had a friend over before.

“We could make ice cream sandwiches?” Mom continued and squeezed Dad’s big hand resting on her shoulder.

“I don’t think Lamia likes ice cream,” I said picking up my bowl so I wouldn’t have to look at my parents anymore, but when I glanced from behind my bowl, I found them nodding.

“Maybe next time,” they said, and left me alone with my raspberry drizzle bleeding brown into my blue moon.

The next Friday, Mom came to therapy with Dad and I. Dad went to his doctor and Mom came with me to mine, but she sat in my spot. It was the parent seat, but now my legs were stuck to the ground like my butt in the little chair.

“Opal, would you like to describe Lamia to your mom?” Both of them were watching me. I couldn’t look anywhere but my knees because the American Girl dolls were staring at me from all corners too. My mom put her hand on my back but it burned.

“Could you show us what she looks like?” Dr. Mosley found me some paper and markers. I chose the blue marker and started with her head then traded it for black to draw her eyes. They looked like the olives my mom sometimes ate straight from the can. I was halfway through drawing her body when my mom interrupted me.

“Why is she blue? Is she sad?”

“Let her finish,” Dr. Mosley said and nodded to me. I was scared to look at my mom again. I finished Lamia, without drawing her scales or gills because it didn’t matter. I looked at the floor and fiddled with the markers when I finished.

“Opal, is Lamia a mermaid?”

I sat in the waiting room again, listening to Dr. Mosley whisper to my parents about the importance of encouraging children to have imaginary friends, but to not call them “pretend.”

She might as well have broken my pinky finger. It wasn’t fair.

“I didn’t make up Lamia.”

“Honey, why don’t you go –”

“She told me her name. She wrote it on the window!”

“We’ll call you,” Mom said to Dr. Mosley as Dad knelt down to me.

“Let’s go get some Hawaiian pizza. Sound good?” I turned and marched away with my parents trailing behind.

The weekend went by and I was restless. We didn’t practice on the weekends and I hadn’t seen Lamia in a week. I missed hiding under the water at the deep end to visit her. I’d see how long I could hold my breath and stay at the bottom of the pool where her long rectangular window and the pool vents were. Monday afternoon came, and I filled my lungs and hid fifteen feet deep. The window was black and I could only see my reflection and the pool behind me. I stared until my goggles fogged and my lungs started to hurt. I returned to the surface for air, swam to one end and back before diving again to the window, closer this time, and placed my hand on the glass. On the other side, I felt a whisp behind the glass for less than a second and my hand went cold again. I smiled, careful to not lose too much air, and pressed my hand closer and noticed tiny ice flakes appear on the glass above my fingertips. I wanted to write to her, *Light*, but only she could write messages and I was scared to move my hand away before I had to.

Then the light flicked on and I watched her jerk her body away from mine like she was looking behind her. Her whole body had scales, even her face, and she shimmered like my

fingernails. Her tailfin was spiked beyond where it ribbed and had matching barbs that glistened down her spine. My hand slowly grew warm, and I wanted to see her eyes but she wouldn't turn to me, distracted by the dimming light just as my chest started to feel heavy. I felt distant movement behind the glass, similar to how it feels when my dad walks down the hall. A shadow on the wall behind Lamia's case grew larger with each vibration. I only caught a glimpse of the person's face before everything went dark.

I woke up on the pool deck, coughing up water, and I couldn't see because my goggles were gone and I was staring at the fluorescent ceiling lights. Before I could rub the light from my eyes a warm, heavy weight wrapped around me and was saying, "Thank God." My dad had dove into the water and pulled me from the bottom.

"There's someone down there!" I said, and he just looked at me. Everyone was looking at me. They had all evacuated the pool.

"You were down there, Opal."

"But it's not a window! It's a glass box! Lamia's stuck in a box!" My dad looked at each of my eyes looking for something before holding me closer to him. He carried me to the car, and called Mom on the way to the hospital.

"She almost drowned – I don't know, I haven't asked her. I'll text you the room number. Can you bring us both a pair of dry clothes? - Love you."

The air in the emergency room was icy with me in my swimsuit and red rings around my eyes from my goggles and my dad also soaked holding me koala-style. We were helped right away.

“I’m cold,” I told my dad, and minutes later a nurse returned with a scratchy white blanket and an oxygen tank. Dad leaned on his elbows and watched the nurses clip the air tubes to my nose, take a blood sample, and listen to my chest.

“Not too bad,” the nurse said and turned to my dad. “We’re going to take a chest X-ray to be safe.” She walked out of the room. I thought all the attention was a little overboard. I felt fine, a little tired, but I was fine. I think my Dad looked worse than I did. He didn’t say anything to me, but he wouldn’t stop looking at me either, until Mom arrived with our dry clothes and she wouldn’t stop talking. I was grateful for that X-ray.

The ER staff told my parents that they wanted to keep me for observation just one night. I hadn’t inhaled that much water, but my oxygen levels were low, and they didn’t want me passing out at home. So we all stayed the night. Mom bought Wendy’s for dinner and we dipped French fries in chocolate frosties. We didn’t talk about it. Mom read me “The Rainbow Fish” before bed and turned out the light. I pretended to fall asleep, and heard my parents talking outside the room between monitor beeps.

“She didn’t come up for air.”

“What?”

“She swam to the end, dove down, and didn’t come back up. She was down there for forty seconds.”

“She’s seven.”

“Marissa, she was looking for Lamia.”

“I’m calling Dr. Mosley.”

“Wait, just listen. When I was down there, just briefly in my peripheral vision, I did see something.”

“Jim.”

“Look, I could be wrong, but there –”

“Jim, listen to yourself –”

“I saw something move.”

“Jim, no one dragged your buddy under the water.”

“What? I’m not talking about Fadley.”

“Jim –”

“Just because I have PTSD doesn’t mean I can’t see things, Marissa.”

“That’s not what I – I’m sorry.”

I don’t remember the rest of the conversation, just that I was fighting the lullaby of my heart monitor.

They didn’t let me swim for a week, and even after that my mom didn’t want me to go back. They talked about me joining a different team. Different team. Different pool. I told them I didn’t want to swim if I couldn’t be in the YMCA pool. Every night since the hospital I dreamt about the face I saw behind Lamia’s case. I guess it was a tank. The face behind her tank was blurry to me but it looked yellow and pudgy in the lighting behind the window. I don’t remember the rest of his body, but every night I dreamt a new detail. His yellow pudgy face with hollowed eyes hidden by wrinkles was incapable of smiling, and his hands were so swollen that they puffed out from the sleeves of his black turtleneck. His heavy, black boots were responsible for the stomping I could feel in the glass.

In one dream Lamia was screeching and clasped what I guess were earholes because he carved her symbols into the tank. Another dream I had, he just stood behind the tank and stared right into me until I woke up. Across from my bed was my bedroom window and outside, the



streetlight glowed the same dim yellow. I went downstairs for a cup of water and found my dad sitting at the kitchen table.

“Hey, kiddo. Can’t sleep?” His eyes looked puffy. I shook my head and pulled out the seat next to him, and sat mimicking his crossed arms.

“Me either. Bad dream. You?” I just shrugged. I didn’t think my dad could get bad dreams. At least, I hadn’t thought about it before.

“I know.” He got up and clinked in the kitchen. On the wall across from me hung a photo of my dad and what he called his “battle buddy.” He had rounder cheeks than my dad who returned with two bowls of ice cream.

“Blue moon and drizzle for you. Mint chip and whip for me.”

I pushed my hair back and we ate until I asked him, “Dad, where’s your friend?” I pointed to his battle buddy.

“Fadley. Fadley was in an accident, and now he’s gone.” Dad swallowed hard. He scraped the edges of his bowl like I had ruined the flavor.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Now. We take a scuba class.”

I still hadn’t been back to practice, but the following Wednesday, Dad and I waited for Mom to go to work and we packed our bags for the Y. I waited for him at the front door with my knapsack and he met me there with a camouflage duffel bag big enough for me to fit in.

“They teach ‘fake’ scuba diving,” Dad said. “We don’t need the class, just the pool.” So we went during open swim hours to check the window in lane 1. Dad said we had all the time in the world, so I should breathe whenever I needed to. The pool was pretty empty except for a

couple old people drifting down the lanes and lifeguard who wore sunglasses inside. We swam breaststroke to the deep end where the window was and dove down together. The window was black, like I was expecting it to be, and reflected both of our goggles.

“Lamia’s in there,” I said on the surface.

“How do you know if you can’t see her?” Dad asked. I took a big gulp of air, dove down, and he followed. I took his hand and pressed it to the window hoping he’d feel it, that *she’d* feel it. I put my hand there too, hoping it would get cold like it had before. Dad pointed up to the surface, and I didn’t want to leave her, but we emerged.

“Did you feel it?” I asked.

“What am I feeling for?”

“It gets really cold. Sometimes it frosts over. Or something moves. You have to put your whole palm against the glass.” We rinsed the inside of our goggles and went under, and this time, the light was on.

“Opal, I need to give you something. Stay here.” I waited for my dad to return and he did with a gadget.

“Watch Lamia. This is a waterproof pager. If anything happens, message me. Please come up for air when you need it.” And he was gone. So I got back in the water and did what he told me. I was scared to go back down and see the pudgy-faced man alone, but I did it. I pressed my hands to Lamia’s tank and she whipped her tail furiously at me, reaching for me. The man had gone but left the light on. I wanted to tell her that she would be okay, but I didn’t know where my dad had gone or when he’d be back or where the pudgy-faced man had disappeared to. Besides the whipping of her tail everything was still. I had gone up for air three times before my dad paged me, *In Tunnel. Stay Put*. I went to Lamia and tried to push the pager screen to the

window so she could see, but she was too far and growing tired. Her tank was murkier than the night my dad saved me which made it harder to see the pudgy-faced man reappear behind her. I jumped when she flailed away from the back, still sunk to the bottom. I went up for air and paged my dad *Man!!!* before I returned to see the pudgy man's fat hands reaching into her tank from above. I banged on the glass with my fists to get him to go away but Lamia flinched, and I remembered my dream.

The fat hands moved closer to my end of the window and disappeared above the top of the frame where I couldn't see them. I got air, but on the way back down, I noticed the water was colder and green water began to settle on the bottom of the pool. In the window, Lamia's water level had gone to half, she was lying at the bottom of her tank, and the vent below the window was blowing out the water behind her glass. The pudgy-faced man was now wearing a full-face mask and had a tank on his back that looked similar to the one I had in the hospital. His hands were pressed to the glass like mine were and I couldn't tell if he was watching Lamia or me. The water level had dropped to a quarter and she flipped and flailed pushing her face into the bottom of the tank when the man stabbed the back of the glass with something.

I couldn't see through the muck stuck inside the tank and collecting on my goggles but I could feel it when the glass on the other side of her tank shattered causing the rest of the water to spill onto the man's feet, sweeping Lamia with it. I screamed and almost choked. I went up for air and paged Dad *Tank Broken!!!* But he hadn't messaged me back from the first time. I noticed my skin had become slimy from Lamia's water as I stared at my useless hands that had just watched her. I dove down to see that he shackled her tail to her hands. He had stuck little balls on the end of each of her barbs by the time I got to the window and she was hardly moving, just a jerk here and there. The man turned to me and waved before he dragged her down the hall just

past where I could see and feel his stomping boots before a heavy thud traveled to my hands on the glass. There was a second, harder thud, and the man in the wetsuit returned a bit taller and less round. He put his hands to the glass where mine were and I pulled away before noticing they were no longer puffy, but familiar. He removed his mask. I saw my dad.

He pointed up, so I checked the pager. *Go shower. NOW.* I dove in to see if he was there, but he had gone, so I got out. The lifeguard looked at me weird, but activity in the natatorium was otherwise normal with the old people slowly treading the water. I didn't say anything to the guard and I marched to the locker room to shower and change and wait for my dad in the lobby. He took a long time to get back. I sat with my bag beneath my feet and squeezed my hands in my lap as I waited. I noticed my chipping nail polish looked duller but the skin on my hands almost glittered if I moved in the light the right way. Dad looked frantic walking out of the locker room, but he spotted me right away and kneeled to my face and held my chin in his hand. He inspected my brown eyes with his blue ones and moved to other parts of my face before kissing my forehead and picking me up with one arm. His duffel bag hung in his other hand swayed by his knees. It dripped behind us.

“Dad, where’s Lamia?” He sighed. His breath smelled like an empty locker room.

We went to Pizza Hut and ordered an extra large Hawaiian pizza with extra sauce.

“You don’t have to see Dr. Mosley anymore, if you don’t want to.” Dad put a slice of pizza on my plate while I sipped my Pepsi through the straw. He crossed his arms the way he had when I found him in the kitchen.

“Does that mean I’m better? Because I have a friend now?”

“Opal, Lamia won’t be visiting anymore.” He rubbed his pant legs.

“Oh.”

He waited for me to pick up my pizza, but when I didn't move he folded his slice long ways and I followed, taking the first bite. We sat and ate under the dim lights and chatter of other people in the restaurant until both our Pepsi's were gone, and I couldn't finish my second piece.

“Try to finish that slice, and we'll take the rest home,” Dad said.

“Did the pudgy-faced man kill her?” He rubbed his eyes with his pointer finger and thumb before looking at me.

“Opal,” Dad reached into his pocket and pressed something smooth into my palm. “No.”

“Dad? Will you still go to therapy? Because. We're kind of friends. Right?”

“That's right, pumpkin.”

I slept between both my parents that night and found comfort in their warmth, while still clutching to the forever frozen scale in my hand.