A painting of a white and red koi fish swimming in blue water. The fish is the central focus, with its body covered in white and red patterns. The water is a vibrant blue with several small blue bubbles scattered around. The overall style is artistic and textured.

CLEO'S
Conundrum

First published in Australia by St. Catherine's
School Waverley, 2019

Original Text © Sarah Anastasiou, Alicia Elliott,
Bridget Kluck, Emily Lim, Eliza Morgan, Tamsyn
Taylor and Zoe Sullivan, Sophia Zhang 2019

The St Catherine's School, Upper Division, Year
10 Wombats, would like to thank Mrs Miller, Mrs
Blomfield, all students and all teachers involved
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The Parameter Guidelines set by the Write A Book in A Day (WABIAD) community to guide us in our story-telling journey:

Primary character 1: Lifeguard

Primary character 2: Illustrator

Non-human character: Shark

Setting: Bicycle shop

Issue: Moving house

Random Words essential to the story line:

Community

Skipped

Magic

Canvas

Sings

St. Catherine's School Waverley, Write a Book in a Day (WABIAD) Year 10 Wombats team would like to dedicate this book to the Kids Cancer Project and the children at Westmead Hospital. We, the authors and illustrators, of this book wish you all the very best in an efficient treatment which will lead to a speedy recovery. We hope that this book is an effective tool to help you all through your different paths of life and through your care. This book will be with you, in every step of your journey no matter how hard or challenging it may seem. We are sending you all our love and support.



Chapter 1

I was consumed by the darkness in an instant. I truly thought my idea was genius- until the lights flickered once before totally extinguishing. I removed my hands from the tap as everything was plunged into darkness and for one horrible moment, I couldn't see anything.

I had stupidly waited too late to come out of the bathroom so I could 'bump into' my new crush. So late, that now I was left alone in this aquarium, temporarily shielded in a bathroom.

I could only hope they hadn't locked the doors.

The advertised apartment did not match the one I walked into. Dirty, dusty and noisy. Unsurprisingly, the bicycle shop underneath seemed devoid of customers, being in the same state as my new home. Renting a dodgy apartment was the best option available right now, after all, it's not like I had a ton of art commissions.

I stood in my apartment, throwing my bag onto the pile of my stuff. I stood immobile. This was all new and so exciting- Sydney was going to be my new **community**, my new home, my new city! The possibilities seemed endless.

I paused in my doorway, before heading down to my car to bring up the last of my bags.

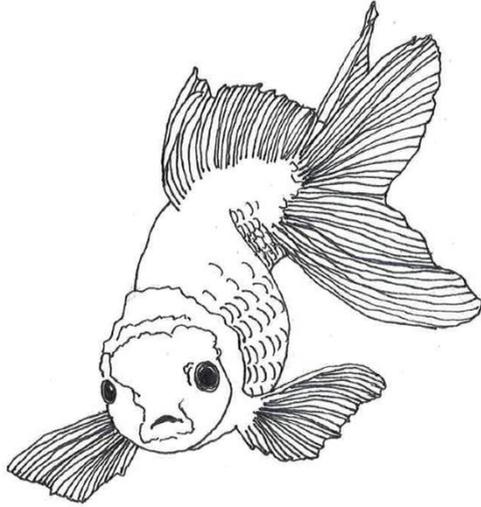
As I was heading out, I nodded to the cashier lazily scrolling through his phone, not really taking him in. As I hauled my bags back through the shop, I realized that the cashier now had a customer. Tall and blonde, this man was literally a Greek God, carved from the finest marble. His lopsided grin widened as the Cashier laughed at something he had said. Their heads together acting like they were best friends; this mystery man was so beautifully charming; he could get some bored cashier on his side in an instant.

I shook my head realising I had been standing still and staring, heading towards the apartment entrance. I fumbled with my keys trying to overhear what they were talking about. Trying to take in more information about this new and exciting neighbour. Why would this guy be in a place as dingy and creepy as this?

“Yeah, I’m gonna head for my shift at the aquarium, you got all the stuff ready?”

It makes sense to do some sight-seeing in my new home. And Darling Harbour was full of tourist attractions and possible new friends. I made up my mind to head to the aquarium as soon as possible.

And that’s how it began, ending with me left in an abandoned bathroom. This plan was extreme and idiotic, making absolutely no sense. So, I pushed the door open hoping I could slink out, only revealing myself to the fish left in the tanks. Outside, I found myself surrounded by omniscient blue lights that cast odd shadows. I hated this aloneness, with the deadened eyes of fish following my path through the aquarium, watching, waiting, staring.



Chapter 2

I cautiously pulled the sides of my jacket together a little tighter. As the lights flickered off, a breeze of cold air rushed past me. The colours drained off the walls as the temperature around me dropped down lower and lower. I never realised how terrifying being alone in the aquarium was. At least, I was pretty sure I was alone.

I wandered around the aquarium warily, trying to find an exit, cautious of any movement. Just as I was about to turn the corner, I jumped at the sound of the door slam, followed by a series of

footsteps that echoed around the room. The dimly lit aquarium was now slightly more visible as the light from a single flashlight shone through.

I plastered my back to the side of the wall, trying to withdraw myself into the shadows. Slowly the footsteps grew louder and louder, as my heart began beating faster and faster. My mind spun in circles as I scanned my jacket pockets for something to defend myself with. Anything.

As I frantically searched, the tips of my fingers were met with the sharp tip of my favourite lead pencil that I did most of my illustrations with. I bit my lip trying hard not to let out any sound as the lead scraped across my skin. *This will have to do.* I gripped the body of the pencil as tight as my shaky hands could. Time was running out and the footsteps kept edging closer and closer. As I glanced down, I spotted the mysterious footsteps come into sight. They were going to see me any second and I don't think they expected anyone to be here tonight. So, I jumped out, closed my eyes, looked down and held the pencil out, preparing for the worst. The bright flashlight was then

pointed at me and I squinted my eyes and held out my hand to block the light.

“Please don’t hurt me! I just got lost! Please!” I yelled.

“If you’re going to defend yourself, you’re going to have to do better than a pencil,” he chuckled.

That voice sounded familiar. It was deep and soothing, and I was certain I had heard it somewhere before. I slowly parted my eyelids and lowered the pencil as I looked up at the mysterious boy.

“O...oh...it’s y...you...” I breathed out a sigh of relief. I then felt my cheeks begin to burn up as I met the deep blue eyes of the boy from the bicycle shop. His face was a blank **canvas**, showing no emotion.

“Do I know you? Anyway, I’m Finn. And you are...?”

“Cleo,” I breathed.

“Whatever. So, what are you doing here? The aquarium is closed.” he said nonchalantly.

“Yeah... I got a bit lost.” The easy atmosphere began to tense up as I now noticed the sweat beads forming across his head.

“Hey, what’s wrong? You seem.... I don’t know, a bit anxious.” I said, placing my hand on his shoulder.

He quickly brushed it off as he coldly stated,

“Nothing is wrong. Just...you shouldn’t be here.”

“Look, I know you don’t want me here. Can you just please help and take me to the exit? I don’t really want to be here! The only reason I came was because.... well... never mind.”

A hint of confusion flickered in his eyes, the atmosphere as tense as ever.

I sighed.

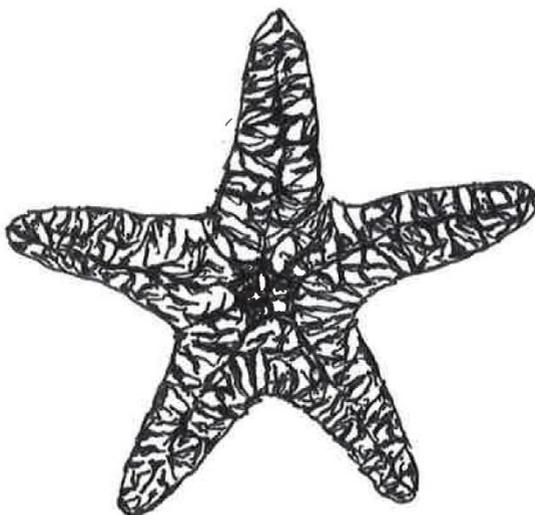
“I’ll just go by myse-”

“Fine. Follow me.” He abruptly interrupted

As he led the way through the aquarium, to the exit, I curiously wondered what he was still doing at this late hour. I mean, I knew he was a lifeguard

here, but it was already pretty late. As my mind pondered on, I became more and more mesmerised with his charm.

We ambled past tanks of fish and other breathtaking creatures before walking to the outside area of the aquarium. A deep tank, open at the top greeted us as the water glistened under the moonlight. Intrigued, I rushed over to see what lay below. As I sped over, I accidentally slipped and charged at the mystery boy with full force. As I tumbled to the ground, he torpedoed towards the tank, skidded over the glass fencing and dived headfirst into the water. I clumsily scrambled up from the ground and limped towards the tank. I looked around searching for him before watching in horror as he sunk deeper and deeper.



Chapter 3

Oh my god. Oh MY GOD. OH MY GOD!

“Finn, I am so, so sorry! There was this rock on the floor and my shoes are too small for me and so I tripped over cause it was in my way and I was falling down and then my arms flew out and you were there in front of me and so my arms hit you and its completely my fault I know but it was a complete accident and I am so, so sorry! Are you alright? Please be ok...”

I was met with the peaceful swish of saltwater and the scent of the sea.

Oh my GOD I just killed a lifeguard. What am I going to do... should I jump in and save him... wait, he's a lifeguard, why can't he?

A rush of water shot upwards suddenly, bubbles frothing and causing a salty splash. Finn poked his blond head out of the water and greeted me with a stare.

“Careful,” he gruffly said, gracefully pushing himself out of the water. Water droplets cascaded down as he attempted to shake himself dry.

“Come on, Cleo. Let’s get you out of here as soon as possible.” His tone was perfectly controlled. I trailed a little behind him, as we strode down the dimly lit corridor. A strange expression masked his face; it was unnaturally calm yet strained at the same time.

“Hey, are you alright?” I nudged him softly, wondering what I could have done wrong.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s just that it’s getting pretty late, you should really be getting home...”

My body deflated a little- I really thought that there would be a little more **magic** here.

Finn's strides were getting longer and longer, faster and faster until I was practically running after him to keep up. Gosh, this guy was in a rush. Corridor through corridor we twisted, until I panted,

"Wait, stop, you're going way too fast. Can we stop for a sec?"

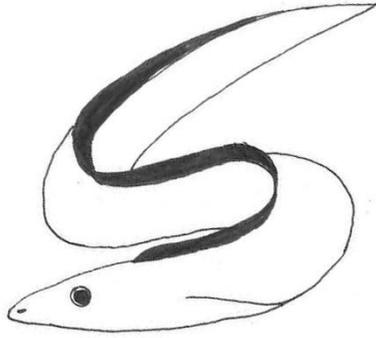
He nodded, face still blankly calm. As we sprawled down on the benches, a sudden sound of footsteps echoed through the corridor.

Were we not alone here? Finn leaped up almost instantly and urged me to get up too. My dissatisfaction turned to fear as the footsteps amplified, like the volume being turned up on a radio. *Who else would be in a closed aquarium?* The footsteps were the closest they had been as two contrasting figures stood in the doorway.

"Hey, who are you?" a thick Russian accent boomed.

My fear planted my feet to the ground, my body frozen in terror. What were these weirdos doing here? Finn looked at me and our eyes locked. *Let's*

go, his expression told me, pulling on my sleeve as we broke out into a run.



Chapter 4:

My heart **sung** as his hand slipped into mine. Finn tugged on my arm – pulling me around the corner. Our feet beat against the linoleum, rushing to get out and avoid whatever creeps lurk the empty aquarium at night.

We rushed past the food storage room and around the corner into the crab exhibition, pelting at full speed past flailing crustacean claws. Finn was dripping water all down the halls as we ran. My momentum was suddenly halted, the two figures were standing at the end of the hall. There was no escaping them now. Finn and I stumbled as we tried to stop, his face worried. I tried to pull him

back but before I could one of the figures shouted, “Oi Finn, who the heck is that!?”.

Finn chuckled, it sounded like he was kind of unsure though as he said, “Helsinki, Gabe? Is that you two?” His hand growing clammy in mine with his creamy skin tone now turning blush. He was nervous.

The bigger one, who must be Helsinki, replied, “Of course it’s us, who the hell else would be here?”

“Uh...um, have you guys cleaned the tank filters in section 9?” Pulling at his sweeping hair, Finn’s head faced the ground, avoiding looking at me.

There was a silence before the skinny one, Gabe, said, “Huh? Why wo-“

“Yep, just heading to our next location,” Helsinki interrupted as he walked down the hall towards us. *They’re cleaners? But they were literally chasing us! Why didn’t Finn tell me that they were cleaners?*

As the two approached, I could make out their faces; Helsinki was bulky and cast a long wide shadow down the hall, his thick beard and Russian accent masking his speech. In contrast, Gabe was

slender and clean faced, riddled with an array of tiny tattoos. This much was for sure, neither of them looked like cleaners and something was definitely up. I glanced at Finn, his tense face matching that of the other two. Hesitantly, I had to admit it to myself that whatever was up, Finn was in on it.

Helsinki and Gabe turned to me; there was a frenzy of eye contact between everyone before Finn said:

“This is Cleo, she was stuck here when the lights turned off. Ok well... we better get her out of here before someone thinks something suspicious is going on.”

We shouldn't be here; I shouldn't be here.

The three of them chuckled and I hesitantly joined in. This was hella weird, and I'd certainly put myself in the middle of something very fishy.



Chapter 5:

As an awkward silence flooded the room, my heart skipped a beat. Blurring a line between reassurance and constraint, Finn gripped my hand harder.

“Ok, you should probably go,” Helsinki’s thick accent broke the silence.

Finn proceeded to remove his hand from mine, and placed it on my back, gesturing me forward forcefully. I muttered to him,

“So, you know the cleaners well?”

Blatantly ignoring me, he continued to push me forward. As I nervously pulled my jumper sleeves over my sweaty palms, they continued to bombard me with orders.

“Let’s get going Cleo.”

“Come on now.”

Fuelled with stubbornness, my feet remained planted, but I finally buckled under Finn’s touch and started to slowly walk. Finn and I trailed behind the other two. As Gabe’s lion tattoo

peeped from below his jean cuff, I recognized him- I recognized them.

It's my moving in day. I'm slightly disheartened by the dodgy bike shop my tiny apartment sat upon. And I open the doors to 'Jeff's Bikes and Repairs'. As a bell echoes through the empty store I enter and lock eyes with a muscular man, foreign, Russian maybe- Helsinki. And then the other. His greasy hair that drapes like a mop over his stick like arms- Gabe.

It was all coming back to me now.

Eyes fixed on two men in a huddle, I walk around the store, trying to look busy while I try and catch glimpses of their conversation. Tripping, I fall against a bike rack, sending 3 bikes clattering down, one by one. The guys in the corner look up, and I catch the bigger one's eye, before quickly looking away. While I restack the bikes, the pair move further away from me, obviously attempting to avoid my gaze. Despite the bigger guys best efforts, his loud, thick accent echoes around the near silent room.

"We're nearly good to go," the first man says, pulling his hood up to shield half his face from my ever-constant gaze. "If this works..."

"There are no ifs about it," the other man replies, voice harsh, "Stick to the plan and it WILL work."

Everything makes sense now.

The drumming of hollow wood alerts my attention to the stairs, where a tall blonde figure emerges from below, his back turned to me. For the first time during their secretive meeting, the first man turns to the boy and smiles.

"It's all ready," the boy says, "I'll see you guys when its time, until then, lie low."

With that their secretive huddle disperses, and the blonde boy turns towards me to leave. He smiles at me, and gives me a swift nod, before exiting the store.

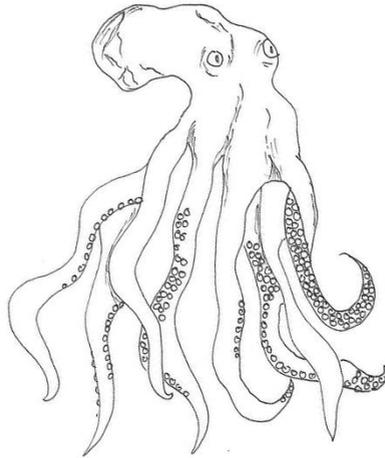
I locked eyes with Finn.

Oh my God. Oh my God. It was Finn. He was in on it all along.

My breath caught in my throat and I struggled to keep my expression neutral as we continued to walk through the Aquarium. My brain screamed at me, for not recognising it sooner, of course Finn was in on it too. I fought my urge to yank my hand out of his. *How could I be so stupid? Why else would he be here at night?* I slowed my pace, as Finn half pulled me along the blue carpeted path.

I searched my thoughts and memories for what they could possibly be trying to pull off. I knew that it was something bad, but what could they possibly want from here? The tugging on my arm forced me back to reality. In the dark hallways I caught glimpses of marine life, illuminated by the bright green exit signs. Trying to distract myself from the fact that these criminals could be leading me to my death, I focused on the animals surrounding me. As we neared the exit, we entered the final exhibit. One big tank filled the room. I noted the lack of movement from within the water. As I stopped, I glanced up at the tank. Finn placed his palm on my back and again forced me along.

But it was too late. I had already seen. The shark was gone.



Chapter 6:

A shark. Not money, not drugs, a shark. As I stared into the darkness of the water, my own reflection appeared to stare back me. A chill of judgement froze over my body as my mind cluttered with my own intrinsic panic. I didn't want to go against the morals that I had so deeply rooted inside myself, the way I had been raised, the lessons I'd been taught. Was I right in choosing to do the right thing over the safety of my life? Was I even capable of stopping them? Where even was the shark? Who even were these people? Have I really been that stupid this whole time? A million questions circled around my mind; I wanted to know everything. But nevertheless, I pushed down my worries, fearful that my own thoughts would be the simple factor in determining the danger that could be shoved into it. The shark was not going to leave this aquarium, and neither was I.

"Cleo come on, we can't stay here forever!" Gabe gestured towards the hallway in front of us, a desperate attempt to get me out. The hallway was illuminated by a dimly lit blue light, one not clear enough for me to recognise from where I was, but it was enough to see the expression on Finn's face. The once perfect complexion of his skin was now damaged by

the crease across his forehead, his eyebrows inched towards his hairline as his lip let out a slight quiver.

Finn tugged on my hand, forcing us to continue down the hallway. My mind began to tick away as we walked through the glass doors. Finn slowly lost grip of my hand, joining Gabe and Helsinki in front. Gabe and Helsinki turned in towards Finn, blocking themselves away from the fear fuming out of my body. Then in an instant, they all turned their heads to face my way, opening a space between them for me to leave, their discreteness not even a commendable attempt at this point. The three of them led me out of the gift store and to the back exit, when I stopped and began to shakily bawl my eyes out.

“Please...” I begged. “Can you let me go to the bathroom?” I began to whimper, clutching my stomach as if in pain.

“Oh, oh, um... of course,” Finn said lightly, looking at me worryingly. I looked back, checking to see how far we’d moved, although it seemed as if we were stuck at the exit. As soon as we were out of sight of Gabe and Helsinki, my hand formed a fist, shaking with terror, yet still quivering with determination. I punched him in the head, knocking him out. His once strong body lay fragile on the floor. I looked, still in shock at what I had done before I knelt down cautiously. I pressed my finger against his neck, my breath returning to me as I felt his pulse against the finger in which he held so tightly, only a few minutes ago. As I felt the pity begin to rise through my body, I pushed it down with my conscious, remembering what I was here to do. I ran to the bathroom, quickly locking myself in, and grabbing my phone from my jean pocket. My fingers shook in fear as I attempted to type the number, the only thing I really had to do at the point, and the only thing I could think to do. As I held it to my ear, the fear that rose through my chest began to simmer down, the voice on the other end of the line pulling a blanket of comfort over me.

“Australian Police Department. Please state your name and location.”

“Please,” I breathed heavily. “I need to talk to the police.”



an illustrator new to Sydney,
just trying to meet a new guy.
but little did she know...
she was putting herself in the middle
of a **AQUARIUM CRIME**
OPERATION. † †

