

Helping your children choose books they will love



Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website
created for parents and children to make
choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from
Take Your Last Breath

Written by
Lauren Child

Published by
HarperCollins Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



*First published in hardback in Great Britain by HarperCollins Children's Books in 2012
First published in paperback in Great Britain by HarperCollins Children's Books in 2013
HarperCollins Children's Books is a division of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd,
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB.*

The HarperCollins Children's Books website address is
www.harpercollins.co.uk

Visit Lauren Child on the web at
www.milkmonitor.com
www.rubyredfort.com

Copyright © Lauren Child 2012

Lauren Child asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Series design by David Mackintosh

ISBN 978-0-00-733409-4

Printed and bound in the UK by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Conditions of Sale

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. All rights reserved.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC™ C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

Coming up for air

THE SUN FLICKERED ON THE OCEAN, cutting bright diamonds of light into the surface of the indigo water. A three-year-old girl was peering over the side of a sailboat, staring down into the deep. The only sounds came from her parents' laughter, the sing-song hum of a man's voice and the clapping of the waves against the yacht.

Gradually the sounds became less and less distinct until the girl was quite alone with the ocean. It seemed to be pulling her, drawing her to it... confiding a secret, almost whispering to her.

She barely felt herself fall as she tipped forward and slipped into the soft ink of the sea.

Down she twisted, her arms, her legs above her like tendrils. The water felt smooth and perfectly cold; fish darted and silver things whisked by – her breath bubbled up as transparent pearls.

Then suddenly, like a snap of the fingers, all the fish were gone: it was just the girl in the big wide ocean.

But she wasn't quite alone.

There *was* something else.

Something calling to her, but she couldn't see what. *It* saw *her* though, with ancient eyes, unblinking as it steadily pulsed its way through the blue. Something with long, long snaking arms hovering between her and nothing.

And then, vine-like, the thing coiled a limb round her ankle and tugged her firmly in the direction of infinity. Down to who knew where?

Oops, thought the child. And on she spun. Bubbles fizzed about her and her head began to throb, her breath almost gone.

And then *yank!* Something grabbed her arm, *someone* grabbed her arm. The strangling-thing released her; suddenly she was coming up for air, breaking through the surface of the ocean.

She found herself slapped mackerel-like onto the hot deck of the boat, coughing saltwater from her lungs. Her green eyes blinked open and she smiled up at two troubled faces. She felt the water dribble from her ears, and heard the sound of the gulls screaming in the sky above.

An Ordinary Kid

WHEN RUBY REDFORT WAS FOUR, she noticed something unnoticeable while reading the back of the Choco Puffle packet. What looked like a word-search game to every other breakfast-eating kid, she could see at a glance was in fact some kind of message – a code.

It took Ruby five days and seven helpings of Choco Puffles to puzzle it out, and when she had, this is what she read.

Fill in this coupon and win a lifetime supply of Choco Puffles. Entry address can be found somewhere on this packet. WARNING: you will have to search long and hard to find it.

Ruby found the address in thirty-two seconds, cut out the coupon on the side of the box, filled in her name and address, popped it in an envelope and asked her father to mail it.

He forgot.

Ruby discovered this thirteen and three-quarter months later when she was searching her dad's pockets for confiscated Hubble-Yum bubblegum. There, in his grey suit jacket, was the slightly battered envelope, addressed in her handwriting, stamp in the top right-hand corner. The deadline for entering the competition had long passed.

Ruby took the letter up to her room and slipped it into the secret hiding place she had made within the doorframe of her bedroom. It was a shame about the lifetime supply of Choco Puffles; they were, after all, her favourite breakfast cereal.

Some several years later...

Chapter 1.

Don't back away or they will see you as prey

‘IT’S PERFECT WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR SHARKS,’ announced the dive instructor. ‘So don’t be surprised if you run into one or two – don’t go panicking or anything.’

Ruby Redfort spat in her diving mask and rubbed at the glass, rinsing it with seawater. Her fellow students were checking kit, zipping up their wetsuits and snapping on flippers.

Ruby, a newly recruited Spectrum agent, was attending a dive camp at a secluded location on one of Hawaii’s many islands. The dive master was an affable sort; he had tutored so many agents during his years as an instructor that they all sort of merged into one, with the exception of Ruby.

Agent Redfort kind of stood out from the crowd.

A thirteen-year-old schoolgirl not even five feet in flippers, sleek dark hair parted to one side, neatly secured with a barrette above her right eye, it was hard to ignore *her*. Aside from anything else she was the only dive student here still attending junior

high – everyone else had long since graduated school; everyone else was in full-time Spectrum employment. Ruby hadn't even heard of Spectrum six weeks ago.

This, in itself, wasn't surprising. Not many people had heard of Spectrum. It was an organisation so secret that access to its headquarters could change from day to day, hour to hour. Once you exited, you could never be quite sure you would ever find your way back: which was just the way Spectrum liked it.

Spectrum – a spy agency set up to foil the plots and plans of evil geniuses capable of grand theft, extortion, fraud and murder – did not employ agents who were less than a hundred per cent smart and a hundred per cent discreet. As far as LB was concerned, 'You mess up, you leave forever.'

LB – the big cheese, the top dog, the head honcho in charge of Spectrum 8 – was not big on second chances, so the odds of getting kicked out were high and Ruby would have lost her agent status almost before she'd begun if it hadn't been for one thing: she was brilliant.

Actually, brilliant was an understatement. Ruby Redfort was a genius: her speciality lay in puzzles and codes. In fact she had won the Junior Code-Cracker Championships when she was just seven, and the following year was offered a place at Harvard University though she had turned it down flat. She didn't want

to be regarded as some kind of geek freak.

It was because of this phenomenal skill at cracking codes that LB had recruited Ruby. The Spectrum 8 boss had no desire to employ a kid – kids could be trouble, LB knew that – but what choice did she have? Her ace code breaker, Lopez, had been murdered at the hand of Count von Viscount, a villain so dread that one shivered to speak his name.

When one dared to speak his name at all.

Ruby had first encountered LB about a month ago, on her first visit to the Spectrum offices. The spy boss had been dressed entirely in white and sitting behind a huge desk that dominated an entirely white office; the red polish on her toenails being the only flash of colour in the room. At fifty-something she looked both beautiful and intimidating: one tough cookie. Ruby was a confident, somewhat fearless kid, but she instinctively knew that in LB she had met her match: an intelligent woman who did not suffer fools gladly. In fact did not suffer them at all.

It was fair to say Ruby hadn't exactly followed orders during the weeks spent working on her first Spectrum assignment, but she had foiled the Fool's Gold Gang and prevented Count von Viscount from stealing the priceless Jade Buddha of Khotan.

It was for this reason that LB had granted Ruby Redfort a second chance, and for this reason that she was now being

trained up at the Spectrum dive camp.

‘If you do come face to face with one of our ocean friends,’ continued the dive instructor, ‘then just stay where you are, don’t back away. If it comes toward you, then swim toward it. He’ll probably get the message.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Ruby. ‘And what message is that?’

‘That you aren’t lunch – lunch usually swims in the other direction,’ said the dive instructor with a wink.

‘And what if this shark ain’t so smart?’ asked Ruby. ‘What then?’

‘Then,’ said the dive master, ‘it will probably try to explore you with its teeth – that’s how they check things out, only you don’t really want them to do so as it could mean waving bye-bye to an arm or a leg.’

‘Well, I kinda need my arms for waving – my legs sorta tend to come in handy too,’ said Ruby.

‘So that’s why I suggest you swim with this stick.’ The instructor picked up a retractable aluminium pole. ‘If said shark gets too near, just prod him and he’ll most likely back off.’

‘And if he doesn’t?’ asked one of the other divers – a guy called Bosco. He was trying to sound casual, but you could tell the whole mentioning of sharks thing had him worried.

The dive master smiled. ‘Then try to look unappetising.’

Ruby rolled her eyes.

‘Don’t you worry Redfort,’ said the instructor, chuckling. ‘It’s highly unlikely they’ll want to snack on you – far too small.’

‘On the other hand,’ said Kip Holbrook, another of Ruby’s fellow trainees, ‘maybe the kid’s the perfect bite-size portion.’

‘Funny, really funny,’ said Ruby. She pulled down her mask and fell backwards off the boat.

Ruby Redfort was not scared of sharks – not yet anyway.