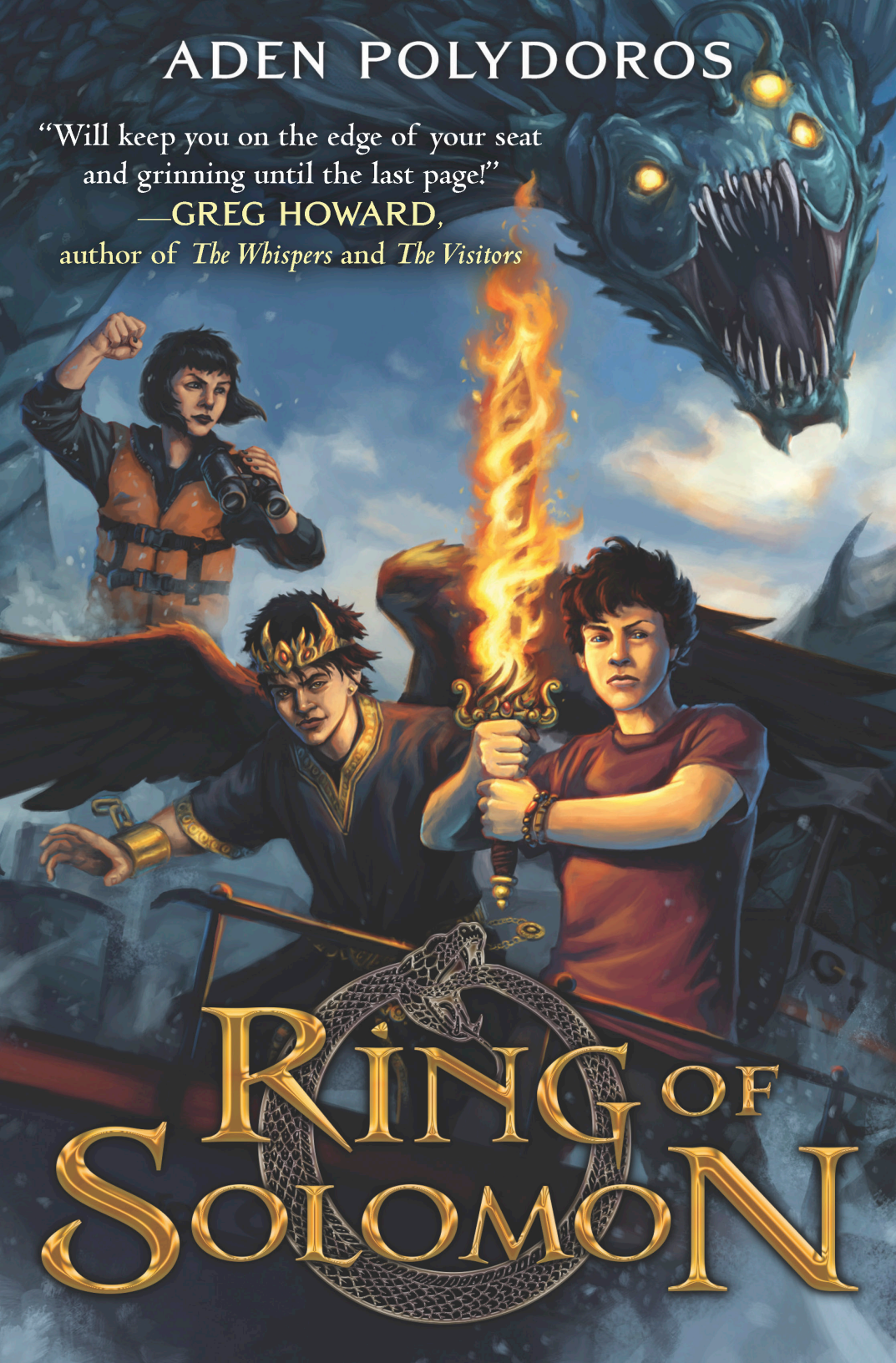


ADEN POLYDOROS

"Will keep you on the edge of your seat
and grinning until the last page!"

—GREG HOWARD,

author of *The Whispers* and *The Visitors*



RING OF SOLOMON



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ADEN POLYDOROS

inkyard
PRESS



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Ring of Solomon

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Dedicated to all the kids who are still waiting for their
enchanted cupboard, haunted house, or magic-school admission letter.



NAOMI WAS GONE.

One second, she was there, smack-dab in the middle of San Pancras's downtown flea market, wearing her huge pink sunglasses and the baseball cap Mom had bought her at Disneyland last summer. And then I turned around just for a moment. By the time I looked back, she had vanished into the swarm of bargain hunters and chattering tourists.

My stomach dropped. No, no, no. Mom was going to kill me.

"Naomi?" I pushed past a man haggling over an overpriced snow globe. By sheer luck, I avoided crashing into a vendor selling plates and bowls. Considering how ugly the dishes were, breaking them would've been an act of mercy.

I swiveled around, searching for Naomi in the crowd, which was so densely packed that it wiggled down the street like a blob of Jell-O. She wasn't crouched over the battalion of stuffed animals and action figures lined up on one man's car-

pet. She wasn't tossing her empty soda bottle into the trash can or scraping gum off the bottom of her flip-flops.

"Naomi?" My voice cracked like an old record. It had been doing that a lot lately, ever since I turned twelve, but it wasn't just puberty this time. My throat tightened in panic. "Naomi?! This isn't funny."

A hand yanked on my sleeve. I turned, not knowing how nervous I'd been until I swallowed and felt my lips tremble. There Naomi was, just standing there with her stupid sunglasses and Minnie Mouse cap, her blond hair poking up in random directions. She inherited Mom's upturned nose and serious eyes, but her dimpled chin and goofy smile were all Dad's.

"Where were you, you dolt?" I asked as she slurped down the rest of her Coke. "I told you not to wander off."

She grinned. "Zach, you have to come see this. I found the perfect thing. Mom's gonna love it."

Naomi pulled me down the rows of vendors. The sun beat down on us, the air ripe with the smells of pizza grease and coconut-scented sunscreen. All I wanted was to go back home and play video games, but Mom's birthday was this Monday. Turning forty seemed like it deserved something special. Roses and drawings wouldn't cut it this time.

Every month, Mom would drive nearly an hour up to San Francisco to drag us to the famous Alameda flea market. Next to it, the San Pancras swap meet was a cheaper knockoff than the plasticky purses a pink-haired woman was hollering were real Gucci. There were only three things our coastal town was known for—its quiet streets lined with Spanish mission-style

houses, the abandoned cement factory at its outskirts, and having a name that sounded suspiciously like a human organ.

Naomi led me to an old man stooped in front of a card table heaped with musty paperbacks, brass vases, and picture frames. There was so much stuff, I expected the table legs to collapse at any moment, drowning everything within five feet in a tsunami of junk. The fire department would have to dig us out.

"Naomi." I looked at her. What did she expect to find here, except for rat droppings and mothballs?

"One second. It's right around here somewhere." Eyes sparkling in excitement, she dug through the tangle of jewelry sitting in a glass ashtray. Mostly just Mardi Gras beads, plastic bangles, and brooches so gaudy even our mom would turn her nose up at them. Naomi fished a ring from the bottom of the pile and showed it to me.

It was a thick golden signet ring. The circular panel on top was engraved with a six-pointed Star of David and surrounded by crimson stones. Garnets maybe, but probably just glass. Hebrew letters encircled the band, though for all I knew, they could've been an advertisement for Burger King.

I tried the ring on my finger, but it slipped right off. "Naomi, it's going to be too big for her. It's a guy's ring."

"But don't you think she'd love it?"

Mom went a little crazy when it came to Jewish stuff, even though she was about as religious as a bacon cheeseburger. She collected menorahs and dreidels, Yiddish pamphlets and Hebrew books none of us could read, corny old paintings of

wizard-bearded rabbis and clarinet-playing klezmer musicians, and more. An entire corner of the kitchen was devoted to her hoard, but over the years, the stuff had overflowed into the rest of our home as well. Somehow, one of her weird oil paintings had ended up in my bedroom. You think *Nosferatu* or *Frankenstein* is bad? Try falling asleep beneath the bearded scowls of an entire room of Torah scholars. That's what I'd call nightmare fuel.

I turned the ring around in my hand. The sunlight danced across the red gemstones. Big, gaudy, and very Jewish. Mom would go totally nuts over it.

"Come on, Zach," Naomi said, tugging on my sleeve. "Come on. It's perfect."

Sighing, I held up the ring. "Excuse me, how much is this?"

The old man leaned over the table, squinting past his half-moon glasses. He smacked his lips. "Twenty dollars!"

Twenty dollars? Talk about a rip-off. We could buy Mom a ring from Kohl's or an entire box of fancy chocolates for that much.

I didn't want to haggle, even though people haggled at flea markets all the time. Hagglng would feel like leaning down to pick up dropped change, and I'd stopped doing that since Jeffrey Cooper in history class threw pennies at me. I knew there was nothing wrong with it, but just the thought made me cringe in embarrassment.

I turned. "Naomi, it's too..."

She had her lower lip jutted out and was giving me the kind of puppy-eyed look that was basically kryptonite for big brothers. A

shiver of dread passed through me. If I left now, the tears would start, and then the screaming. Trust me, her tantrum would make World War III look like a schoolyard fight, no joke.

"Zach, you have *thirty* dollars," Naomi said.

"Yeah, but there's the field trip to the zoo on Monday, and I want to have enough for the gift shop." But it was more than that. I knew that Dominic Bianchi would be there, and since we were in the same homeroom, maybe we'd end up in the gift shop at the same time. I could see it in my head—he'd be walking down the aisle, running his fingers over the shelves' contents, looking longingly at a souvenir or two. He really liked wolves, so maybe he'd be eyeing a T-shirt or poster in the carnivore section. And I would come up, money already in hand, and buy it for him.

"Zach, please." Naomi begged at me with her eyes. "Mom will love it."

Reluctantly, I counted out the crumpled bills. Five, ten, twenty. I only got ten dollars a month for allowance and two-fifty to play with our neighbors' cat, Mags, when they were away on business. Oh well, there probably wasn't anything interesting at the gift shop, and it wasn't like Dominic would even notice me. Why would he? We weren't friends, even though I wished we could be.

"Here," I muttered, handing the money to the man.

He pocketed the bills. "Smart choice, kid."

"Is it an antique?" I asked, already regretting my life choices.

"Who knows."

"Where'd you get it?"

"It was in a fish."

"A fish," I repeated stupidly.

He nodded. "A sea bass. When I cut it open to cook it, the ring was buried inside its stomach. Those bass, they'll eat anything."

"Really?" A small smile touched my lips. Talk about a wicked origin story.

"Ew, that's so nasty," Naomi said as we walked back to the flea market's entrance, where we had promised to meet Mom and Dad at noon. She made a face. "Let's not tell Mom."

For once, I agreed with her.



"I CAN'T BELIEVE we're doing this," I muttered, propping my foot against the back of the driver's seat. A blur of blue ocean and beachfront houses rippled past the window. "Do I really have to go, Dad? Can't we just go to the beach instead?"

"It's too late to complain now, kiddo. You're stuck." He grinned and met my eye in the rearview mirror. "Remember, you used to love going to Grandma's."

"Yeah, like when I was ten. I'm almost thirteen now, Dad."

"Don't remind me." He rolled his eyes. "Besides, I don't hear you complaining at Christmastime."

That was because Grandma gave the best presents. I was pretty sure it was her way of trying to convert us, like if she showered me and Naomi with enough stuff, we'd go over to Team Jesus.

"It's not even a holiday," I said in annoyance. "Why have a barbeque in the middle of the month, for no reason?"

"Because she wants to show off the new tile," Dad said.

I groaned. "That's even worse."

He arched an eyebrow. "Oh? So, you'd rather be moping at home now?"

"I'd rather be playing video games with Sandra than spend my Saturday stuck listening to Grandma brag about her *floor*."

"Zach loves Sandra, Zach loves Sandra," Naomi sang, knocking her head against my shoulder.

"Shut up, gnome." I shoved her lightly in the arm. My cheeks burned, and I was pretty sure if I glanced in the mirror, my face would be redder than a fire hydrant. "We're just friends."

"A crush is nothing to be ashamed of, sport," Dad said with a laugh.

"It's not a crush!"

Mom looked back and gave me a smile, an almost reassuring one. Sometimes, I wondered if she knew the truth. If she could tell.

I reached into my pocket for the ring I'd bought at the swap meet, just to make sure it was still there. The more I thought about it, the more I worried it was a piece of junk.

Grandma and Grandpa lived in the fancy part of San Pancras, where people were so snobby that even their dogs seemed to sneer down at us. Our grandparents' chunky white house overlooked the beachfront. Mom said the style was midcentury modern, whatever that meant. To me, it looked like a pile of Legos with windows. If I were a millionaire, I'd build a castle for myself, complete with a moat and drawbridge.

There were already several cars parked in the driveway. We

found a spot at the end of the line. Our station wagon looked so lame next to my grandpa's fancy-schmancy Porsche and my uncle's huge Hummer.

Dad ran his fingers over the Porsche's glossy paint job as we walked past it. He sighed. "This is why I shouldn't have gone to art school."

"Then you wouldn't have met Mom," Naomi said, because like me, she had heard the story about our parents' first date a gazillion times.

"Tuck your shirt in," Mom told me, ringing the doorbell. "And Naomi, stop chewing on your hair."

"Sorry," Naomi said through a mouthful of her ponytail. Her hair was as light and wispy as corn silk, just like our dad's, whereas mine took after our mom's—brown, wild, and the sworn enemy of hairdressers. I was pretty sure that my cowlicks alone defied at least three laws of gravity and physics.

The door opened and our grandma waltzed out like a star on the red carpet. She wore a sparkly silver dress and had her blond hair done up in a fancy do that kinda made it seem like she was wearing a beehive.

"Oh, Peter, it's so good to see you!" Grandma cooed, hugging my dad. "And Emily. Stunning as always, dear."

Mom smiled stiffly as Grandma leaned in to kiss her cheek, looking like she'd much rather lock lips with a fish. Ever since Grandma had told Mom that she wanted Naomi to get baptized, things had gone nuclear between the two of them. When it happened, I remembered how back in preschool or kindergarten, Grandma had taken me somewhere where a strange

man had sprinkled water on my head. I was a little worried that I actually *was* baptized, and what that really meant, and if I was Jewish still or not.

Sometimes, I didn't feel Jewish enough, no matter how many menorahs and seder plates Mom managed to cram in her china cabinet. We only went to temple for the big holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and if you got between Naomi and her bacon, she'd go rabid. I would know—a few months ago, Naomi had nearly bitten off my thumb when I tried stealing half of her Bacon 'N Egg McMuffin.

Of course, Jeffrey didn't care whether I felt Jewish enough or not when he started bullying me. At first it was the penny thing. Then he'd knocked off my baseball cap at recess and asked me where my horns were. I wished I could stand up to him, except he had an entire gang of friends, while I just had Sandra. No doubt, my best friend could throw a mean right hook, but I wasn't about to test my luck against Team Neanderthal.

Once Grandma finished smothering Naomi in hugs and kisses, she turned to me. Twelve was way too old to be hugged, but I toughed it out anyway, and groaned inwardly as she kissed me on the forehead. I hoped she hadn't left a mark.

Dad clapped a hand over my shoulder. "Mom, you're embarrassing him."

"A grandson shouldn't be embarrassed to hug his grandmother." She pulled back to study me and Naomi closely. She always had to do this. No matter the occasion, she'd complain about something. Maybe it would be the length of my hair, or the style of my clothes, or how a girl Naomi's age should

be wearing dresses instead of shorts. It was an honored family tradition for her. This time she just plucked a piece of lint from my shirt, clucked her tongue, and gave my mom a long look. "Wrinkles. You really must do a better job of ironing their clothes, Emily."

Mom's eyebrow twitched. She looked half-tempted to turn this beach party into a bloodbath. "Not all of us can afford to pay people to wash our clothing, Catherine."

"Shame." She swiveled around and strode inside. As soon as her back was turned, I rubbed at the greasy patch her lipstick had left on my forehead.

Dad sighed, herding us into the house.

We hadn't been here since last Christmas. The silver globes and gold snowflakes hanging from the staircase railing and shelves had been replaced by pink roses and cut crystal. Naomi raced to the bowls of pink-and-white M&M's on the snack table, but I held back, itchy with the feeling of being watched. My fingers strayed to my pocket, tracing the ring's worn engravings.

"Hey, kid, get me a hotdog!" a raspy voice said from behind me.

I swiveled around, drawing my breath in sharply. The hallway was deserted except for my grandparents' Afghan hound, Clarence. With the dog's long flaxen hair, he looked, well, a lot like Grandma. Give him a beehive, and they'd practically be twins.

I chuckled nervously. I had probably just imagined the voice, even if it did look like Clarence's mouth had moved.

Clarence nudged me with his snout. "Oh, come on, kid. Do you know how gross kibble is?"

My jaw dropped. No way.

"Naomi, did you hear...?" I looked over my shoulder, but she had already followed the grown-ups out to the patio. As Clarence settled on the shiny new marble floor with a heaving sigh, I squatted down next to him.

He rolled his deep brown eyes up at me. "Well, kid? You keep your mouth open like that any longer, a bug's gonna fly in."

"Am I asleep?" I whispered. "Or dead?"

"If you were dead, do you really think you'd be here?" he asked, giving a weary look around us.

Well, to be fair, being trapped at snobby family get-togethers was the closest thing to hell on earth, next to fourth period with Jeffrey.

"Since when did you learn to talk?" I asked. "Can all dogs do that?"

"Hotdog first, kid. Then you can ask all the questions you want."

I went out to the patio, feeling kind of dreamy. Maybe I was asleep after all.

Along with Grandma and Grandpa, there was my aunt and uncle, and my teenage cousin, Samantha. Samantha was basically the superstar of the family—head of the drama club, an all-expenses-paid scholarship to Otis College of Art and Design next year, Instagram influencer, yada yada yada. Every time we had a barbeque or holiday dinner, my aunt and uncle boasted about her accomplishments, and all I could say was that I'd scored a C on my math test or had a very impressive bowel movement.

"Here comes the man of the hour!" Grandpa said as I walked over. He pulled that same line every other visit, and I still had no idea what it meant. It sounded like something he'd stolen from a TV commercial.

"Is there anything wrong with Clarence?" I asked.

He arched his bushy eyebrows. "Wrong how?"

"His, uh, bark just sounds a little different."

"The dog's getting old, Zach."

I was pretty sure old age didn't cause dogs to magically begin talking, but what did I know? Shrugging, I snagged a hotdog from the stack beside the grill.

"Hey, hold your horses," Dad said with a startled laugh. "Those are still cold."

"I'll survive." I took a big bite to prove it.

Naomi paused in the middle of nomming on her burger to make a face. "You're so gross."

"Says the one with ketchup all over her chin." I hurried away before Mom and Grandma could get in another argument over our manners and how we were being raised.

Naomi followed after me. "Why'd you do that?"

"What? You've never tried a cold hotdog before. You're missing out." I pretended to take another bite. "Delicious."

She groaned. "Stop it. You're going to make me puke."

We went back into the den, where Clarence was curled up by the snacks table. He lifted his head as we entered.

"You've got to see this," I told Naomi, before dangling the hotdog over the dog's head. "Say something, Clarence."

He wagged his tail and barked. Barked. A perfectly normal sound.

What the...? I was sure I hadn't imagined it.

"Clarence, I know you can speak."

"Zach, cut it out," Naomi said in exasperation.

"No, he was actually talking to me just a few minutes ago."

My cheeks prickled with heat. Clarence bumped his snout against my leg, and I tossed the hotdog to him. Once he scarfed it down, he nudged me a second time. Inside my pocket, the ring pressed against my thigh.

The ring.

I reached into my pocket and snared the band in my fingers, its metal hot against my palm.

"Thanks for the chow, kid," Clarence said, licking his chops. "But you really ought to have given me a warm one, you know? Cold hotdogs are almost as bad as stale kibble, and let me tell you, I wouldn't wish that upon my worst enemy."

"See," I said breathlessly to Naomi. "I told you. He's talking."

Naomi rolled her eyes. "I'm not five anymore, you know. This isn't funny."

I took the ring from my pocket and pressed it into her hand, twining fingers with her so the band touched both our palms. "Clarence, say something else. Tell us what you think of Grandpa."

"That cranky old man?" Clarence puffed air through his teeth. "He tells me I shouldn't chase squirrels, but you know what I think? I think he just wishes he could chase them himself!"

Naomi gasped. My shoulders loosened at the sight of the shock blazing across her features.

"Zach, it's a magic ring," she whispered.

I rolled my eyes. No duh.

"What about Grandma?" I asked Clarence. "What do you think of her?"

Clarence leveled his chin and flipped his luscious locks out of his eyes. "My fur's way better."

I wasn't about to argue with that one.

"Do you know more about this ring?" I asked the dog, but he had already turned his attention to grooming himself. I sighed and followed Naomi back outside.

No surprise—the adults were arguing about sports or the president or something. Samantha sprawled on the patio chair, typing furiously into her phone. She barely even glanced at us as we neared.

Naomi took two steps toward the gathering. "Mom! Mom! Look at—"

I snagged her shoulder before she could say more and shook my head. If this ring *was* magical, telling Mom and Dad would ruin it. It had been hard enough convincing them to let me go to Sandra's paintball party this year. They'd been sure I'd shoot my eye out with a paintball or get hit by an exploding CO2 tank. Knowing how uptight they got about our safety, if they knew the ring could make people understand animals, they'd probably think Naomi and I would use it to befriend mountain lions or great white sharks!

Come to think of it, that wasn't such a bad idea. Jeffrey

bragged all the time about going out on his dad's boat and how his family belonged to the San Pancras Yacht Club. If I could convince a shark—or even just a mean-looking dolphin—to pop out at him, he'd totally have to buy himself a new set of swim trunks. Bonus points if it happened in front of his friends.

"Naomi and I are going down to the beach," I called to Mom. She waved me on. Once we made it out of sight, I stopped Naomi. "Listen, I'll get Mom another birthday gift, but not this. This is my ring. I paid for it."

"But I found it!" she protested.

"No offense, Naomi, but you're nine. I'll let you use it with my supervision." A part of me wished I hadn't told her at all. "We need to keep this a secret, okay? Just the two of us. You can't go around blabbing to your friends or your teachers at school. No one, got it?"

The last thing I needed was for the ring to fall into the wrong hands. As in, Jeffrey's hands. With the entire animal kingdom at his mercy, he'd turn my life into a nightmare.

"I won't tell anyone," Naomi swore.

"Promise."

She held out her pinkie. I hooked mine around hers. It had been a few years since I'd believed in the absolute power of pinkie promises—or any promises, really—but it would have to do this time.

"Why are we going over here?" she asked as we trudged through knee-high patches of yellowed grass. A cool mist brushed off the ocean, leaving the air tangy with the scent of sea brine.

"Don't you want to try talking to fish?"

She pointed at a seagull. "What about birds?"

I took out the ring and linked hands with her. "Try calling it."

"Hey, Mr. Bird!"

The seagull continued its slow, lazy loop overhead, joined by several others.

Naomi frowned. "It's not working."

An idea came to me. "Tell it we have food."

"Hey, Mr. Gull! We have chips for you."

The seagull landed on the beach at our feet.

"Chips. Chips. Chips." Its beak opened and closed. All of a sudden, I didn't like the look in its beady white eyes. "Chips. Chips."

"Uh-oh." Naomi pointed upward.

More seagulls had begun to swarm, soon joined by a handful of sandpipers and blackbirds. Their shrieks and chitters merged into a roar as creepy as the rumbling of thunder:

"Chipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschipschips."

I exchanged a look with Naomi. The wonder in her face had faded into pale, trembling fear.

"I don't think we have enough chips," she whispered.

"Yeah? No kidding!" I flinched as a seagull swooped down, coming close enough that I felt its talons cut the air above my head. I wondered if seagulls ate meat, and then decided I really didn't want to find out. "Come on, let's go!"

Naomi cried out as a seagull dived toward her. I gripped her hand tightly in mine, and we raced across the dunes. Birds sur-

rounded us in a screaming white flurry. Gagging on the smell of dusty feathers and bird dung, I shielded my eyes with my hand.

"Duck your head down," I shouted to Naomi. "Protect your eyes."

We ran for the line of shrubs bordering our grandparents' property. A gull twisted its claws in my hair. Naomi's sweaty hand slipped from mine like a wet bar of soap. I lost my balance, tumbled forward, fell, scraping my knees on the sand and sawgrass.

Being eaten by seagulls wasn't exactly how I planned to go. As far as untimely deaths were concerned, it would only be slightly less humiliating than being squashed by a clown car.

I hopped the small picket fence separating the backyard from the shoreline and helped Naomi over to the other side. Ahead, the adults watched us approach in stunned silence, the hotdogs and burgers smoking on the grill. My cousin Samantha whipped out her phone, crowing something about TikTok or Instagram.

My mom was the first one to leap into action. She ran toward us, shouting for us to go inside, go inside now. She scooped Naomi up in her arms, and moments later, I felt Dad's hand close around my upper arm. He drew me against himself, dragged me forward, guarding my body with his own.

Overhead, the birds screamed bloody murder.



FROM THE SAFETY of the den, we watched the birds raid our dinner. Entire bowls of chips vanished in the blink of an eye. Hotdogs were snatched from the grill, still smoking, and carried off in all their greasy glory. Even the brownies and apple pie became the birds' pirate booty, which was probably a good thing. Grandma's "famous" brownies tasted like chocolate chalk, and that was being generous.

"This is *totally* going to go viral," Samantha said, taking selfies against the ceiling-length window's backdrop. Already, nasty lumps of white gull poop covered the pavestones. "Goodbye, Kim Kardashian. Hello, Samantha Darlington."

"Not my zinnias!" Grandma exclaimed in horror as the remaining seagulls began mauling the garden. Samantha must have considered Grandma's reaction meme-worthy, because she started filming again.

"What did you do, Zachary?" Dad demanded. Oh man, he'd brought out my full name. Not good.

"I didn't do anything, Dad, I swear." I pushed my hair out of my face and grimaced as I touched a wet spot. Ugh. Note to self: never underestimate the vengeance of hungry seagulls.

"Zach has a magic ring!" Naomi announced. I shot her an ugly look, but she kept on blabbing. "He can talk to animals with it. He told the birds we had chips."

Dad chuckled sarcastically. "Is that so?"

I rolled my eyes. So much for the sacredness of pinkie promises. She couldn't even keep her word for fifteen minutes.

"Tell your daughter this isn't funny," Grandma snapped at my mom, her face growing almost as red as the checkered tablecloth.

I racked my brain for something to say. Now that I knew the ring's power, there was no way I'd let Mom and Dad take it away. At least not before getting payback on Jeffrey or impressing Dominic.

"I threw a hotdog at one," I said quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it'd go berserk like that."

Everyone looked at me: my grandparents with anger, Samantha with her mouth cocked in disgust, Mom and Dad with disappointment.

My mom took a deep breath. "Zachary, you're—"

I sighed. "Grounded. Yeah, I know."

No video games, no computer, no TV. I threw myself down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Strung on fishing line,

painted models drifted in the draft from the open window—a Mothman cryptid, the USSC *Nostromo* from the 1979 movie *Alien*, the spaceship from *Predator*.

Some boys collected cars or sports stuff. Me? I preferred old monster movies, the real scary kind. Or at least the ones Mom and Dad let me see. My bookshelf was crowded with limited-edition action figures of Frankenstein, Dracula, and the others, crammed up next to yard-sale *Goosebumps* books, and horror comics. On my desk sat a 1:87 scale replica of the *Addams Family* mansion. The crown jewels of my collection were displayed on a shelf Dad built above my desk: rare, fully illustrated hardcovers of all the old classics.

Monster movies were kind of a big tradition in our house. My dad and I watched them all the time. We went to the local theater every month for their old-school horror special. At first, it was *Beetlejuice* and *Gremlins*, but then last year, he began letting me watch the scarier ones like *The Blob*.

But that was only part of it. The real reason I liked monsters so much was because deep down, I kind of felt like one. Yeah, I couldn't sprout fangs or transform into a wolf, but the thing about monsters was that nobody understood them, and sometimes people just hated them for who they were. So, if they wanted to fit in, they had to file down their teeth and invest in a dog grooming kit, keep their head down, and just stay hidden. And every day, I felt the same.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket. Dad had locked all the game apps somehow, but I still got tweets and text messages.

SANDRA: Is this you??

She had sent me a video. With dread already building in my heart, I clicked on the play button.

Samantha must have started filming even before Naomi and I had tumbled past the trees. The sixty-second video showed us running across the lawn, being chased by a tornado of shrieking, chips-obsessed birds. You could even see the moment a seagull pegged me with its perfectly aimed poop-bomb.

"No. No. No." Quickly, I typed out a response.

ZACH: Did my cousin Samantha send it to you?

SANDRA: Lol you kidding? It's got 50k views on TikTok and counting.

"Seriously?" I muttered. When I'd dreamed of going viral, this wasn't what I meant!

I logged on to YouTube and went to Samantha's channel, where she cross-posted her fashion design and drama class videos from TikTok and Instagram. There she had posted the full video, along with a two-minute short showing Grandma's meltdown at the carnage and another of my parents chewing me out over trying to feed the seagulls.

SANDRA: Was it really just a hotdog?

ZACH: No.

SANDRA: Then what did you do to make them so upset?

ZACH: Come over tomorrow. I'll show you.

As I waited for her to respond, a Twitter notification popped up on my phone. Someone had made a GIF showing me getting pummeled with gull poop and sent it as a DM, along with the words BIRD BRAIN!!!

I groaned. Great. The video must have already found its way into Jeffrey's grubby little hands. I dropped my phone onto the bed and took the ring from my pocket, holding it up to the glow of the streetlamp outside.

"What else can you do?" I mused.

No response. Then again, I hadn't really expected one.

"I wish for a new laptop. Get me a new laptop."

I waited a couple minutes, but no laptop appeared from thin air. All right, so it couldn't grant wishes.

"Fire." Sitting up, I flicked my hand toward the window.

Nothing.

"Abracadabra."

No luck.

"I'm guessing there isn't a genie in there?" I asked the ring, shaking it gently. "Someone who can teach Jeffrey and his friends a real lesson? If there is, it'd be really nice if you could show up."

The ring grew hot against my skin, warming my palm like the time I sat too close to the campfire. I held my breath. Slowly, the heat faded.

I waited a minute. Then another.

Sighing in defeat, I collapsed onto my back and closed my eyes. Maybe I could convince a pack of coyotes to chase Jeffrey or bribe some seagulls to pelt him with poop. That would show him.

"You called for me?" a smooth voice said.

My eyes flew open. I lurched into a sitting position with a cry, searching the darkened room. Overhead, the models swung in lazy circles, casting their shadows across the walls. Movement shifted in the corner of my vision. I swiveled around.

A figure sat atop the windowsill, backlit by the red street-light. His form was immersed in darkness. As he jumped onto the bedroom floor, I caught a glimpse of spread wings, feathers as black and glossy as spilled ink.

"Wh-what..." My lips trembled so hard I couldn't even get the words out. I thought I might scream the way people did in horror movies, but it was like my voice had thickened to maple syrup in my throat. "Are you the guardian of the ring?"

Slowly, he eased to his full height. His wings ruffled and furled against his body, so long they nearly dragged across the floor. He wore a black tunic trimmed with gold thread around the hem and clasped with a jeweled metal sash.

A boy. It was a boy who didn't look much older than me, his hair framing his face in a dark tangle. His gold eyes glowed in the moonlight. He wore a crown whose sharp tines curled like flames, and upon his wrist, a wide golden bracelet studded with garnets.

He would've been pretty, if he weren't so terrifying.

As he stepped forward, the robe parted around his ankles, exposing the taloned feet of a bird of prey. Oh crap, was this my punishment for lying to the seagulls that I'd give them chips? Being cursed by some bird prince?

"Wh-what are you?" I whispered.

"Ashmedai." He smiled, revealing teeth far sharper than those of any human. "King of demons."