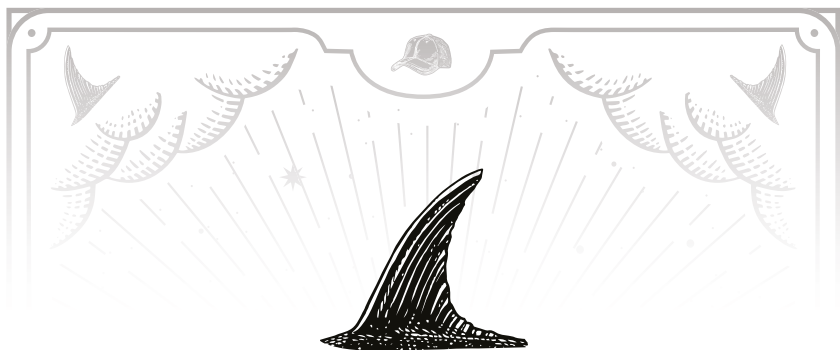




THE FACE

JENNIFER LISS



Chapter 1

THE STORM

Ben, do you hear me?" The voice of Ben's mom came through the speaker of his phone, loud and clear.

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mom."

"Promise me you'll head home *before* it starts to rain," his mother said.

Ben reached for his lucky video game controller. In the process, he knocked his phone off the coffee table.

"Ben?"

He snatched the phone off the floor and wedged it between his ear and shoulder.

“Sorry, Mom,” Ben said. “Nick and I are going to play one round of *Zombie Chase*. Then I’ll ride my bike home.”

His mom sighed. “You better keep your word. My weather app says this storm is going to be like nothing we’ve ever seen. By the time it starts raining, I need you to be safe and dry in our apartment. Got it?”

“Yes, I got it. Don’t worry, Mom.” Ben hung up after promising three times that he would be home before the storm.

“Is your mom working at the hospital tonight?” Nick asked.

Ben fiddled with his controller. “Yeah. She has night shifts on Saturdays. It stresses her out. My mom always worries about me getting home late. I have to text her the second I walk in the door. If I don’t, she gets mad.”

Nick shivered. “Don’t you get scared staying alone in your apartment all night?”

“Nah.” Ben smiled when his controller lit up. “I’ve been doing it for a while, so I’m used to it. Besides, our neighbors are always around if I need anything.” He waved the controller at his friend. “Should we play?”

Nick grinned and flipped his bright blue cap around. “If you’re ready to lose.” He always wore his cap backward. But if he needed good luck, he flipped it around. Then the orange lightning bolt on the front would face forward. Ben had never seen another cap like it.

Ben and Nick played one round, then another, and then another. *Zombie Chase* was one of Ben’s favorite games, and he didn’t have it at home. It was hard to tear himself away from the console.

When the lights started to flicker, Nick paused the game.

“What’s going on?” Ben asked.

“I bet it’s the storm,” Nick said. “Don’t you hear the thunder?”

“Oh no!” Ben looked at his watch. “I have to go. My mom will be so mad if I don’t get home before the storm.”

Nick’s video game system was in the basement. There weren’t any windows down there. When the boys climbed the stairs to the kitchen, Ben couldn’t believe his eyes. Sheets of rain pounded against the glass kitchen door. Wind was howling. It blew over a trash can in the backyard.

Ben grabbed his coat. “I can’t believe this.”

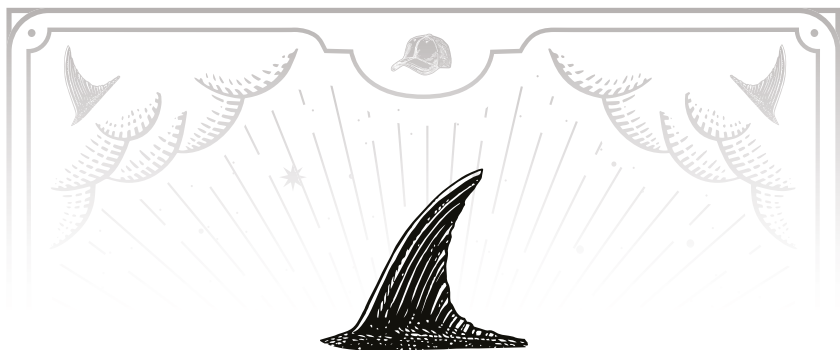
“Are you sure you should ride your bike? It looks ugly out there.” Nick flipped his cap backward again. “My dad will be home in an hour. He could give you a ride. You should wait.”

Ben quickly zipped up his coat. “That’ll be too late. The route by the river is fast. I’ll be home in ten minutes.”

Nick crossed his arms. “The river? Don’t do

that. It's super creepy. All those strange people just hang around down there."

"It's fine." Ben rested his hand on the doorknob.
"I ride fast. Nothing can get me."



Chapter 2

THE RIVER

Rain pelted Ben's face as he rode away from Nick's house. Large puddles had already formed on the streets. As Ben rode through them, water and mud sprayed his legs. After one block, he was soaked. Soon he turned left. Then he took a sharp right onto a narrow path. It led to the river.

The waterway had cut through town many years ago. Supposedly, the river had once been beautiful, following a natural course. Now it was dirty and full

of trash. The river ran through a large concrete tube that went under city streets.

Only a small part of it was open. That was where it surfaced. A pathway ran along one side of the river. It used to be a pleasant spot to walk or bike ride.

In recent years, it had become a place where people hung out. Ben's mom called them "drifters." That seemed like an old-fashioned word to Ben. Still, he could see why his mom wanted him to avoid the area. The people around the river were intense. They always appeared to be looking for trouble.

However, Ben wasn't thinking about them today. All that mattered was getting home quickly. The last time he was late, his mom had grounded him. He didn't want that to happen again. The river path was the only shortcut he knew.

Suddenly Ben's red bike skidded on a patch of mud. Recovering his balance, Ben pumped his pedals as quickly as he could. He was relieved that the path was empty. The drifters had probably all sought shelter.

Rain continued to pour. The brown water flowed faster than Ben had ever seen. Rising water swallowed the gravel shore.

In his pocket, Ben's phone buzzed. He winced because it was probably his mom. Ben was going to be in big trouble.

With one hand, he pulled out his phone. Steadying the handlebar, he glanced at the screen. Ben sighed with relief when he read the display.

Missed call from Nick.

Ben's mom was probably busy at work. The emergency room was usually hectic on weekends. The nurses barely had time to stop and eat. This made it hard for Ben's mom to call him. With luck, he would be home in a few minutes. Then he would text her.

A loud squeal made Ben jerk his head to the right. He gasped as a huge fin emerged from the river. It slapped the surface of the water, and Ben heard the squeal again. Then the fin slid back into the river.

Rain streamed down Ben's face. Yet he barely noticed. His focus was on the river. The spot where the fin had appeared was calm.

What in the world was that? Ben wondered.

He waited a moment, but the fin didn't reemerge. There was no more squealing either. Roaring wind and rain were all he heard.

The only living things Ben had ever seen in the river were a few mangy ducks. This giant fin had him curious. Still, he couldn't wait. Ben had to get home. But he was about to get the biggest shock of his life.

Without warning, a creature leapt from the river. It seemed to suspend itself briefly over the churning water. The fin on its back was huge. Yet Ben was awed by its long, gray tail.

At first, he thought it was some weird fish. But a fish had scales. This didn't. It had skin. In fact, it looked like it had a body.

Even more shocking was the creature's face. It looked *human*.

THE FACE

While riding his bike near the river one stormy night, Ben takes a spill. When he wakes up in the hospital, he remembers seeing something he can't explain. Now Ben is determined to find out who—or what—is lurking in the murky water.



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