

From the author of *MAIAMANDER*

GARGANTS

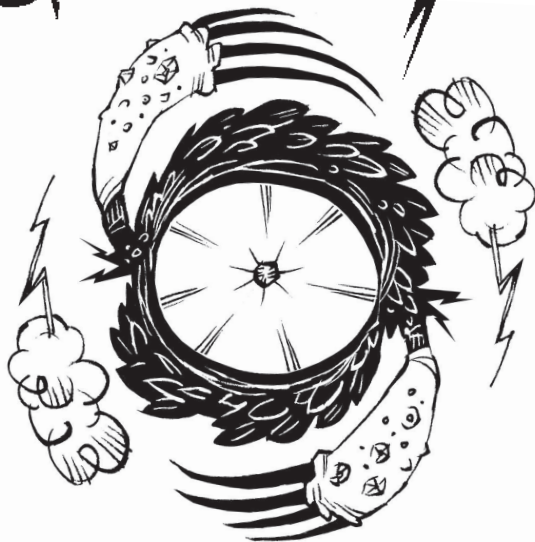


THOMAS
TAYLOR

GARGANT'S



GARGANTIS



THOMAS
TAYLOR

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



WALKER
BOOKS

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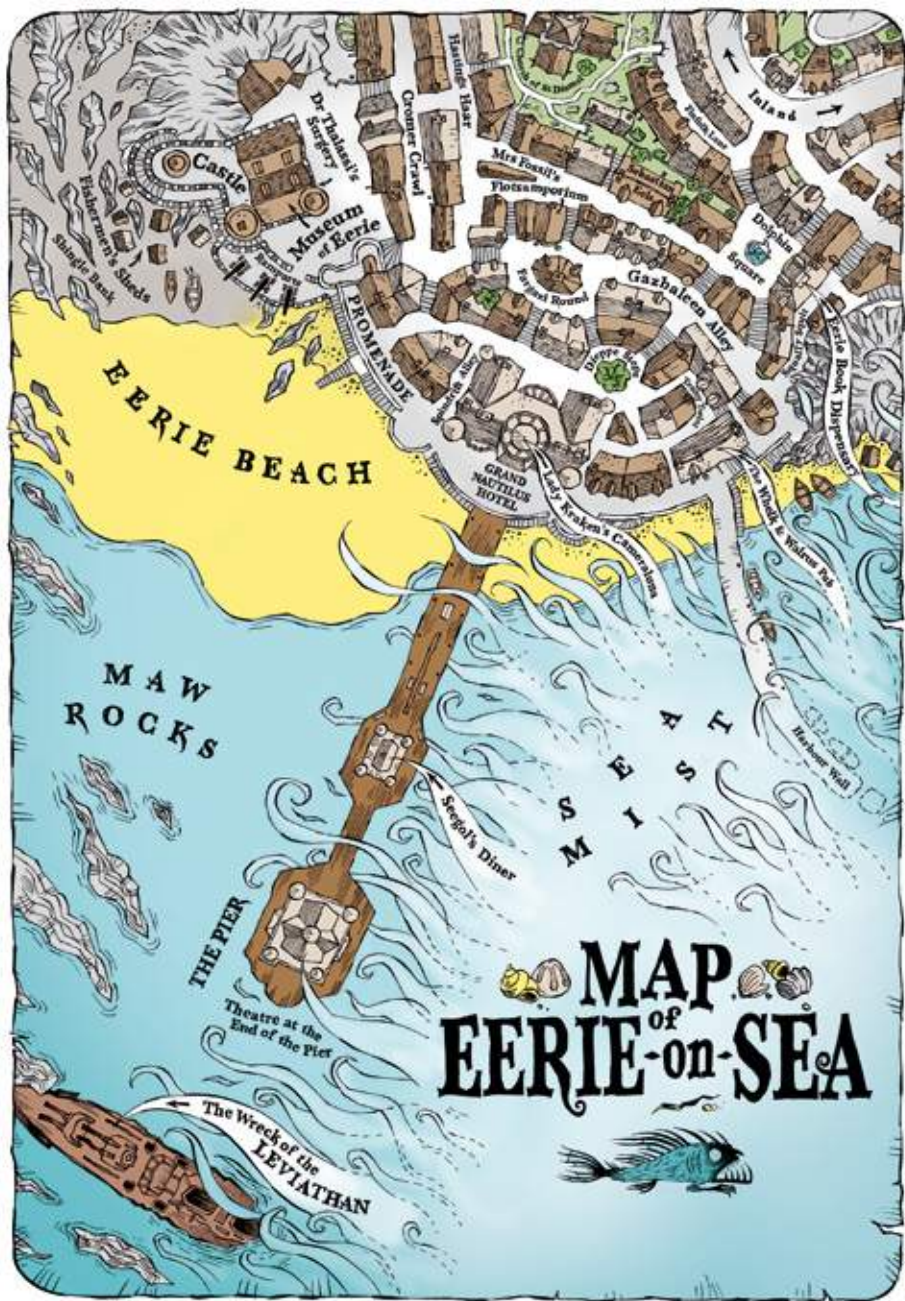
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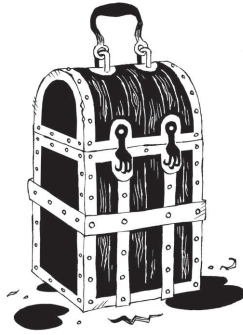
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DEEP HOOD

IF THERE'S ONE THING hotels have a lot of, it's strangers. Hotels are kind of in the stranger business, after all. But no hotel in the world puts the *strange* in *stranger* quite like the Grand Nautilus Hotel.

Take this guy, for example. The one who's just come in from the storm. The one walking across the empty marble floor of the lobby. See him? The one whose face is hidden by the enormous hood of a long waxed coat streaming with rainwater? He doesn't even pull his hood back to talk to the receptionist, and his luggage – a metal-bound wooden box clutched in one gloved hand – doesn't leave his side for a moment.

Who is he? What's his story?

What's in the box?

Of course, we'll probably never know. And that's fine. People are entitled to their privacy. Privacy is something else hotels have a lot of. Besides, there's something sinister about this man, something threatening that makes me *not want* to know, to be honest. I'll be quite happy once he's up in his room, doing whatever dark and secret things he's come here to do, far away from me. He takes his key and steps away from the reception desk ...

... and starts walking in my direction!

I sit up and adjust my cap.

"May I help you, sir?" I say as the man in the overlong coat stops before the desk of my little cubbyhole. I look up and see nothing but darkness in that drooping hood. My cap starts to slip down the back of my head, so I straighten it.

"Herbert Lemon." A voice comes from inside the hood, and I flinch. There's an unnatural edge to that voice that makes my skin crawl.

"Th-that's right, sir," I reply. "I'm Herbie Lemon, Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel, at your service. Have you lost something?"

There's a sudden *KER-KER-BOOM!* as a clap of thunder gallops around the town outside. The flash of lightning that rides with it only serves to highlight the

darkness in the man's hood. The wind flings rain against the windowpanes, and the hotel lamps flicker.

The man remains motionless, dripping rainwater on my counter.

"U-u-umbrella, perhaps?" I suggest.

I glance at the metal-bound box in the man's hand. There's barely room for a change of underpants in a thing like that.

"Or luggage, maybe?"

My voice is almost a squeak now.

The man leans in, his hood nearly closing over my head. My nostrils fill with the stink of wet coat and fishy breath.

"Do not ask what I have lost, Herbert Lemon," comes the man's voice, sounding as if each word is made with a great deal of effort. "Ask what I have found."

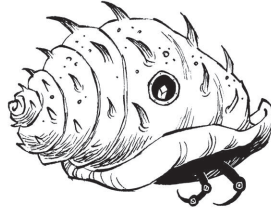
And that's when there's another crash of thunder and the hotel's lights go out.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Yes, you – sitting there safe at home, staring into your book with bug eyes, waiting for something horrible to happen to me. You're thinking that I'm going to freak out now. And I admit, I am considering it. But you don't get to be Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel without learning

how to be a professional. So, OK, yes, maybe I'm not the bravest mouse in the basket, but I am in *my* place, behind *my* polished desk, master of *my* own little world of lost property and shiny buttons. And so that's why, when the lights come back on again, I'm still sitting exactly where I was, clutching my Lost-and-Founder's cap with both hands and ... blinking at empty space.

Because, of course, the man with the deep hood has gone.





WEIRDOS AND CRACKPOTS

THE SECOND RULE of lost-and-founding is: *Keep calm and try a smile.*

Seriously, you'd be amazed at some of the things that turn up in my Lost-and-Foundery: thingummies, doodahs, assorted hoojamfips of all descriptions. Once, I even had a living, breathing human being hand herself in, but that's another story. You just have to take it all in your stride, stay cool and pretend that the Roman helmet, or false nostril, or bloodstained candlestick that got left in the conservatory is all in a day's work for a Lost-and-Founder. So it's the second rule I'm mostly thinking of when the hotel lights come back on to reveal that not only has Deep Hood gone, he's also left an object on my desk.

"You were just handing something in?" I ask the

empty space where the man had been standing. “Why did you have to be so creepy about it?”

I lean out of my cubbyhole and see a trail of rainwater leading to the main staircase. If I wanted to, I could follow it and find out which room Deep Hood’s staying in.

If I wanted to.

And the thing on my desk? Well, see for yourself.

It’s a shell.

A strange, spiky shell – pearly white and spiralling around itself until it ends in a point. The small spikes, which are slightly curved, run up this spiral at regular intervals. I pick up the shell and peer into the trumpet end (it’s one of those sorts of shells). It seems heavier than it should be, and it gives a clear metallic tinkle when I shake it. There’s a small hole in one side, rimmed with brass. Is there something inside? Cautiously, I put the shell to my ear.

“I can hear the sea,” I say to myself with a nervous chuckle of relief. “That means it’s empty, right?”

“Or your head is,” says an annoying voice, and I nearly drop the shell in surprise. From behind a large potted fern near my cubbyhole steps Mr Mollusc, the hotel manager. He takes the shell from me.

“Shiny thing.” His eyes light up. “Probably worth

quite a bit. What are you doing with something like this, Lemon?"

"It was handed in, sir," I say. "By that new guest."

At this, old Mollusc's horrible moustache bristles, and he almost throws the shell back to me.

"You spoke to him?" he says, nodding fearfully at the stairs. "He spoke to you?"

I shrug and hope that's answer enough.

Mollusc runs his fingers through his thinning hair.

"Why do we always get the strangest ones?" he asks, though mostly to himself.

I shrug again.

I mean, surely he knows the answer to *that* by now. Summer is a faded memory, and Eerie-on-Sea hasn't pretended to be a normal seaside town for so long that I wonder if it'll remember how when the tourists return. Winter is lingering, and a storm mightier than any I have ever seen has engulfed the bay, turning the sea into a raging animal and blowing winds that would strip the enamel from your teeth. Only weirdos and crackpots would travel all the way to Eerie-on-Sea at this time of year. And where else are those weirdos and crackpots going to stay but the Grand Nautilus Hotel?

"Er, did *you* speak to him, sir?" I say, daring a question

of my own. “His voice was a bit ... you know. Did you think his voice was a bit ... you know?”

“Don’t be impertinent!” snaps Mr Mollusc, suddenly remembering himself. “You have a new piece of lost property to take care of, boy. No doubt of great value. Kindly get on with your job.”

And with that he turns on his heel and strides away.

Across the lobby, Amber Griss – the hotel receptionist – gives me a smile that seems to say, “Oh, don’t mind him, Herbie. You know what he’s like.” But her raised eyebrow adds, “Just don’t let him see you making that face!” So I grin an “Oops! You’re right!” grin back and lift down the heavy old ledger instead.

This ledger is where I, and all the Lost-and-Founders before me, record everything that is handed in at the Lost-and-Foundery, as well as everything that is successfully returned. It’s enormous. I heave it open and flip to the next blank space. I write the time and date and then the words PECULIAR SHELL. I’m not quite sure what else to write, to be honest.

Some of the hotel’s clocks, the faster ones, start chiming for 7 p.m. It’s been a long day, so I just write, INVESTIGATION BEGUN AT 7-ISH next to PECULIAR SHELL. Then I close the ledger with a thud, flip the sign

on my desk to CLOSED, and carry the strange shell down to my cellar.

The cellar is the real heart of the Lost-and-Foundery: a whole wing of the hotel's basement that generations of Lost-and-Founders have called home and that has long since become a glittering cavern of curiosities. Someone once described it as "Aladdin's cave", but it's not.

It's mine.

I shove a log into my little wood burner, hang my cap on a curly bronze whatsit and flop down into my enormous armchair. The gale whistles through the chimney, and the walls quake with an almighty thunderclap, but the storm can't reach me down here. I grab my largest magnifying glass – itself a lost item – and use it to turn my eye enormous as I peer closely at the curious shell. In particular at the small brass-lined hole.

"Something interesting?" comes a voice, and for the second time the shell nearly flies out of my hand, as I start in surprise.

"Can people please stop doing that?" I shout as the shadows move and Violet Parma steps into the firelight to sit beside me. She's holding a large white cat.

"Doing what?" she asks.

"Jumping out! I was just thinking how this place is

mine-all-mine, and then you pop up from behind the lost pyjamas and spoil it.”

“You did say I could come around whenever I wanted,” says Violet with a slight lift of her chin. “And there was a time when you invited me to live down here, remember?”

And both those things are true, even if the second one turned out a bit differently in the end.

But wait, you’re probably wondering who Violet Parma is. Unless you’ve been to Eerie-on-Sea before, that is, and have heard all the stories about her. And if *that’s* the case, then let me tell you that those stories are also true. I know because I was there for most of them. But whatever you’ve heard, and whatever I say, and whatever you think of this wild-haired, brown-eyed girl with a cat, all that really matters right now is that Violet is my best friend here in Eerie, and she knows how to open my cellar window.

“Besides,” says Violet, “the storm is worse than ever. Poor Erwin here got lifted right off his paws and was nearly swept out to sea! I didn’t think you’d mind us hiding out down here for a while.” And she puts Erwin – that’s the cat, by the way – in his favourite box of lost scarves, the one I keep near the wood burner.

“You’ve got something new,” Violet adds, staring eagerly at the iridescent shell in my hands.

“There’s a hole in the side.” I flip the shell around. “I was just going to look in it, to see—”

“Great idea!” Violet takes the shell and the magnifying glass from me, and now she’s the one with the giant eye, peering into the hole in the shell.

“There *is* something in there!” she cries.

“What sort of something?” I ask, deciding not to protest.

“In the bottom of the hole.” Violet’s eye looks bigger than ever as she leans into the magnifying lens. “There’s a piece of metal, like a little pin with squared-off sides. The kind of thing you see when you look into the winding hole of an old-fashioned clock.”

“Like the kind of thing that’s turned with a key?”

“Exactly,” says Violet. “You have some of those keys, don’t you? Herbie, I think there’s clockwork in this shell!”

I open the large toolbox beside my repair desk, heave out a big jar and carefully tip its contents into the pool of light from my anglepoise lamp. From the jar spills keys of every kind. It takes a bit of poking about, but eventually I find a brass winder key that neatly fits the hole in the shell.

“Well?” says Violet when I don’t turn the key. “What are you waiting for?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” I reply. My mind goes back to the creepy man who left this shell, with his disturbing voice and drooping hood. “I’m supposed to keep things safe, Vi, not mess around with them. Maybe it wouldn’t be right to wind this thing up.”

“Are you serious?” Violet blinks at me. “How can you not be curious to see what it does?”

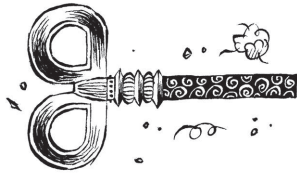
“I am curious, but...”

I glance over towards Erwin and see that the cat, while in every other way appearing to be fast asleep, has one ice-blue eye wide open and is staring at us intently. It looks as though Erwin is on Violet’s side, as usual.

“I just wonder if...”

“Oh, give it to me.” Violet takes the shell again. She turns the key.





SEA SHANTY

VIOLET GIVES THE KEY three sharp turns...

Tic-tic-tic-TIK, tic-tic-tic-TIK, tic-tic-tic-TIK.

Nothing happens.

She puts the spiky shell down on the table beside my chair.

Nothing continues to happen.

“Wait,” she says. “Can you hear that? It’s doing *something.*”

I stretch my hearing, and yes, sure enough, there’s a faint whirring from inside the shell, as if tiny gears are moving into position.

Then the shell stands up.

Or rather, it pops up a finger’s width above the table as a small brass arm reaches down from the trumpet end

and elevates the shell. Then music starts – a tinkling tune that dances in the air as the shell begins to rotate on the brass arm, sending points of reflected lamplight flickering across the arched ceiling of my cellar.

“It’s beautiful!” gasps Violet. “And the tune seems familiar...”

“It should,” I say. “It’s a sea shanty.”

“A what?”

“A sea shanty. You know, one of the songs the fishermen sing. You must have heard them when they’re hauling their fishing boats up the beach, or doing fishy things on the harbour wall. They’re always singing.”

“It sounds different like this, though,” says Violet. “Prettier. More magical.”

The music ends, and the shell stops spinning. It sinks back down onto the table.

“So, it’s a music box,” I say, thinking I should add this fact to the ledger. “That might make it easier to find its rightful owner...”

The shell stands up again.

And I mean REALLY stands up this time, on four little brass legs – each like the leg of a crab – which pop out from inside it with a metallic *CLACK!* Violet and I, who had been leaning in close to hear the music, start

back in surprise. Even Erwin sits up in his box of scarves and gives a hiss of alarm. The shell pivots my way, as if looking at me, though there's no eye that I can see. Then it pivots towards Violet. A fifth brass appendage emerges, this time with a tiny pair of scissors attached to the end like a crab claw. The arm waves between us, the little scissors *snip, snip, snip*-ing in a way I can only describe as menacing.

"Pass me that bucket," I say to Vi as quietly as I can.

"Why?" comes her reply. "Do you feel sick?"

"No," I mumble. "The third rule of lost-and-foundering. I was forgetting it. Pass me the bucket. Quick!"

Violet reaches over and picks up an old wooden bucket filled with coat hangers. I snatch it from her, tip the coat hangers on the floor and dive towards the shell.

Too late! The thing must sense me somehow, or maybe it's just bad timing, because the shell leaps from the table just as I bring the bucket down, and it scuttles away across the floor. I dive after it, miss again and have to watch helplessly as the little clockwork hermit crab – because that's exactly what it looks like to me – runs up the side of my lost-books bookcase and skitters away along the top. In desperation, I throw the bucket at the shell, knocking it to the ground.

Violet darts forward holding an old woolly jumper and jumps on the shell. She wrestles with it in the jumper for a moment, and I can hear metallic clacking and whirring sounds as the mechanical hermit crab tries to untangle itself. Then the jumper goes still.

“Got it!” she says.

“Do you think it’s all wound down now?”

Violet shrugs.

“It’s stopped struggling, at least.”

“Maybe.” I take the jumper from her, careful not to let our little clockwork prisoner escape. “But I’m not taking any chances. If someone comes to claim this wind-up shell, I don’t want to have to admit that it’s run away and is living wild and free somewhere in my Lost-and-Foundery. Besides, I didn’t like the look of those scissors.”

I scrunch the jumper – shell and all – into the bucket, place the bucket on the floor upside down, and then put a couple of heavy books on top. If the mechanical contraption still has some wound spring left, that should stop it going anywhere.

“What is it, then?” says Violet.

“A clockwork hermit crab.”

“No, I mean the third rule of lost-and-foundering. What’s that?”

“The third rule,” I say, giving her one of my most impressive looks, “is: *Unexpected the expected!*”

“Shouldn’t that be the other way around?”

“Ha!” I reply. “That’s just what I unexpected you to say.”

“OK.” Vi rolls her eyes. “Where did you get that shell from, anyway?”

“Handed in.” I flop back into my chair. “New guest, just arrived. He must have found it, um, somewhere.”

“You don’t know?” says Vi, sitting on the other side of the wood burner. “Didn’t you ask where he found it? Didn’t you ask for *details*? That’s not like you.”

I think about explaining, about telling Vi just how weird and sinister the faceless guest was, with his dripping hood and creepy voice, but I can’t be bothered. This is mostly because, annoyingly, Violet’s right – I should have run after Deep Hood to find out more. How else am I going to return the stupid shell to its rightful owner if I don’t follow up leads when they’re hot? I’ll just have to knock on the man’s door in the morning and ask. Right now, though, I’d really like to change the subject, so I’m pleased when Violet changes it for me.

“Are you hungry?” she says. “It’s been ages since we last went to Seegol’s for fish and chips.”

At the mention of Seegol's delicious chips, my stomach does a little flip of anticipation. My ears, however, report the sound of raging weather to my brain, so my brain sends a signal to my stomach to knock it off. My stomach does another little flip anyway.

"I'd love to go," I say. "But the storm..."

"It's a monster," Vi admits with a whistle. "Though it's also exciting to be out in. I've never experienced anything like it. And besides, Seegol's isn't far."

Well, that's true enough, as you'll know if you've ever seen a map of Eerie-on-Sea. But being out on the deck of the pier in this wind, with lightning forking overhead...

"Come on, Herbie!" says Vi, jumping up. "It'll be like we're on an adventure again."

"OK." I stand up and reach for my coat. My firelit corner of the cellar suddenly looks cosier than ever. "And if the storm's really bad, we can always bring the chips back here."



I don't so much climb out of the cellar window as get sucked out. The wind seems to be trying to lift me into the air by my cheeks. I brace myself against it, planting my feet, and see Violet braced too, her mass of dark curls standing out

from the sides of her head like a windswept hedge. I start to speak, but a gust of air whips the words away and tries to take my tonsils, too, so I clamp my mouth shut and think of chips. We stumble across the cobbles to the sea wall and squint in astonishment at the sight beyond.

The ocean is devouring the pier.

Or rather, it's trying to: waves like the jaws of some immense, elemental creature chomp at its Victorian ironwork, breaking in gouts of spray that lick the shuddering deck. Garlands of suspended pier lights dance crazily in the wind, while the neon sign – the one that says EERIE-ON-SEA in fizzing, candy-coloured letters – crackles and blinks more than ever. Above this boils the storm in a vault of bruise-coloured clouds, lit with electrical flashes of its own.

Only the lights of Seegol's Diner – the fish and chip shop at the heart of the pier – shine solid and reassuring.

I look at Vi, and her eyes are bright with excitement. She starts down the steps to the pier, clutching the sea wall, then stops. She opens her coat like a pair of wings, waits for them to fill with the furious air and then, at just the right moment ...

... she jumps!

Incredibly, the storm holds her in the air, even

lifting her slightly. Violet Parma is flying!

Then gravity notices and drags her back down. Violet lands smartly on the deck of the pier, closes her coat against the buffeting of the storm and beckons me to do the same.

I spread my coat open and look up into the lightning sky. For a moment, I feel like Batman.

Then I see something.

A shape – a colossal, heaving shadow, vaster than imagining – coils through the storm clouds above Eerie-on-Sea.

“!” I cry, all thoughts of Batman swept away.

The wind, as if seeing me miss my chance to fly, punches me back against the sea wall, pinning me there like a curious specimen, hammering my face with spray. It takes a great effort to peel myself off the wall and get my coat closed. I stumble down the steps to join Violet. She’s trying not to laugh.

I squint up into the sky and rub my eyes. There’s nothing there now but flickering clouds and a tumbling storm. Surely that was all there ever was.

Violet grabs my arm and pulls me along the trembling pier towards Seegol’s Diner.





THOMAS TAYLOR has always lived near the sea (though that's not difficult in the British Isles). He comes from a long line of seafarers but chose a career as an illustrator because that involves less getting wet and better biscuits.

His first professional illustration commission, straight out of art school, was the cover art for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. This led to a lot more drawing until he finally plucked up the courage to try writing for himself. It turns out that turning biscuits into books is even more fun when you get to create the story, too.

Thomas currently lives on the south coast of England, which provided a lot of the weather for this book. As a keen beachcomber he has found several messages in bottles over the years, including one that appeared to be in secret code. He hasn't been struck by lightning yet, but as the best time to find beachcombing treasures is just after a storm, it's surely only a matter of time.

THE LEGENDS OF EERIE-ON-SEA

HAS THE MIGHTY GARGANTIS RETURNED?

A ferocious storm is raging in Eerie-on-Sea.

An ancient artefact filled with a wondrous light has washed up on the beach.

And a mysterious hooded stranger has just checked into the Grand Nautilus Hotel.

Herbie and Violet know that these events are connected – and that they must act fast to save the town. But their investigation may just lead them to the cold, dark bottom of the sea...

*"Taylor's magical touch makes you
believe the impossible."*

Catherine Doyle,
author of *The Storm Keeper's Island*

