

Today's The Day by Chris Malburg

First 50 pages

Prolog

My bedroom door swings quietly open thanks to the WD-40 I sprayed on the hinges yesterday. I kick off my flip-flops then step out onto the carpet. If Mom and Dad hear me creeping down the hall for sure they'll drag me into their latest shoutfest. I'm not taking sides.

My big sister's door is shut tight. Sarah is not asleep. No one could sleep through the fight downstairs. I just want all the yelling, all the sniping to stop. Well, it just might. And really soon.

I knock twice on Sarah's door. Nothing. I'm not standing out here exposed for much longer. I knock again. "Open up, Sarah," I whisper.

Finally the door cracks open. A sliver of face appears. Her left eye scans me up and down.

"What?"

For starters, stop the war between our parents. But what kid can do that? Well, maybe this kid can. "I need your help. It's important."

Her door inches open just enough for me to slide in then silently shuts. Since she turned sixteen last month this is forbidden territory. When we turn sixteen we get to redo our bedrooms. Sarah just finished redecorating. My chance comes in four years. Sarah's room is girly all the way—pink walls with cream-colored ceiling molding and baseboards.

"I'm the reason this time," I walk over to the white-framed mirror on the wall opposite her desk where she keeps her laptop. "I told them it would be nice to get out of New York City sometime this summer—"

"Oh *please*. That's your sixth grader's thinking." Sarah leans up against the bookcase beside the desk where all of her schoolbooks are supposed to go but instead end up scattered around the room.

From downstairs Mom shouts, "This is *not* about where we go. It's about being together as a family."

"Told you."

"Still wrong, Brian," Sarah says.

I brush my fingers along the fringe dangling from the pink-shaded lamp that lights up her workspace. Scraps of paper and post-it notes litter her desk. I couldn't stand the mess. My room isn't as new or fancy. But at least it's neat and I can find my things.

"Your strategy of punishment by ignoring Dad seems to really be working. Great way to get his attention, Sarah. That's what you really want."

I see her surprised smile. Gotcha. She picks up a post-it, begins tearing it and slowly nods. "Daddy being pissed off has at least *something* to do with me. Forces him off that cell of his even if it is only to yell at me."

"Do other kids have this problem?"

“Sure they do, little bro—like all of my friends. Parents are from another planet. You’re the straight-A student and president of your class. Got any ideas?”

“Actually, I do.”

“You do? Okay, Brian Schilling, Mr. Scary Smart Geek. Spill it.”

* * *

Chapter 1

This is a first. All four of us in the same room at the same time. Even if we are just downstairs in the library where Dad usually works until late at night. We’re squared off with Mom and Dad sitting on a red leather couch; Sarah and I on the one opposite. A glass coffee table separates us like a neutral buffer zone.

Mom’s voice is pleasant, “Isn’t this nice. A family conversation. We should have these more often.” Dad’s cell phone vibrates. We all look at him. Dad raises one finger—asking for a second—and says into the phone, “Got an interesting conversation going here. Talk to you later.” Then he does the unthinkable—he holds down the button until it turns off the phone *completely*.

“What’s up kids?” asks Dad. “Take all the time you need. All night, if you want. Tomorrow’s Saturday. We can sleep in.”

We all know the joke. Dad never sleeps past 5:00 a.m. He says he’s just wired that way.

Sarah looks at me. I nod my head. She begins, “Look, we can’t stand all the fighting. This house has so much anger. We’re tired of it.”

Mom says, “Honey, your dad and I are just two very strong willed people both with high pressure jobs. If we didn’t let off some steam every so often, we’d both burst. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Mom is right. It’s the ones who keep it all inside you have to watch. They’ll explode from the pressure build-up and die of a coronary.”

“Even so,” continues Sarah, “It hasn’t been easy for Brian and I. We want a change. Actually, it was Brian’s idea. He’s the smart one between us.”

Mom nods. “So what’s your idea, Brian-the-Brain?”

“Well, summer vacation starts next week. Without school and its air conditioning, it’ll be miserable here in the City. So Sarah and I want to leave.”

“Leave?” asks Dad. “You mean, just the two of you? Without us?”

Mom asks, “Leave as in run away? Honey your friends will think that you’re some elementary school kid. Aren’t you worried what they might say?”

“No. Besides, Brian and I are not running away. We are *going* away for the summer. Of our own choosing. We’re going to Aunt Helen’s and Uncle Jack’s house in the islands.” Mom first opens, then shuts her mouth.

She needs some help with the next step. “Uncle Jack and Aunt Helen live on a beautiful Caribbean island for the summer. They don’t fight either.”

“Really?” asks Dad as if this is news. He knows where Aunt Helen and Uncle Jack live in the summer. At least he doesn’t quite reject my idea. “So you both want to leave

home for three whole months? Both of you forsaking your friends? What if they forget about you, Brian? Sarah, what if Bobby Jones falls in love with someone else?"

"His loss. Anyway, we will be the coolest kids in our class, getting to spend the summer on an *island*. And we can always stay connected to what's happening with our friends on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snap and the rest. It'll be like we never left, only we're too cool to stay here melting away our summer vacation in New York City."

The library in our house has walls covered with dark brown leather and the floors are dark hardwood; the furniture is red leather. It's like all this darkness sucks in the light. Mom's face is in shadow. Even so when she turns toward the lamp I can see the lines across her forehead.

Sarah breaks the silence, "It will be nice just laying out on the beach with no one telling us what to do and when to do it. I like Aunt Helen and Uncle Jack. They're so mellow."

Dad raises his eyebrows. Then he winks at me, "And Aunt Helen is beautiful. But then again, your mom is gorgeous. Bet you think I don't notice. But I do."

Sarah says, "Do you know why I never invite my friends over? It's because of all the tension here. Remember what happened at the Jonathon Club last Christmas?"

Mom's forehead wrinkles some more.

Sarah continues, "That was awful. The manager had to call security. Then you both kept yelling at each other while the valet was getting the car. Sarah shuts her eyes at the pain. "I never told you that someone—I never found out who—videoed your fight and sent it to the school list. Whatever it costs me, I will never risk such humiliation again. Never.

"So being out of the house for the summer beats being away from my friends every time. Besides, like I said, I'll stay in close touch on my cell."

My turn. "I already called Aunt Helen and told her about my idea."

"You did?" asks Dad. He seems surprised. "What'd Helen say?"

"She and Uncle Jack are cool with it. They both said that we need your permission. Uncle Jack even said he'd go to bat for us."

"The deal is done," says Sarah. "Aunt Helen and Uncle Jack already said yes."

Dad stops clenching his jaw. I take it as a sign of defeat.

Dad says, "Okay. We admire your initiative. But you two need to know some things before you make your final decision."

It can't be this easy. What's missing?

"Your Uncle Jack is a great guy," Mom begins, "I've known him for twenty years. He is a solid person and one in whose care I would trust you both for three months. Same with Helen. They said they're glad to have you."

"Wait," Sarah says. "You already talked with them?"

Mom laughs, "Of course, Honey. Helen and Jack both called us as soon as they got off the phone the first time Brian called begging for an invitation." Mom stops talking. "What? Every kid needs to understand that they're never smarter than their parents. And they won't be until they have their own kids. So, yes, we talked—several times, actually. They even flew in last week and spent a whole afternoon with us. Together we figured out what your summer vacation on the lovely island of St. Croix will consist of. We have planned the curriculum, the physical objectives. Everything. Day-by-day and with progress reports from you each week in the form of a video conference call with us."

Dad says, “There are some things you should know before you decide to go off and live with Jack and Helen for an entire summer—”

“So you were playing us all along?” I ask.

“You both seemed so pleased with yourselves,” Dad says, “I didn’t want to spoil your fun. You’re lucky you have relatives like Jack and Helen who can take three months off to go live on an island. Jack only does what he calls *odd jobs now and then* for the US government. His time is his own. Helen was the CEO of Taiko Automotive’s light truck division. That’s where they both met, by the way. She resigned that post but is still the board chair. She comes and goes as she pleases.”

Dad continues, “Thing is you two, my brother has skills and an extraordinary background that you don’t know much about—”

“Yeah,” says Sarah, “he was in the Navy or whatever—”

“Not just in the Navy. He was a SEAL. You know what those guys do, right? Jack is among the best in the world in certain... situations. He is an elite warrior. There is nothing combat related that your Uncle Jack cannot do and come out the winner. Nothing.

Sarah says, “I want to be Aunt Helen. She goes to all those famous parties in New York. She flies to Switzerland on a private jet to ski—”

Dad interrupts, “All that was once true about Helen. But since she and Jack have been married, you haven’t seen one newspaper or magazine photograph of her out partying with the *eliterati*, have you. She’s settled down. And by the way, Aunt Helen has an MBA from Stanford. Bet you didn’t know that. Your Uncle Jack has transferred some of his unique knowledge to Helen. Don’t let her knock-out looks and that sweet voice of hers suck you in. She’s as smart and deadly as Jack if it comes down to it.”

“Right. So we feel afraid?” asks Sarah now in her condescending voice.

Mom says, “No. Not afraid. But maybe feel very, very safe.”

“When Jack left the Navy,” Dad continues, “he went to work for the Securities Exchange Commission. He ran their Enforcement Division. You heard of the *Deadly Acceleration* incident two years ago at Taiko Motor Corporation? Where the terrorists used the cars as their weapon of choice? Your Uncle Jack took out the instigators. Saved thousands of lives. Then last year, there was the *God’s Banker* episode with the Vatican Bank. Only there they engineered a forced takeover of the entire Roman Catholic Church. Guess who saved the Pope? Your Uncle Jack. Double tap to their leader.” Dad taps a finger right in the middle of his forehead. “Jack won’t tell you, but I will. He accomplished both of those incredibly dangerous missions by killing people. He had no choice. These are the odd jobs he does for the US government.”

Mom takes over, “Another thing you two need to know. Jack and Helen are fanatics about the physical stuff—fitness, diet, conditioning. If you spend the summer with them, you will live the life they do.”

“Okay. So Brian and I know about their alpha personalities. We’ve talked with them at all the Thanksgiving dinners, Christmases, and New Years. We can handle them, don’t worry. I *am* sixteen years old.”

Dad gives that little chuckle of his when he thinks he knows better.

Mom says, “You both need to ask yourselves if you’re sure you want to leave your cushy life to go live on an island? It’s an important question. This will be totally different than anything you’ve ever experienced.

“It is Jack and Helen’s gift to you two. You will get the chance to look inside yourselves and see what you’re made of. If you’re unwilling to do that, then don’t go.”

Is my sister hearing this warning? I know Sarah. She’s already shrugged it off as Mom being overly protective. Sarah is already thinking about lying on a warm beach with the sun overhead. Who wouldn’t, right?

Mom says, “One thing for sure, you will return to New York both very different people than when you left. Better people, your dad and I think. That is why we agreed to let you both go to St. Croix. And why Jack and Helen have set aside their summer for you. We’re a family. Families do this for one another.”

Dad adds, “Truth is, I’d give my little finger to join you. I’ve always wanted to learn the stuff and do the things you will from the two people who just may be among the best qualified to teach it.”

“So that’s it? We can go?” I can’t believe how easy this was.

“Yes,” says Dad, “you can go. One last thing to keep in mind, *be careful what you wish for, you just may get it.*”

* * *

Chapter 2

We walk out of the arrival gate at King Airport, St. Thomas. Then smack. Aunt Helen is right there. She delivers a hug that says she sure isn’t like any older aunt. Aunt Helen is all tanned arms and long legs. Inside her embrace I feel the smooth silk of the thin, white sleeveless shirt she’s wearing. It ends a few inches above her red shorts. My aunt smells like warm flowers.

Uncle Jack sweeps us into a bear hug too. He says, “Good god, you both have grown. Sarah, you’re not so little anymore. Almost as tall as Helen. And my, my but you’re turning into one gorgeous young lady.”

This is the same guy who Dad says is such an elite warrior?

Aunt Helen pulls me into her again, saying, “I am so delighted to see you both.” She is Japanese-American, taller than me—at least 5-10. Mom calls her slender and physically fit beyond what any woman has any right to be. Aunt Helen is my idea of what every island goddess should be. Her short black hair sweeps around her beautiful, smiling face and ends just below her ears.

They’re a matched pair, my Aunt and Uncle. Jack is about 6-5 and solid muscle. Before we left New York Dad said he hadn’t told us even half the story about Uncle Jack. But that we would soon find out.

“Come on you two,” Jack says, “let’s grab your gear and get on with the rest of your escape from New York.”

“Are we taking the ferry to St. Croix?” asks Sarah, running to catch up on our way to the baggage claim carousel. That’s a first. Sarah never runs to catch up with anyone. She sort of just expects the world to move at whatever pace she chooses.

“Naw, hon,” Uncle Jack answers over his shoulder. He’s first to baggage claim. “Got something way cooler than a ferry boat.” We point at two bulging suitcases. Uncle Jack bicep curls them both off the carousel like they’re filled with nothing but air. “Come on you two, move out. Wind’s coming up. Water’s getting choppy.”

Uncle Jack leads the way out of the air-conditioned terminal toward the docks outside. King Airport is right on the western edge of St. Thomas. The bay is just a few yards from the terminal with docks for people who arrive by boat from the other islands. The sun reflects off the white concrete and gives a white-hot shimmer to everything. My t-shirt is already sticking to my back. Three boats bob at the docks. One’s a two-masted sailboat. One is a cabin cruiser probably used for fishing. And the last in line is a massive shiny black-hulled yacht. It takes up almost the rest of the dock. But we aren’t stopping at any of them.

“It’s a Turbin Mallard seaplane,” says Uncle Jack, tossing his head toward the very end of the dock. “Got her six months ago.”

Sure enough, through the sunny, white glare I see it. Tied to the dock is this huge seaplane painted shiny white with aqua and yellow stripes running in waves along its sides. “Wow,” is all I can say.

Uncle Jack pulls a key fob from his pocket. He points it at the seaplane and the hatch door pops open and rises. He hefts our baggage and climbs inside. I follow. Uncle Jack stows our bags in the back then says, “Sarah, you and Helen have eight seats to chose from. Sit wherever you want. Brian you’re flying copilot,” he calls back as he enters the cockpit. He points to the right side seat. “Careful with your feet. Don’t kick anything vital.”

“Buckle up Brian,” Uncle Jack orders almost before I settle into my seat. I’m getting that when Uncle Jack orders you to do something, it isn’t a suggestion and he means right now. He reaches over, pulling my two shoulder straps down and snaps them into my four-way lap belt connector. Then he cinches down the straps.

“So you won’t be thrown around on take off in this choppy water. Here put these on.” He holds out a pair of headphones.

I immediately hear Uncle Jack’s electronic voice. “Our preflight checklist,” he says handing over a 5X7 plastic laminated card. “Read off each item and wait until I say ‘*check*’ before moving on. And Brian, don’t skip any item.”

I read the checklist and watch as Uncle Jack’s hands fly over the switches. He checks the readings in the three flat panel displays in the cockpit for some items as I read them. For each one he says, ‘*check*’.

Suddenly the left engine begins to make a whooshing sound like a vacuum cleaner. Its propeller begins turning. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. The whoosh turns into a roar that grows into thunder. Then the right engine does the same.

Jack’s voice comes through my headphones. “Brian, please look out your window and make sure the crew untied the two lines holding us fast to the dock, will you?”

I watch the Military Channel so I know how they talk. “Dock lines secure,” I say.

Like he was expecting it, Jack’s calm and casual voice instantly comes through my headphones, “Roger, dock lines secure.” Then he dumps me to talk with the control tower off in the shimmering distance. That’s what Sarah and I like about Uncle Jack and Aunt Helen. They don’t treat us like little kids. They expect us to behave as adults. When we do, they don’t make a big deal about it, just accept it and move on.

Uncle Jack's tanned and huge right hand gently pushes the throttle levers forward and the two engines roar even louder. He turns the control wheel left and the flying boat eases away from the dock. Uncle Jack's seaplane begins taxiing out toward a line of orange buoys that define the seaplane runway. You want cool? This beats cool by a factor of ten.

Taking off in a seaplane is bumpy. Really bumpy. I'm glad Uncle Jack cinched me into my seat. The water is choppy. It throws us around pretty good until we gain enough speed to lift off. Out of my cockpit window is St. Thomas harbor and King Airport as they fall away behind us. We climb into the clear blue sky.

"Flight time to St. Croix will be about 25 minutes," says Uncle Jack. "Enjoy the ride."

I speak into the microphone in front of my mouth, "Roger that. Just tell me what to do."

This stops Uncle Jack. He turns to look at me through those steely blue eyes, his square chin jutting out. Then his face breaks into a big, wide grin. "Got me there, Brian. Like I said, you just sit there and enjoy the ride. Let me do the flyin' today, huh?"

"How far is your house from the airport?"

The big guy laughs behind his microphone. "No airport, Brian. We land the same way we take off—on the water. We'll set down right near Bartholomew's Cove and taxi to our dock. Nothing to it. You'll see."

Back in the main cabin Aunt Helen and Sarah are talking. Well, Sarah is doing most of the talking. Aunt Helen just nods, sometimes pointing out the window at the little islands and some of the boats whizzing by beneath our wings. Funny, Sarah never talks with such enthusiasm to Mom. I feel it too. Neither Uncle Jack nor Aunt Helen are our parents. Makes all the difference.

We fly over the blue waters of the Caribbean. If you look straight down, the water is so clear, you can see the shadows of the boats on the bottom. In the coves and inlets the land blocks the wind so there's no chop with white caps. Just a smooth, glassy surface.

Jack's voice suddenly erupts in my headphones, "Okay Brian, we're coming closer to St. Croix. There'll be some traffic up here. Your job is to scan the airspace. Point out any air traffic to me and make sure I see it. Tell me where on the clock face it is and in what direction it's heading. Let me show you. See that twin engine Beechcraft off to our right side? That target is at our three o'clock, heading 88 degrees east. You know it's east by the heading indicator on your instrument panel just to the right of your control yoke. It's the dial with the airplane on it. The nose of the airplane is fixed and the heading degrees rotate around it as we turn. The degrees go clockwise around the dial from zero at north to 90 due east and so on back to 360. Got it?"

Uncle Jack's instructions come fast and precise. He expects me to get it the first time. "Got it," I confirm back. Here's the heading indicator I'm looking at:



I am not about to disappoint Jack. I madly scan the sky around us for any traffic. If there is a bogie out there I'm going to find it. I soon learn it's easier to see the planes just below the horizon when they are against the blue ocean. "Bogie at our ten o'clock heading..." I look down at the heading indicator on the instrument panel, "west, 2-8-Zero degrees." I point my finger right at the plane and hold it there.

"Bogie at 2-8-Zero, roger," confirms Jack. Then, "Good work, Brian. *Excellent* work. I didn't notice him until you spoke up."

Over the next ten minutes I spot five more airplanes near us and point out each one to Uncle Jack. We're a team. Pilot and copilot. We fly around the island of St. Croix. The shallow water near the island is this beautiful blue. It gets lighter as it becomes shallower and runs up onto the sand. Uncle Jack gently pushes his control column forward and we begin descending. He points at the altimeter on the instrument panel.

"Tell me when we reach 3,000 feet, please," he orders.

I watch the hands on the altimeter dial turn steadily counter clockwise as we drop from 5,000 feet. We reach 4,000 feet, 3,800 feet, 3,200 feet. "Coming to 3,000 feet," I say.

"Coming to 3,000, roger," Uncle Jack replies and pulls back on the control column. He makes a right turn and we head toward the east end of the island. I can tell from the heading indicator as the dial spins, then stops with the east indicator on the nose of the airplane. This isn't so hard. Then I notice all the other dials and gauges on the three flat panel displays. You probably have to learn how to read each one and know what it tells you, just like my heading indicator. Forget what I said before. This is hard. We continue flying over roads and some fields with crops growing in them.

"Brian, look straight down. That's Bartholomew's Cove. Our house is there. See it?"

We zoom over the cove. It is beautiful. The water is flat calm inside the cove—like a sheet of glass. And so clear I can see the ocean bottom. What's this? There's a sunken ship right there in the cove off the dock. It's just sitting there plain as day. Whoa. I look back to Sarah and Aunt Helen. Sarah sees it too because she is pointing and nodding. She lifts her head and looks straight at me. Then she gives me the thumbs up. This is Sarah happy. Right then I figure I made the right decision getting us an invitation to spend the summer here. Or had I? *Be careful what you wish for...*

Uncle Jack continues the gentle right turn and we zoom over the water again. He pushes the control column forward some more and we descend.

"Landing strip buoys in sight," I say into my microphone. This is so awesome. My first ever seaplane landing and I am the copilot.

"Roger, buoys. Thank you, First Officer."

Down we glide. The engine roar now sounds like just a dull rumble. Down, down we go. The more altitude we lose, the faster it seems the water rushes up to us.

Suddenly Uncle Jack pulls back on the control column, pushes the twin throttles forward and the plane's descent slows as the nose comes up and the windshield fills with blue sky.

"Flaring now," his voice comes through my headphones. Then he pulls back on the throttles and we skim onto the water's surface.

The first bump is pretty gentle as the plane settles onto the water. Then it gets really bumpy before we lose enough speed. Water splashes outside the windows. Finally we come to a stop. The plane sits there, rocking like a boat. Uncle Jack pushes the throttles forward and the engines roar again. He taxis us into the cove, toward the island and the dock.

"Thanks for the help, Brian," he says. "You're an excellent First Officer and copilot. Quick on the uptake. Talk when necessary and quiet the rest of the time. Just how I like it. We're in Round Bay right now, heading for Lime Tree Cove where we make a quick right turn into Bartholomew's Cove. That's where we live."

* * *

Chapter 3

The shrill whistle slices through my sleep. I wake up shaking. Who wouldn't?

"GET UP, GET UP, GET UP," shouts Uncle Jack as he marches into my room. A man as big as Uncle Jack can make a lot of noise. From beneath my warm covers I watch him move further into my room. Now his hulking silhouette covers the window and the moon's silvery light.

Next door Aunt Helen is doing the same to Sarah. I'm too stunned to move. With a single yank, Jack strips all the covers off my bed. The cool night air floods over me. Instant goose bumps. "Move, Brian. We're burnin' daylight."

But it's still dark outside. Irrelevant. When my Uncle Jack yells, *MOVE*, I'm not one to argue. I leap from the bed.

Uncle Jack continues shouting, "You have five minutes to make your bed, climb into your running gear and meet me out back. You WILL NOT be late." I see the glowing hands of the divers watch he's holding in front of my face. "GO." Then he's gone to help with Sarah.

I can't remember moving so fast. My bed is done. Not the best job. Adequate will have to work. Then I jump into my running shorts, socks, and Nikes, and sprint toward the backdoor, pulling my T-shirt over my head. My feet skid to a stop on the dewy back lawn. A cough sticks in my throat as I inhale the rough, saltwater smell of Bartholomew's Cove. What have I have gotten us into?

Uncle Jack is already here, looking at his diver's watch, its luminous hands glowing in the dark.

"Time. Five seconds to spare. Not bad. Know this, Brian: Early is on time; on time is late. Where's Sarah?"

Sarah? "Uh, dunno."

His great tanned, bald head turns my way so that his full gaze now has me squarely in his sights. "You mean, *I don't know, Sir*. We speak in complete sentences here on my

island. You are telling me that you do not know where your teammate is? THAT-IS-WHAT-YOU-ARE-TELLING-ME?" Uncle Jack says each word clearly, precisely and very loudly.

I catch the Sir part. "Yes, Sir. I cannot say where Sarah is, Sir."

His voice suddenly becomes threateningly low, "Then Brian you had better go find her and get the two of your young butts out here on the double. We only succeed as team and it works the other way too."

I find Sarah in her room dressed except for her Nikes. She is tying her left shoe. I throw myself to the floor and begin tying her right. All the while, my once-sweet Aunt Helen is complaining—in a very loud voice—about the way Sarah has made her bed. Out of the corner of my eye I see Aunt Helen rip the sheet off of one corner and quickly, but expertly fold it into what she says is a proper naval corner.

"I can see that we have some additional instruction due after PT," Aunt Helen says.

Shoes tied. "Get up and get out to the back yard," I say to Sarah.

"Brian what's going on?" she asks.

I grab her hand and pull her up. "All I know is that we had better do exactly what Uncle Jack says."

She yanks her hand free of mine and grabs her cell phone off the bedside table. We both run out to the grassy back yard with Aunt Helen on our heels yelling for us to, "MOVE, MOVE, MOVE."

"Ah, there you two are," says Uncle Jack. "Finally. And after six and one half minutes on a five-minute drill. What do you two have to say for yourselves as the sun begins rising on what promises to be a fine day here on me island, argh, argh."

I speak before Sarah can open her sassy mouth. "Sir, we have no excuse and we will do better tomorrow."

He walks between us, around us, behind us and finally comes to a stop in front of us. "Helen, how do their beds look?" he says without his eyes ever leaving us.

Aunt Helen, my sweet Aunt Helen says, "Their beds look appalling. Miserable. Like they did not take the time to do the job right. I would not allow Carrie or Dove to sleep in either one."

I steal a sideways glance at Carrie and Dove, their two Labrador retrievers laying on the grass beside Aunt Helen, eagerly wagging their tails. As if they know what's coming and can't wait.

Sugarland's Stuck Like Glue—Sarah's latest cell phone ring tone. "Took you long enough, Ashley—"

"May I have that cell phone, Sarah," demands Aunt Helen.

"No," says Sarah and turns her back. "...Nobody. So, did you and Danny finally—"

"Now," insists Aunt Helen. She steps toward Sarah and snatches her cell phone from her hand. Sarah lunges, raising her hand to grab it. Aunt Helen puts a straight arm into her chest. Then Aunt Helen says, "Hi Ashley? Yeah, it's Helen, Sarah's aunt—"

"Oh my God," screeches Ashley. "Aunt Helen? It's really you? Sarah has told us all about you. The New York party scene. The Clubs. The art shows and openings. Getting arrested for drunk and disorderly. That is so cool."

“Yeah Ashley, it’s me alright. And that is not something I am especially proud of. I’ve since matured. Listen, sweetie, Sarah is really busy at the moment. I’m afraid she won’t be returning your call. At least not for the rest of the summer—”

“What? But I *so* need to talk to her. This is *super* important.”

“Sorry, Ashley. But there’s good news. When you see Sarah again, she’ll be a changed person. She’ll be awesome. Trust me. Bye.” Aunt Helen presses the *End* button and puts the phone in her pocket.

Sarah says, “Give back my phone. I have important calls to make. People need to reach me. I want my cell phone back. Right friggin’ now.”

“You *want* your cell phone back? *Now?*”

“Yeah. Immediately.”

“Why?” asks Helen. She steps to within three inches of Sarah.

“It’s my cell phone,” Sarah shrieks, not moving.

“My island. My rules,” says Helen.

“You have no right to take my property. I am your guest on this island, not your prisoner.”

“Is that all you got—that it’s yours and I have no rights?”

“I already told you if you were listening. My peeps need to reach me.”

“Which people? And why do they need to reach you?” asks Helen.

Sarah takes a step back. Helen advances so the same bare three inches separate them. “Which people, Sarah?”

“My friends. My friends need to be able to reach me. There’s Ashley whom you’ve already embarrassed me in front of. Brittany. Noriko. I have a wide circle of friends. This might take a while.”

“Why? Why must they reach you?”

Sarah sweeps a strand of dark blonde hair off her forehead, tucks it back behind her ear. “Because. They just need to reach me.”

“Your folks tell me that you want to be treated like an adult,” says Helen. “Okay then, let’s have an adult conversation. About a cell phone. Here on my island. So Ashley, Brittany, and Noriko can reach you. What would you talk about on this cell phone of yours while on my island?”

“Why are you behaving like this to me?” Sarah screams at Aunt Helen.

“Sweetie, keep that up and you’ll scare the birds on this beautiful tropical island morning. But you won’t scare me. Some parents give their kids cell phones so they can call 911 in case of emergency. That doesn’t apply here on St. Croix. It’s the safest island in the entire Virgin Island chain. We know all the police officers and they know us. Besides, I imagine if you’re ever in trouble here, Jack and I will be right there at your side. But don’t worry sweetie, you can have your cell phone back when you leave in three months.”

“Oh? Like that’s—”

“Yes, Sarah? Is there something unclear about this conversation? No cell phones? Retrieval when you leave? What have I failed to properly explain, Sarah?”

“This is so unfair,” Sarah screams again and actually stamps her feet. “You were our favorite relatives. Now...now you are being impossible. Rude to my friends even. I thought this was going to be the most super vacation ever. Now look. I’m awake before

the sun is even up. You took my cell phone. How will I know what happens with my friends? What is this about?"

"You don't know?" asks Helen.

"It is about you confiscating my cell phone."

"No, Honey. It is not about something so trivial as your cell phone. Or even your momentary embarrassment with Ashley."

"What then?"

"This is about control. I have it. You don't. But you have the opportunity to earn it back. Only this time for good. So no one can ever take it from you."

Aunt Helen turns her back on Sarah. She steps forward on the wet grass overlooking the cove and says to us, "Yes, this turn of events might appear somewhat...confusing. Is that how you'd put it, Jack? Confusing?"

They're both in this together and working as a tag-team. Usually Sarah or I can drive a wedge between our parents. It weakens them. That doesn't seem possible now with Uncle Jack and Aunt Helen as tight as they are. Our lifeline just ripped right out of our hands and we're going under.

"Hmmm," Uncle Jack's voice rumbles. "Confusing? Maybe to a dim-witted dullard without a brain in his or her head. But that is not the situation with our niece and nephew here, is it?"

Silence. We have a standoff.

Then Uncle Jack's voice thunders, "WELL IS IT?"

I hate being yelled at. I've seen movies about the Marines. The drill instructors in those movies always scare me. I say, "No, Sir."

Aunt Helen turns her back on me. She says, "Jack, did you hear a little mouse squeak? I could swear I heard a tiny mouse squeak."

"Might have been a very small mouse, Helen. Let's try again. "ARE YOU BOTH DIM-WITTED DULLARDS WITHOUT A BRAIN IN YOUR HEADS? WELL ARE YOU?"

Sarah and I both yell, "No, Sir!"

"Well, Helen I think I heard a little something that time. But I-STILL-CANNOT-HEAR YOU."

This time Sara and I both scream at the top of our lungs, "NO, SIR!"

For the first time so far, both of them smile. It is quick. Out here on the grass overlooking the cove, in the half-light before dawn I might be mistaken. Call me hopeful.

Then Uncle Jack faces us both and says, "Helen is wise about many things. But this in particular. The summer vacation you now face will change both your lives. And you will come off this island a changed and improved person, just like Helen told Ashley on your contraband cell phone that she so correctly confiscated. That I can guarantee." But even Jack did not know how right his words would turn out to be.

"Why are we doing all these exercises?" asks Sarah between gasps for breath. We have just run two miles toward the western part of the island. With its rolling hills sloping down toward the beach, the island no longer seems so beautiful. Especially when you have to run up the hills, over their rocky spines, then down their steep backsides. The

powdery sand that looks so nice on the beaches gets stuck in your running shoes in the hills and bogs you down so it seems like you're running in mud.

All four of them—Jack, Helen, Dove, and Carrie—are breathing easy, not sweating at all. Well, maybe Carrie is panting a little. But she's eight, that's fifty-six years old in dog years.

Helen hears everything. She heard Sarah's question and says, "It's called PT—physical training. It is something we do every day. You are invited to join us."

This seems one invitation we cannot refuse. Unless we want Uncle Jack to scream at us to GET UP, GET UP, GET UP.

Aunt Helen continues, "As your endurance improves and you lose weight we'll make it more challenging so no one gets bored."

"Weight?" exclaims Sarah. "What about weight? Whose weight?"

"Get moving," announces Jack. "One more mile. We'll talk on the run."

Uncle Jack leads us into a forest of short trees.

He says, "You didn't think I would just take you two without first talking to your folks did you? I was blunt and asked some tough questions of your mom and dad. You won't like some of what was said.

"First, there's friction in your house. No more than most with growing kids. Both of you are part of the cause. Sarah, you ignore your dad. When he tries speaking to you, you get on your cell phone with your friends. He's frustrated with you. That's what the ban on cell phones is about. I understand why you're punishing him. You think he's neglecting you."

Jack is in the lead, running while talking as easily as if we were in the living room. Aunt Helen brings up the rear so no one can lag behind. My lungs are burning and my legs feel like rubber. Budget cuts at my school last year eliminated PE classes. I am so far out of shape it's not funny—*seriously not funny now*. We're running inland again, up into more hills. The air is warmer as we climb and the sun rises ahead of us. It gives a red glow that spreads over the ocean's horizon. From up here the coast curves around to form crescent-shaped Bartholomew's Cove below. The sun is just high enough to throw its light into the lagoon. But as I'm running and looking out at the lagoon I stumble over a tree root growing in the trail and go down in the hard-packed sand.

"What's up, Brian," asks Aunt Helen as she comes up behind me and stops. She offers her hand.

"Thanks," I say, letting her haul me to my feet. "I was looking down at the rather than the trail." I point at Bartholomew's Cove. "I saw that sunken ship when we flew over it yesterday. She's beautiful."

"Yes," says Helen. "That's the wreck of the *Merryweather*. She's our own man-made reef. Jack and I bought her and sunk her there three years ago. We wanted a place for the fish to live and something interesting to dive on. So, you've discovered that our island is not all beauty. It can bite you if you're not watching. Hey, we'd better stop gazing at the scenery and catch up to Jack and Sarah. I'll tell you all about *Merryweather* later today. Promise. And I'll take care of that knee you just scraped."

It takes us ten minutes to close the distance between Jack and Sarah. The brief rest helped. My legs still feel rubbery, but at least I'm not gasping for breath. By now my shirt is soaked from the humidity.

“So there you both are,” says Jack. “I was just telling Sarah that your dad admitted he travels too much on business and keeps too long hours.”

“Yeah,” says Sarah, “but when he is home, he’s thinking about work, not about us. He’s not present in the moment.” Those long legs of Sarah’s are coming in handy. She’s got a rhythm going and doesn’t seem to have any problem keeping up with Uncle Jack.

Aunt Helen says, “Your dad heard you loud and clear, Sweetie. We know all about your conversation with your parents. They’re going to counseling during the summer while you’re away.”

“Marriage counseling?” asks Sarah.

“I think that may be part of it,” answers Helen. “But what they really want is to learn how to deal with you two on a level playing field. You both have them confused and it’s driving them crazy. All four of you are highly intelligent people. You’ll figure it out.”

Then Sarah says, “I am not fat.”

Helen replies, “It’s nothing personal. By the standards of the American Board of Pediatrics, a 16 year-old girl of your height should weigh 13 pounds less than you do right now. And your body is soft. That’s why we took your height and weight measurements, and measured your waists before we began PT this morning. I wrote everything down for both of you. We’ll chart your progress. And there *will* be progress. You’ll see. And your bodies will firm up too.”

Jack says, “Within four weeks, 30 days, you both will be down to the weight you need to be. All it takes is exercise and diet. We’ll show you.”

Speaking of diet, I realize that I am starving. We didn’t have breakfast before PT. For dinner last night, they grilled a grouper Uncle Jack caught in the lagoon out back, mixed a salad and for desert we had fruit. What’s up with that? I usually have ice cream after dinner at a minimum. My body must be feeding on itself. By now we’ve looped back toward the grassy back yard where our run began. Finally the end is in sight. It couldn’t have come sooner.

“Shoes, socks and shirts off,” orders Helen. I see that she has already taken off her shirt and running shorts so all that remains are her sports bra and bikini bottoms. She did that while barely stopping her run. Her six-pack ab muscles ripple on her tanned, flat belly. Her shoulders look like steel. And the muscles in her arms don’t jiggle underneath like mom’s do. Aunt Helen is in amazing shape. And Jack? Whew. Without his shirt, he looks like some body builder, except not so bulked up.

“We’re swimming out to the platform,” Helen says as she knifes into the water and is off like a shot. She’s using some kind of a power stroke as she accelerates toward the middle of the cove.

Jack grabs the line attached to a paddleboard. I hear him whistle to Carrie and Dove. They both leap into the water, then jump on the paddleboard and lay down. Jack hitches their doggie life vests on them both then begins swimming and pulling the paddleboard behind him. He’s pulling at least 100 pounds of dog on that paddleboard. I follow them. The water is warm—must be at least 80 degrees. But that platform we’re heading toward—it looks at least two football fields away. Within 20 yards Sarah splashes past me. She is a better swimmer than me. I’m okay with it. Really. With every stroke of this painful swim I think of one thing—breakfast.

I try every stroke I know—crawl, breast, back—nothing seems to make me go any faster. I’m twenty yards behind Sara and she’s another twenty yards behind Uncle Jack

and the dogs. From out here I see Aunt Helen reach the platform first. It's the one I saw yesterday that sits over the sunken shipwreck in the middle of the Cove. I flip over on my stomach and swim while watching as she easily levers herself up and over the edge. She sits on the deck, then gathers her legs under her and stands. Now she's squeezing water from her short, black hair with the rising sun casting its glow over her. Another two minutes and I finally reach the platform.

“Nicely done,” Jack calls down to Sarah and I. We're both still in the water, catching our breath. Then he reaches down and pulls us both up like we weigh nothing. Carrie and Dove take turns licking both of our faces in welcome.

Once I'm finally breathing normally, I look around. From out here in the middle of the lagoon, the cove curves around like a perfect sliver of moon. A little ways down from the dock outside the house is another dock where Jack keeps the beautiful Mallard seaplane we flew in on yesterday. It's tied up along side its dock, waiting for our next flight.

I ask Uncle Jack, “This isn't all about losing a few pounds. What else?”

Jack says, “Sir—what else, Sir.” Your parents don't think you show the respect others deserve. One way you will begin showing respect is by addressing anyone older than you as Sir and Ma'am. Answers will be, yes, sir, no sir and yes ma'am, no ma'am. You will show respect to everyone unless and until they prove that they do not deserve your respect. Have I earned your respect?”

Neither Sarah nor I hesitate. “YES, SIR!” we both yell at the top of our lungs.

Helen says, “There are a few other life skills you will leave this island with. There's one—after we get you into proper physical shape—that's right beneath you.” She points over the side of the platform. The water is so clear I can see the sunken ship Aunt Helen and I talked about on our run. From the platform we're standing on, just a few feet off the water, I can see how big it is—at least 100 feet long. And sleek—pointed bow, wider in the middle, then tapered toward the back. There are old machine guns mounted on both sides and a huge gun on a turret sitting on the front deck. The ship's smoke stack rises to within ten feet or so of the surface. There's pink, white, and purple coral growing all over the ship. And there are fish. Hundreds of colorful fish. Some big, some small swim all around it. Would I ever like to go down there to see it up close.

“We're going to get you licensed and certified as advanced open water divers,” says Helen. That training will take about a week and will begin as soon as you are physically fit. We do not want you drowning here in our lagoon because you used to eat too much.”

So that's it, lose the weight, get in shape and they'll teach us to dive. I really want to see that ship up close. Seems like a fair trade. At least we have a goal now for this diet and exercise routine. I've always thought that I could endure just about anything as long as I had a worthwhile goal.

Then both Jack and Helen dive back into the water with Carrie and Dove following. Jack helps both dogs onto the paddleboard and they set off back to shore. The platform is out in the middle of Bartholomew's Cove. No way back to shore except the way we came. I dive in with Sarah right behind me. This time, she will not beat me. I am sure breakfast awaits.

Aunt Helen has set towels by the back door for us. Sarah and I dry off and walk into the kitchen. Helen is busy loading the blender. Uncle Jack says, “Since this is your first day, Helen offered to make breakfast. I will make lunch; all four of us will make dinner. Beginning tomorrow, we will alternate galley duties. Sarah makes breakfast, Brian makes lunch, and all four of us do dinner. He or she who didn’t make the meal volunteers to clean up. Questions?”

I have already slumped down at the kitchen table overlooking the blue waters of the cove outside. I take a breath, about to speak.

“Is there anything unclear about what I just said, Brian?”

“No sir. But may I please have a follow-up?”

“Go ahead.”

“Sir, I was wondering how do we know what to make?”

While Aunt Helen continues cutting up oranges, strawberries, bananas and apples and puts them into her huge blender she says, “A fair question, my brilliant nephew. I will leave you a note telling you what is on the menu. And either Jack or I will be here to supervise and teach.”

Then Jack’s jaw juts out and his forehead wrinkles. “Guys, know this: Neither Helen nor I will ever put you into a situation you are not prepared to handle. It may not seem like it sometimes, but you are about to amaze yourselves at your own capabilities and resilience. And we’ll always be there to lend a hand if needed.”

“Sarah whines. “But Mom always cooks for us.”

“Aye, me hearties,” says Uncle Jack in a low, guttural pirate’s voice, “that would be this life lesson—how to feed yourself and your lads. ‘Tis one of many life skills you’ll be leavin’ me island with. Argh. Argh.”

That’s the second time Uncle Jack has spoken Pirate. He’s not bad. I finish the bottle of water he set at all of our places. I watch Aunt Helen, still busy at the blender. Now she’s tearing spinach and kale leaves and tossing them in too. Finally she drops some seeds in, pours more orange juice on top of everything, and hits the switch. After thirty seconds or so, she stops the machine and pours the thick, green mixture into four huge milkshake cups. Jack hands them out to us.

“Drink up everyone,” says Helen from her cutting board. “By the time you go to sleep tonight you will have taken in about 3,000 calories and expended over 4,000. Your food intake will consist of 50% carbohydrates, 30% protein, and 20% fats. Most of those carbs will come from fruits and vegetables rather than from animals.”

I drink my shake and watch Aunt Helen busily cracking eight eggs on the flat counter top, then separating the yolks from the egg whites by pouring them between the two eggshell halves. She throws the yolks down the disposal and puts the whites in a large pan. Then she throws in red, green and yellow peppers and turkey pieces she had cut up, stops for a second to down the rest of her shake, and finally sprinkles some seasonings from bottles she has there beside her pan. It doesn’t take long before the mixture is bubbling and rising up past the lip of the pan.

“Done,” she says after another few minutes of cooking. “You are about to experience Helen’s breakfast frittata.” She cuts it into four pieces and places them on plates. Uncle Jack grabs the plates and sets them on the table.

The truth is that this tastes like the best breakfast ever. I know it sounds awful, right? But I am the one who ran three miles, swam 500 yards, and struggled through warm-up

exercises. When you work that hard for food, anything tastes great. Even Sarah didn't complain for once. I notice she ate every scrap on her plate too.

"What about Carrie and Dove?" asks Sarah. "They need breakfast too."

I watch both Helen and Jack stop eating and smile at each other as if Sarah thinking about someone else is a private joke. Jack says, "They each get one cup of kibble from their bag in the closet there with some beans and carrots from the freezer. Be sure their water dish is filled with fresh, cold water."

Sarah jumps up from her chair. Amazing, in itself. "Come on, ladies," she says. "Time for breakfast." Sarah has never lifted a finger for anyone, let alone a dog. Totally all about herself all the time.

We finish breakfast. Sarah and I clear the table and begin washing the dishes. I wash; Sarah dries what doesn't go into the dishwasher. I ask, "What's with all the yelling at us?"

Jack and Helen sit at the kitchen table. Jack says, "Always knew you were a smart 12 year-old, Brian. Here's the deal on the yelling. It's part of breaking you both down, first physically, then mentally. Similar to what the military does to their recruits. You yell for no other reason than we demand it. Every time you yell an answer or address us as sir or ma'am you give a little more of yourselves to us. Soon we'll have a blank slate to work with and we'll build you back up again. This time stronger and much better. It works, trust me."

"Please put my frittata pan in the oven to dry, Sarah," says Aunt Helen. "Another thing that we require is for you two to become each other's partners. Swim buddies, dive buddies, running buddies. We want you to depend on one another for physical help as well as mental and emotional assistance as you evolve through the various stages we and your folks have planned for you. You'll look out for each other in all circumstances. You'll succeed only as a team."

Uncle Jack says, "Brian saw that first thing this morning when I yelled at him for not knowing where Sarah was. Remember? It's the team concept. You both are a team. You're part of a slightly larger team that we four compose. As you two help each other succeed and as we help you, bonding occurs. There are no stronger bonds than those forged through struggling to accomplish what seems the impossible."

Sarah hands over the large bowl from the blender for me to dry. She asks, "Sir, or ma'am or whatever, what are these stages that you think we're participating in as partners. Personally, I would do better at almost anything if I didn't have to drag a 12 year-old behind me."

That stings.

Jack says, "Your strengths become your buddy's, Sarah. It works the other way too. You can share your buddy's strengths and make them your own. As for activities, we'll be hiking a little, maybe doing some running. Helen's a great chef. She'll show you how to cook. We live in this beautiful cove, so there will probably be some swimming, some diving. We have a shooting range here, so maybe we'll teach you to shoot. There's the Mallard seaplane, so perhaps you'll learn a little about flying. That sort of thing." This is actually Uncle Jack-speak for a high intensity training course.

* * *

Chapter 4

“What do you think, Brian?” asks Jack, pulling the world’s ugliest fish to the surface. Five days on the island, running, swimming, cooking, and calling them *ma’am* and *sir*. And *now* he’s asking my opinion? I call that progress.

We’re treading water in the lagoon about 50 yards off shore. “What is it?” I ask.

“Hogfish. Really a great eating white fish. Delicate flavor that works perfectly with all sorts of other ingredients. Sarah and Helen thought a hogfish would be good in the low fat Newburg they’re making for dinner.”

I put my face back into the water, looking through my dive mask, breathing through my snorkel, and easily kicking my fins like Jack and Helen showed us. The stuff they’ve taught us in such a short time on the island is amazing. Jack sticks the fat hogfish—a five pounder at least—into the game bag attached to his diver’s belt, closes the opening and pulls his spear from the fish and the bag all in one smooth motion. We fin back to the dock.

We put our fins, masks, and snorkels into the soaking tub filled with fresh water and move over to the outdoor kitchen in the shady part of the dock. I know what comes next. The rule is that he (or she) who catches the fish—or in my case, helps catch the fish—cleans the fish. Helen taught me. After three tries, it got easier. I grab the fish boning knife. It takes me just three quick slices. I cut the length of Mr. Hogfish’s belly. Then I cut off his head and tail. I reach my fingers inside and yank out his slimy guts. Sarah said, ‘eeewww,’ the first time she did it. But now she cleans fish as good as me. I slice off the skin on both filets, rinse them under the faucet, and then wrap them in wet paper towels.

Jack takes the cleaned fish filets. “I’ll run these up to the kitchen. You clean up here and wait for me. Be right back. We have about thirty minutes free time before dinner. I have something special to show you.”

“Okay, now swim toward me,” says Jack. I’m just twenty yards out treading water. Jack stands in water up to his waist. I don’t know what he has in mind. But neither am I so afraid of the unknown. I think that maybe it’s because I’ve survived so many things already. Everything Jack and Helen do has a purpose. I kick and begin swimming. It only takes me fifteen strokes to reach Uncle Jack.

“Not bad, Brian. But—”

“But? But what? I can swim now better than I ever could.”

“True. But aren’t you getting tired of Sarah always beating you?”

“She’s just a better swimmer. I accept it.”

“Not so fast, Brian. It always pays to be a winner. Sarah is just a more *efficient* swimmer than you. That’s all. What would you say if I told you I can make you into an efficient combat swimmer who’s faster than just about anyone in the water?”

“We’re only here for three months.”

He looks at his diver’s watch. That is the coolest watch ever. Helen has one too. “We now have 25 minutes,” he says. “Still time enough. Listen up...”

I always thought the sidestroke was for sissies. Wrong. The SEALs use a type of sidestroke that is lightning fast and so efficient it seems you can swim forever without getting tired. Right there in water reaching up to my shoulders Jack shows me the scissors kick and the powerful downward arm motion first with my leading arm, then next with my trailing arm. This is the combat swimmer's stroke. Here's the YouTube link showing what I'm doing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IUHudMN1TU>.

At the end of 20 minutes Jack says, "Good enough for an initial assessment." In seconds he's back standing in shallow water, leaving me floating out here.

"Okay Brian," Jack calls to me, "now swim toward me. Don't sprint, just swim like I taught you."

I start from 20 yards out in the lagoon. My first scissors kick doesn't sync up with my stroke. I don't move very far. But then the next one does. So does the next and the next. In just five strokes I am standing on the bottom right in front of Jack. He grabs me in a bear hug. "You're a natural combat swimmer. Outstanding work, young man." He lifts me out of the water and launches me high and out into the lagoon like dad did when I was a kid.

I come up and take a breath trying to be cool as I tread water. Truth is I'm so excited at this small victory I can't stand it. And I want to remember forever how it feels having this incredible man's complete attention and approval. Then I add earning Jack's respect to my list of goals before leaving St. Croix.

"Hey, Brian. It feels like you lost some weight too."

"Seven pounds so far. Just six more to go."

"Down hill from here, Brian. Down hill from here. You'll make your target weight ahead of schedule. Let's go chow down. You earned it."

Before Jack was even out of the water, I have swum into shore. I race right past him toward the back door. My Uncle Jack never leaves a challenge unanswered. Five more steps and his feet are pounding right behind me. I am sprinting with everything I have. My lungs burn and my legs ache. Then he roars right past me. I'm not quitting though. Jack wouldn't like that. From the first day and everyday since, they both tell us that quitting is never, ever something we consider. Never. So I keep running. By the end of the day, there's not much left. But I'm giving it everything I have. I watch Jack run. Head up and level, arms pumping, legs churning and feet that almost never seem to touch the ground. Everything in perfect sync. He's leaning against the door when I finally pull up. I bend over and with my hands on my knees to catch my breath, I say, "Tomorrow, you teach me to run like that."

Jack grabs my right hand and pulls me up to face him, "That will be my honor."

I take the few remaining minutes before dinner call to sit on the porch. Dove comes over, lies down beside me, and puts her head in my lap. Dove seems to have picked me as her favorite. Carrie and Sarah seem to be a pair too. Before bedtime, both dogs come in to visit first Sarah, then me. Every night they jump up on my bed, wait for me to scratch behind their ears. They each give my hand a lick, then leave for Helen and Jack's room where their dog beds are. The coolest dogs ever. My sister would definitely agree. There

are quite a few cool things here on St. Croix. But maybe the coolest are the incredible things Jack and Helen are teaching us.

There are lots of rules here. But one really helps me and Sarah. It comes at the end of every day. After the kitchen is cleaned and made ready for tomorrow and after we've brushed teeth and taken showers but before we go to bed, we have a meeting. Helen calls it family time. She and Jack, Carrie and Dove, me and Sarah. Usually, it's out on the veranda facing the ocean so we can watch the cruise ships passing by.

During the last part of every family gathering we both explain what we learned that day. Sarah and I don't always learn the same things on the same day. Jack and Helen listen and sometimes correct our misunderstanding. But the point is for one of us to teach the other.

That's the problem I see coming, sitting out here with Dove before dinner. At family time tonight I will have to tell Sarah how the combat swimmer stroke works. Call me selfish. But I want to beat her butt just once before spilling my new secret. How to do that?

"Great hogfish newburg," says Jack. Helen nods toward Sarah and smiles that sweet smile of hers. I take another bite. Actually, it is pretty good. Considering I watched Mr. Hog Fish die, then cleaned him myself.

"Nice job, Sarah," I say. The saucy Newburg sits on a bed of brown rice with broccoli on the side and a spinach salad. Tonight's desert is—you guessed it—fruit. This time, it is a mixture of oranges, bananas and passion fruit mixed with some low fat yogurt and wheat germ sprinkled on top.

"How's the swimming coming along?" Sarah asks. "I saw you and Uncle Jack out in the lagoon while we were making dinner.

I say, "Okay. We're trying to build my endurance and speed. But even at my best I don't think I'll ever beat you."

I watch as Sarah chews her broccoli. "You're right about that, little brother. You just don't have a swimmer's build. Swimming fast takes a long, lean body. I'm sixteen. I'm taller than you by twelve inches—"

"Yeah," I interrupt, "and those big feet of yours act like flippers."

"And swimming fast takes coordination. I have it. You don't. At least not yet. I bet I'd still beat you to the platform even if I gave you a 20 yard head start."

Jack chokes and sputters. Helen asks, "You okay, sweetie. Something go down the wrong pipe?"

"No, but it's about to."

"What's that, sweetie?"

"Nothing. I just said I hope its not about to."

I know an opportunity when I see one. "A twenty yard head start? Tell you what, Sarah, forget the head start. I won't need it. But let's make the race *around* the platform. Round trip from beach to beach."

"You can't swim that far non-stop," she says.

"Call me optimistic. Let's make it mean something. Winner skips tomorrow morning's 5-mile run."

"Wait a minute," says Helen.

“Works for me,” inserts Jack. “It pays to be a winner.”

Sarah smiles. “Wonderful, I can sleep in an extra twenty-five minutes. Pure heaven. You’re on. When?”

“Now.”

I hunch down and dig my feet into the sand. Sarah casually stands beside me. No determination. Her hands hang limp by her side. Not like mine—raised parallel to the ground, ready to claw the air for any fraction of advantage. She’s coolly resting her weight on one hip, like she’s waiting for a bus. Oh, she cares alright. Sarah is just messing with my head. She really wants to win our bet and get some extra sleep tomorrow. I can’t wait to see her face after I win this race.

“One, two, three, go!” calls Helen.

The wet sand gives me traction. Five steps and I’m in the water, churning to the drop-off where I can begin my secret combat swimmer’s stroke.

On my second breath, I raise my head up and look back to see Sarah lope down the beach and wade into the water. I don’t want to lose my rhythm so I put my head back down, kick, stroke, stroke, breathe.

By now I’m forty yards out. On my next breath I hear Helen cheering from shore. “Come on Sarah. Remember this morning. Combat swimmer, sweetie. He’s toast.”

Toast? Combat swimmer? My scissors kick is perfect. Kick, glide. It propels me through the water like a torpedo. My leading arm feels like it has the power of a backhoe. My hand reaches forward, cups the water ahead and pulls it behind me. Same with my trailing arm. I’m totally in sync—stroke, stroke, kick, breathe. I hear the water sluicing by as if through a fire hose. I’m swimming faster than I ever thought possible. Two more strokes and from the side I see Sarah is now even with me. It’s her sixteen year-old’s long arms and legs. And those flipper-like feet. What an advantage over a twelve year-old—and a short, boxy one at that.

Now I’m pouring it on just to keep up. Kick-stroke-stroke-breathe.

We round the platform and head back to shore. Sarah is now an arms length ahead. But there’s still enough in the tank to beat her.

Every time I come up for a breath I hear Helen cheering for Sarah. But Jack’s voice booms over the water too, “It pays to be a winner, Brian.”

She’s a body length ahead. But then I see Sarah suddenly stop. She rolls into a ball, clutching her stomach. My next stroke and kick catch me up to her. The water is clear. I see her grimacing face under the water and sinking fast.

Without thinking I dive under kicking my feet and stretching my right hand way down to grab her hair. I yank her up to me. We’re down ten feet. I grab her around the waist and kick for the surface. We’re rising. The water is getting lighter. I can see the surface shimmering above. When we get to within three feet I give her a huge push to propel her upward.

When my head breaks the surface I take a huge gulp of air then reach for Sarah. I grab her right wrist in my left hand and pull her across my body. The leverage I have flips her over onto her back. Then I cup one hand under her chin from behind and use the leverage from my forearm against her back to level her body on the surface. Now she’s floating flat, face up and with her nose and mouth above water. Just like Uncle Jack taught us. Sarah is crying and clutching her stomach.

“Brian it hurts so bad,” she sputters.

I’ve seen this back home in the City Plunge with kids who swim too hard and too soon after eating. “You have a stomach cramp,” I tell her. “Relax and float. You’ll be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you.” And nothing ever will, I silently promise. With one arm around her shoulder, crossing over her chest then under her arm, I have her securely resting on my hip.

“Hey, Brian. Need any help?” asks Jack, swimming calmly beside us. He’s been here the whole time. Must have dived in and raced out the second Sarah stopped swimming. I knew Uncle Jack was a fast swimmer. But geez. Then Aunt Helen pops her head up. Of course both of them would be out here like a shot. We’re family. That closeness is something they’ve built into every day we’ve been here.

“Come on, sweetie. Let us help you,” says Helen swimming on the other side. They have us sandwiched between them.

Sarah is my training partner and my swim buddy. I’ll never know as much as Jack and Helen. But I do know that I don’t want to give up my responsibility. “No thank you, Ma’am. I’ll take good care of her.” With Sarah on my hip, still cramped up and Jack and Helen watching, ready to lend a hand if needed, I swim her all the way into shore. Carrie and Dove splash out to greet us. They think this is one big game and they want in. Dogs have it right. This should be fun, with breaks for biscuits, naps in the sun and time for family. Yes, Uncle Jack, it pays to be a winner. That’s how I feel right now—even though I probably wouldn’t have won that stupid swimming race anyway.

“**More hot chocolate?**” asks Helen.

“No thank you, Ma’am,” I politely reply. “Look, out there at three o’clock. There’s a ship—”

“Heading?”

The ship was moving from west to east. “About 85 degrees?”

“Close enough,” replies Jack.

That must be a cruise ship,” says Sarah. “Look how it’s lit up.”

“Yep,” Jack confirms. “That’s the *Crystal Serenity* leaving St. Thomas. Pretty ship all sparkly against the night.”

Helen says, “So this is our sixth family gathering. Tell us what you learned today. Sarah?”

Sarah says, “Ma’am, I learned a couple of things today. First is that awesome combat swimmer’s sidestroke. I don’t have to explain it to Brian since he *obviously* knows it too.”

I can’t resist, “You bet I know it. I fly through the water and can go farther than I ever thought I could.”

“So, who won your race?” asks Jack.

I say, “She was winning before she cramped up. Her lead was growing. Sarah won.”

I watch Sarah shake her head, “But I didn’t finish. You had to carry me in. I didn’t win anything but a really sore stomach. Let Brian sleep in tomorrow. He earned it. Thank you for saving me, Bro.”

Jack and Helen nod, weighing the evidence. “What else did you learn today,” asks Jack.

“That you shouldn’t go swimming so soon after dinner?” says Sarah with a nervous giggle.

“More than that. I learned that you always go back for your teammate. That you win or fail as a team.”

Sarah adds, “That you trust your teammate to do what they say they can do. Brian sure did when he said he wouldn’t let anything happen to me and that he’d take care of me. He really did.”

“Awe, shoot,” said Jack, “if you two don’t stop I’m just goin’ to break down and cry.”

Helen said, “Oh, that I’d like to see, Jack. But you two just got it. We could have rescued Sarah in a flash,” Helen snapped her fingers. “She wasn’t in any real danger. You’ve never seen Jack really turn it on. He’s like a torpedo in the water.” Her hand slaps her palm and it shoots out from there. “We saw what was happening and that Brian had the situation under control. We knew there was a larger lesson here and that a mouth full of sea water was a small price to pay.”

Jack puts down his bottle of beer. “So give me a single word for what you learned.”

Sarah looks at me. “Trust. I trust my teammate.”

I say, “Confidence. I knew I could do what I promised Sarah I could do. If I didn’t I never would have said so and would have waited for you two to rescue us.”

Jack asks, “So Brian, how do you clear your mask?”

My snorkeling lesson had been quick and really easy. Jack and I went over it this morning. “Sir, you just tilt your mask to break part of the seal around your forehead then blow out through your nose. The air coming into the mask forces the water out. When you’re done, your mask is clear.”

“Good. Sarah, how do you use the US Navy Dive Tables?”

It takes Sarah five minutes to tell us about bottom time and surface interval time before the next dive. She explains it has to do with the relationship between time and depth. I know Helen is going to teach me tomorrow so I don’t worry about getting it all tonight. Lights of the *Crystal Serenity* are almost out of sight.

Helen says, “Okay ladies and gentlemen. Let’s call it a day, shall we?”

I glance over at Jack’s cool diver’s watch. Even in the dark here on the veranda I can see from its luminous dial that it’s 9:15. I know, that’s probably still early by your standards. But hey, do you get up at 4:45 am, run five miles, do calisthenics, eat rabbit food, swim forever and learn stuff—really interesting stuff, but still. Get what I mean?

Jack says, “We meet here an hour later at 0600 tomorrow. Helen and I’ll just have to think up a worthy replacement for our run. Don’t worry you two, we will.”

Not a creak or a squeak in the entire house. Just the Caribbean Sea lapping at the shore. The moon shines through my open window. Then Dove suddenly pounces on my bed. Her four paws walk over me, moving quickly toward my pillow. Aunt Helen follows her right into my room.

“May I please have a word, Brian?” she asks. Her voice is soft, totally like our favorite aunt when she’s not confiscating our cell phones or telling us to swim or run faster.” She’s wearing Uncle Jack’s Navy t-shirt. It’s so big on her that it reaches down to her knees.

“Sure.” Dove’s nose burrows into the covers near my head, followed by her massive sigh—she’s totally comfortable and doesn’t want to be disturbed. Helen sits on the edge of my bed and crosses her tanned legs and bare feet.

“You both are doing really, really well,” she says. “Your diving skills are improving. But I sense you’re uncomfortable with something. What is it, Brian? You can tell me.”

Jack and Helen insist on the complete truth. Always. “Yes, Ma’am. I can swim fast and it seems like forever. I can run too. Taking off my mask and tank? No problem. But—”

“There’s always a but, Brian. There is for Sarah. There is for me. And there certainly is for Jack.”

“Uncle Jack’s afraid of something? No way.”

“Yes, my young nephew, he certainly is. Maybe someday he’ll tell you.”

I try picturing Uncle Jack scared. I just can’t. Dad said he was a SEAL. And from what I’ve seen so far, he is not someone who scares easily. If Helen is right, it must be something totally fearsome. Something he cannot see or feel. Supernatural, maybe?

“So, what worries you, Brian?”

“I can’t stand it when you guys turn off my air. Even in training I’m afraid I’ll suffocate underwater. I hate it.”

“Well, have you ever suffocated underwater?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“And have either Jack or I ever let anything bad happen to you while you’ve been here with us?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“So what’s this about? Control maybe? That’s what freaks me out—when I lose control. I want to know that all the air I need is within my grasp at all times.”

“You’re scared of having your air turned off too?”

In the silvery light of the full moon, my Aunt Helen smiles her beautiful smile and nods, making her short, black hair sway from side to side. “Sure am. Scares the bejesus out of me every time. But I overcame it.”

“How? My arm isn’t long enough to reach behind me and twist open the air valve knob.”

“There must be a way to give you complete control. Hmmm. I have an idea. You can remove your tank faster than anyone I’ve seen.”

“Yeah, I am pretty good at that.”

“Okay,” says Helen, “how about this. Soon as Jack turns off your air valve you bring your right hand up to the strap fastener on your left shoulder. At the same time move your left hand to the strap fastener around your stomach. Now you’re in control. If you feel like you’re going to run out of breath, you just pop open those fasteners, twist out of your tank, turn it over so you can see that valve and turn back on your air. Simple.”

I lay there in my bed thinking. Dove’s head rests on my shoulder now. “I can be out of my tank and buoyancy compensator in two seconds. Okay.”

“Let’s practice surviving claustrophobia,” says Helen. Close your eyes. Imagine with me. We finished morning workout. We ate breakfast—you both are becoming excellent chefs, by the way. You and Sarah cleaned the kitchen. Now we’re in the lagoon underwater—about forty feet deep should do it. Just another diving lesson, right?”

I nod my head and lay there in my bed with my eyes still closed.

“Now I’m going to cover your face with your bed covers as if we turned off your air. Soon as I do, grab your imaginary tank strap fasteners. When I feel you pull them open, I’ll remove the covers from your face and you’ll be able to breathe again. Ready?”

Helen lifts the covers over my face. Immediately that constricting fear of suffocation closes my throat. My right hand grabs my left shoulder and my left hand, holds on to the middle of my belly, right where my tank strap fasteners would be. I try counting to three. But just make it to two before yanking my hands as if I’m opening the imaginary clasps. Helen instantly jerks the covers off my face. I suck in a giant gulp of cool night air. Helen’s soft hand gently strokes my forehead.

“My, my, you’re burning up. You okay, Bri?”

“Whew. I’m so stupid.”

“No at all. Everyone fears something. Try again. This time, I’ll count. Let’s reach four before bailing out. And Brian? No need holding your breath before I close your imaginary air supply. Okay? Here goes.”

Aunt Helen settles the covers over my head. Dove snores peacefully, her head beside mine and clueless to my terror. She doesn’t seem to mind being under the covers in the dark, hot and without air. My hands move into place. The darkness, heat, and lack of air constrict. Not quite so bad this time. Helen finally hits her four-count and pulls the covers off.

“Better, my brave nephew. Much better. Cooler now,” she says as her gentle, hands pat my face again.

We practice until I can stay under the covers for a 30-count.

“Okay. You are ready. How do you feel?”

“Good. I’m good. Not my favorite. But I can take it.”

“Excellent. Tomorrow in the lagoon Jack will turn off your air for real. It’s one of the last tests for certification. We’ll prep both of you before. You will know exactly when. You’ll do great. But let’s guarantee your success. I’ll swim with you to the surface after Jack turns off your air. I’ll be right in front of you. I’ll hold onto your shoulder strap so we don’t separate. I will hold my spare regulator in my other hand. You are in control. Just tap me twice anywhere to get my spare. I’ll put the reg into your mouth so fast you won’t know where it came from. You have complete control of your air supply.”

“Got it. And thanks.”

“You’re welcome. You are family. We do whatever it takes for family to succeed. Just tap twice if you need it. But seriously? You won’t. Love you, Brian. Come on, Dove, let’s get some sleep too.” Dove hops down from the bed and they both walk out the bedroom door.

* * *

Chapter 5

“**Stroke, stroke, stroke,**” commands Helen. We sit facing Helen in the six-man Vespoli racing shell. In front of me, sitting in the two empty rowing stations, are Carrie and Dove in their orange canine life vests with ball caps on their heads and dog goggles. So far we’ve sped three times around the lagoon. The water here in the lagoon is flat calm, no current, no waves and no wind this morning. It is so clear, I see us speed by the sunken ship, *Merryweather*, as we come around each lap. I am dying to see it up close. When I get down there, the first thing, I want to just float next to her pointed bow with thirty more feet of open water between me and the bottom. It’ll be like hovering in a helicopter. Then I want to slowly swim over her deck, taking in all those winches, cranes and the two machine guns. I want to see everything—the bridge, the crew’s quarters, everything.

Helen breaks her regular cadence to say, “Brian while we’re out here having a leisurely row, watching the sun come up, tell us about the history of Bartholomew’s Cove.”

It takes concentration to keep my oar in sync with Jack and Sarah’s. And strength. The oar doesn’t pull itself through the water. Still, we must be going at least 15 miles an hour. That may not sound very fast to you. But we’re doing this all by ourselves—no motor or sail and with 100 pounds of dog as just dead weight. Along with the swimming, diving and tae kwon do training they give us each day, there’s always some sort of bookwork. So far it’s just been research or reading something. Then we report on what we learned at family gathering that night. All three ask questions of the fourth. Sometimes just because it’s interesting. But I think Jack and Helen want to make sure that we understand it.

“Ma’am, Bartholomew’s Cove is actually named after the pirate, Bartholomew Roberts—Black Bart.” I stop to catch my breath.

“Come on, Brian, you can row and talk at the same time.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Black Bart lived from 1682 to 1722. He was Welsh. He actually took more loot than Blackbeard, Ed Low and the other pirates put together. He had a fleet of four pirate ships and over 200 pirates working for him.” Whew. I stop for a second to wipe my sweating forehead on my shoulder in between cycles of my oar.

“The legend is that Black Bart captured and looted more than 400 ships during his career. His main ship was the *Royal Fortune*. Legend has it that he based the *Royal Fortune* right here on St. Croix. Our cove is named for him because this is supposedly where he and his crew stopped to rest and divide up the treasure after some of their biggest raids on passing ships.”

“Geeze, Brian,” says Sarah. She sits in back of me. Jack’s position is behind her. “There might be buried treasure here in Bart’s Cove?”

“Unlikely,” says Jack from behind us. “Many have looked. Oh they’ve found lots of doubloons and gold artifacts from the pirate days all over most of the Virgin Islands. Whenever there’s a big storm it churns up the bottom and more of the loot gets found. Besides, as successful a pirate as Black Bart was, the greatest treasure here on Croix was the one amassed by Jean La Vasseur while he was Governor of Tortuga. That guy was crooked as they come. He took ten percent of all the loot captured by the Brethren of the

Coast—pirates by any other name who worked for him. He’s supposed to have stored all his treasure right here on Croix.”

Helen steers our racing shell while yelling at us to stroke together, then laughing at us as we blow it every so often. She has us back on a course for a fourth lap around Bartholomew's Cove. I look at the landscape of palm trees, sand dunes and beautiful vacation homes in the hills racing past us as the light six-man shell flies around the lagoon. If I were a pirate, this is exactly where I’d want my base. The cove is fairly small and crescent shaped. There’s just one way in through a natural cut in the coral reef. Uncle Jack marked it with two orange buoys on either side of the cut. The reef rises to within a few feet of the surface. You can’t see it on the surface—especially not at night. No attacking ship could get very close without trapping itself in a tight corner or running aground on the reef. If I were Black Bart I would set up canons on shore and in the hills that surround the inlet into our cove. I’d sink any ship stupid enough to try attacking. “What happened to Vasseur’s treasure? Did anyone find it?” I ask.

“Not yet,” replies Jack.

Jack and I wash the saltwater off the racing shell and hang it on wall pegs in the storage shed. We’re in the seventh week of our stay on St. Croix. Helen has stopped telling us what to make for meals when it’s our turn to cook. It’s up to whoever has cooking duty. This morning I’m making oatmeal with cinnamon and blue berries.

Suddenly Carrie and Dove jump up from the dog bed they share here in the kitchen. Paws skid over the hardwood floor as they tear over to the windows overlooking Bart’s Cove.

“What’s up, ladies,” Aunt Helen calls after them. “What do you see?”

Sarah and I watch both dogs turning in excited circles.

Uncle Jack quickly lays down his napkin and says, “Breakfast is on temporary hold, guys. You both need to see this.” He gets up from the table and opens the back door. Both dogs race down to the beach, then leap into the lagoon. Aunt Helen is right behind them, pulling off her t-shirt and shorts down to the bathing suit we all wear under our street clothes here on St. Croix. Uncle Jack stops only long enough to reach into the freezer and grab a plastic container. Then he too races to the beach.

The sound is unmistakable—high-pitched, joyous squeaks and whistles. Out in the lagoon two blue-gray bottlenose dolphins swim right up to our dogs. Uncle Jack and Aunt Helen are out there right with them.

“Come on,” calls Uncle Jack. “Meet two of our favorite visitors.”

Sarah and I have already lost our street clothes and are down to our bathing suits. We swim out to the party. Uncle Jack is making hand gestures to the dolphins. Suddenly both disappear underwater. In a second, they leap straight out of the water, going a good five feet in the air. They splash down and face Uncle Jack. He tosses both a piece of frozen fish from the plastic container.

“Meet Spinner and Nosie,” says Aunt Helen. “They adopted our dogs as their playmates two years ago. They visit Bart’s Cove every few weeks or so.”

“Watch this,” says Uncle Jack. He raises his hand holding frozen fish parts and makes a circle. Both dolphins rise out of the water, standing on their tails and spin in circles. Uncle Jack now makes a rolling motion with both hands. The two dolphins submerge, then leap out of the water and turn a flip in mid-air before splashing down.

Both dolphins come up facing Uncle Jack. He slaps his hand on the surface. They smack their tails on the water in response. Jack rewards them with a healthy piece of fish.

We've moved closer into shore by now so all of us—dogs too—can stand. Spinner and Nosie follow us. They float peacefully in the crystal clear, warm water just a few feet deep.

Sarah stands off to the side of our group, not moving. Aunt Helen says, "Don't worry, sweetie. These wild animals haven't been harmed in any way. Sea World sends two of their marine biologists and trainers every six months or so. They check on their health and teach us how to interact with them. Each visit they teach both us and the dolphins a new behavior. Come pet Spinner. He's curious about you. Take the flat of your hand, like this—"

"Oh my gosh," squeals Sarah. "He's pushing his back into my hand. He feels like my wet suit. But smoother."

"Dolphin skin has to be smooth so they can rocket through the water."

"Look. He's smiling at me."

"He likes you or he wouldn't just float there while you stroke him," says Uncle Jack. He hands a frozen fish to Sarah. "Hold this and move your hand up and—"

"He's nodding at me," giggles Sarah as Spinner nods his head to the exact rhythm of Sarah's hand movements. She tosses the fish to Spinner who expertly snatches it in mid air.

"Your turn, Brian," says Aunt Helen.

Then I see it. From beneath Spinner comes this long, gray-brown stream of ugly. It floats to the surface.

"He's a wild animal. This is his home," says Uncle Jack.

But I notice that all of us—Carrie and Dove included—have moved up current.

"Let's try this again, Brian. Hold out your hand—perfect."

Nosie slowly moves right up to my hand and gently puts her front flipper into my grasp. Then she does the shaking. I feel the strength of her flipper moving in my hand. I reach into the plastic container and pull out a fish, then toss it to Nosie.

"What else do they eat?" I ask.

"When dolphins are seriously hungry they go after bottom-dwelling fish. But they also love snacks of shrimp and squid.

"Won't they become dependent on you for their food?"

"They've been wild their whole lives," Uncle Jack explains. "Spending an hour with us a few times a month won't change that. Besides, the little amount of fish we give them cannot sustain them. These guys need to eat about twenty pounds of fish a day."

"Look," Aunt Helen points.

Sure enough, both dogs are standing nose to nose with Spinner and Nosie. The dogs were licking the dolphins' noses.

"When Carrie and Dove began playing with them in the lagoon, all four seemed to bond" says Aunt Helen.

Uncle Jack says, "Who wants to go for a ride?" Carrie and Dove both spring to attention. Uncle Jack grabs their two orange life vests off the dock and quickly snaps them around both dogs. "Understand that Spinner and Nosie are wild animals no matter how well behaved they seem. It took a long while before we and the Sea World trainers trusted Spinner and Nosie with our dogs. They seemed to just naturally fall into this

behavior. Sea World and the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in San Diego are making a study of Spinner and Nosie. See the orange tags with small GPS boxes on their top fins? These are the most carefully watched wild dolphins you'll see anywhere."

Uncle Jack helps Carrie onto Spinner's back. Carrie immediately grabs Spinner's body with all four legs. Uncle Jack waves his hand and Spinner slowly swims away on the surface with Carrie riding on his back.

"Carrie can jump off any time she wants. Her life jacket will keep her afloat with her head above water. And Helen and I are always watching them."

Dove and Nosie are next. Uncle Jack repeats the procedure. Now all four are slowly swimming and riding on the surface back and forth out in the lagoon.

"Isn't that a hoot? They'd stay out all day if I let them. You two want to try?" He whistles twice. Spinner and Nosie turn around and head back to us. Both get a fish for their efforts. I climb on to Spinner's back and balance there. It's not that easy. Sarah hangs back.

"It's okay, sweetie. Nosie won't take you under. But if you don't want to go—"

"I'm trying to figure out where her fin goes. Between my legs or where?"

"Ha. No, you're taller than Brian. Just gently hold on to her fin and let your legs trail behind, then wrap them around her body ahead of her tail. She needs her tail to propel you both so stay out of its way—"

Spinner smacks his flipper, sending a spray of water at Sarah. Finally Sarah is on Nosie's back.

"Remember kids," warns Aunt Helen, "just let go whenever you want." Then she waves her arm and we're off into the lagoon, slowly riding on the backs of two very smart dolphins.

Jack finishes the last of his oatmeal. "Spinner and Nosie won't visit again for at least another week or two. Let's everyone finish breakfast then please clean the kitchen, and meet me on the dock in your swimsuits."

What a great start to the day. And now this, whatever it is. I look at Sarah. So far our diving lessons have been in the pool. Sarah shrugs her shoulders.

The lagoon shows deep blue in the morning light. Carrie and Dove lay flat on their sides sunning themselves on the dock, exhausted after their dolphin playtime. Four SCUBA tanks stand at attention next to the swim ladder. Their buoyancy compensators and regulators, already attached, set to go.

Helen walks out of the kitchen saying, "Hi you two. Today's a really special day so we'll get started right away. You're now both in excellent physical shape. You are respectful. You listen. And you follow instructions. We could not ask anyone to do more. Today is your reward."

"Today we go diving," says Jack walking from the equipment shed across the dock. He carries the nylon equipment bag containing our fins, masks and snorkels, then sets it next to the tanks. "Today we dive for real," he says. "In the ocean." Uncle Jack reaches into the bag and takes out each set of our personal gear. "Where God meant diving to be done." Then he places our gear beside each rig.

Wicked cool. I've been waiting for this since that first day when we flew over Bart's Cove and I saw *Merryweather* sunk in the lagoon.

“Diving is first about safety,” says Helen. “So for now we stay in the lagoon.”

“No reason to dally,” says Jack. “Let’s gear up and get wet, shall we?”

We twist open the air valves on each tank. Air compressed to 3,000 pounds per square inch instantly hisses into the hoses, making them stiff. We check our regulators and buoyancy compensators. Jack rechecks each one, just to be sure.

“Hey Brian,” says Jack. “Better put this on. Catch.”

Jack tosses me a nylon dive skin. It’s a full-length suit. Easy to get into and totally flexible. It’s thin, not meant for warmth—unnecessary here in the Caribbean. But it protects in case you scrape up against something down there. All of us climb into our dive skins, then the weight belt, fins, tanks and masks. The last thing I put on are canvas gardening gloves—for more protection.

Now we’re all standing here on the edge of the dock. Sarah and I are bent over from the weight of our equipment.

Jack says, “I’ll go first so I can be there in the water for you. Then Sarah, Brian and Helen. After you jump in swim away from the dock so the next diver doesn’t jump on top of you.”

Finally it’s my turn. With one hand on my mask so it doesn’t come off and the other grabbing the bottom of my tank so it doesn’t hit me in the head I take one giant stride off the dock and start my first real ocean dive. I sink less than a foot as my legs scissor together. I bob right back up as my buoyancy compensator—really an inflatable life jacket attached to my tank—does its job and allows me to float while wearing all this gear. On land it weighs about 50 pounds. Here in the warm, clear lagoon, I am weightless. As I swim over to Jack and Sarah I lower my face into the water for a look around. There are corals with brilliant blues, emerald greens and yellows. Off in the distance—in the deeper water beyond the drop-off— there’s *Merryweather’s* shadow.

We follow Jack, finning over the surface to where I can see the sandy bottom just 15 feet below. We stop and float in a circle there on the surface.

“We’re going to practice the drills you two have become so good at in the pool,” says Jack. “We’ll descend to the bottom, stand there and give the okay sign. Then Helen and I will observe you take off your masks, then put them back on and clear them. When we give you the okay sign, I want you to remove your tanks just like we practiced in the pool. Piece of cake. Then put them back on. Clear? And remember no spitting out your regulator while taking off your tanks. I want you to get the feeling of sitting there on the bottom breathing with your tanks off. When I give the okay sign, put your tanks back on and buckle up. Then we prepare for the last part of the test.”

My stomach flips over on itself. Even though the water is warm, I begin to shiver. Then Aunt Helen’s hand gently squeezes my shoulder, shielded by my tank so no one else can see.

Jack says, “For the final test I will turn off your air. After I close your air valve I’ll come around in front of you and make the out of air sign.” Jack slashes his hand across his throat. “Spit out your regulator, tilt your head upward, and calmly kick to the surface. Helen will be right beside you all the way up. Remember to exhale. I want to see bubbles coming out of your mouths at all times.”

Aunt Helen says, “The air in your lungs expands on the way up. If you don’t exhale, your lungs will explode. Not a very good beginning to the day.”

“Clear?” asks Uncle Jack.

I touch my thumb and first finger together in the diver's okay sign. Sarah does the same.

"Excellent. Let's put this final exam behind us, then go have some fun."

All four of us put our regulators in our mouths, then press the deflate button on our buoyancy compensators. There's a hiss of escaping air, then we quickly sink below the surface. Bubbles explode out the exhaust ports of our mouthpieces and race for the surface as we exhale. We are on a slow ride down a very calm elevator as we descend into the clear, warm lagoon.

On the bottom we quickly run through the first two drills. Mask off, mask on, blow through the nose to clear the water out. No problems for either Sarah or me. Next, unstrap the tank, pull it over my head. Remember to keep the regulator in my mouth so I can keep breathing. Give Helen the okay sign. Put the tank back on. Refasten the straps.

Now the hard one.

Jack has moved us further out into the lagoon to where the bottom drops off. The green glow of my depth gauge shows we're now in 40 feet of water. The shiny, silver surface looks a lot farther away from down here. Bubbles from my increased breathing race for the surface in silvery balls. If either my tank or regulator should fail, I will be out of air for real, not like in the warmth of my bed last night with Aunt Helen covering my face with my blanket.

Sarah goes first. She and Jack flash the okay sign. I watch as Jack reaches behind her head, then twists the black plastic knob that turns off her air. He slashes his hand across his throat in the out of air sign. Sarah and Helen slowly rise to the surface, disappearing into the gloom. In just a few minutes, Helen swims back down to rejoin us.

Jack looms in front of me. He flashes the okay sign. I return the sign and slowly nod my head. He stares through my mask, into my eyes for a few seconds. Then Uncle Jack takes his regulator out of his mouth and flashes me his big, toothy grin. Bubbles explode from my regulator as I laugh. I flash him the okay sign again. Now I'm ready.

He reaches behind me and twists off my air valve. Then he slashes his hand across his throat.

You don't suddenly run out of air. Breathing just becomes harder with each of the three short breaths remaining in the hose connecting your tank to your regulator. After the second breath it's like sucking air through a straw. Then...nothing.

I struggle to pull air into my lungs. That fear of suffocating tries to creep in, but I push it away. Without the sounds of my regulator forcing air to me and then my exhaust bubbles it's eerily quiet. I spit out my regulator and slowly kick for the surface. Helen swims right with me. She holds my tank strap in one hand. She carries the spare regulator in her other. I am not breathing. But I'm not starving for air either. As we slowly ascend I feel the air from my last breath fill my lungs. The pressure in my chest increases. I remember to tilt my head back and slowly exhale. Within a few more slow kicks, I'm five feet from the surface. Two feet. Then my head breaks the surface. I can breathe again.

"You both okay?" asks Jack. He was right behind me all the way up.

"Yes, Sir," Sarah and I both answer. Everyone is floating on the calm surface of the lagoon. Our buoyancy compensators keep us afloat. Sarah and I are both laughing for no reason except that it's finally over.

Jack says, "Excellent. Great job—"

“A really marvelous job you two,” says Helen. “It’s scary, I know. But you two completed the last certification test. You are now officially certified open water divers. How about going for a real dive now?”

She’s talking about *Merryweather*. Whoa. My dreams have come true. Every chance I get, I look at *Merryweather*. I saw her for the first time when we flew into Bart’s Cove. That high up and going so fast, I didn’t get a very good look. Then for the last month I’ve watched her from the hills on our daily training runs. From there I could see her pointed bow gracefully flaring into a wide middle and tapering to a rounded stern. Then from the swimming platform in the lagoon I looked sixty feet straight down on the middle of the ship. The machine guns and open holds stood out from the flat deck. Now I am about to actually touch *Merryweather*.

I did my homework. *Merryweather* was originally a minesweeper built in 1943. Her mission in the South Pacific was to clear the harbors of mines when the US Navy ships came into port. In 1946 she took some cannon rounds from an enemy cruiser. It destroyed most of her aft deck, injuring twelve of her forty-five-man crew and killing three. The Navy sold her as surplus. Since then, *Merryweather* has had four owners. The last one was a salvage operator in St. Thomas that went bankrupt. She sat tied to the dock for ten years before Uncle Jack bought her. *Merryweather*’s final mission has lasted three years as an artificial reef for the fish population here in our lagoon.

We release the air from our buoyancy compensators and sink to the bottom. Jack and Sarah take the lead, swimming side-by-side. Aunt Helen and I follow. My bottom timer says the dive has been running now for about fifteen minutes. My air pressure gauge says I have 2500 pounds of air in my tank—plenty for the time we’ll be on the bottom.

***Merryweather*’s bridge rises out of the gloom.** We’re now sixty feet deep. Jack and Helen both shine their dive lights on the sunken ship as we fin up to its hull. It’s home to hundreds of colorful fish swimming all around. I reach out and finally put my hand flat against her hull plate. I run my hand along her rivets. It’s cool to the touch. The surface is hard, rough with the growth of sea life. It grabs and tears at the canvas of my gardening glove. We slowly fin over the open deck, our buoyancy is totally neutral—neither ascending nor descending. This is what I’ve been waiting for. A real shipwreck.

The bridge windows shattered years ago. Helen plays her light inside. There’s a metal chart table. What charts once covered that table? Where did they take *Merryweather* on her voyages? Now it’s overgrown with coral—brilliant reds, oranges, purples, and blues. Fish swim all around inside the bridge. There’s an antique radarscope still with tattered remnants of its black, rubber viewing hood slowly waving back and forth with the gentle surge of the current. Did it spot the Japanese war ship that shot up *Merryweather* and killed those men? And there’s the ship’s compass set into a pedestal standing next to the ship’s helm. It must have signaled bearings for every direction on the compass during *Merryweather*’s service.

Swimming through a sunken shipwreck is like walking through a watery ghost town. It’s silent except for the hiss of air through our hoses, then bubbles escaping through the exhaust baffles of our regulators. Helen leads the way deeper inside to the crew’s quarters. I suddenly feel the more confined area closing in on me. Without my dive light, it would be totally dark in here. I follow Helen and float through an interior door to a cabin. We both play our dive lights over the metal sleeping racks. Who slept here? What

happened to them? With all of our dive equipment it's cramped in here. I try not to hit anything with my tank. A medicine cabinet with its door rusted open stands over an old porcelain sink—turned brown over the years. Inside rusted cans and bottles stand awaiting their long dead owners. Did they hold shave cream? Hair oil? An old toothbrush stands upright in its holder. Whose was it? Was he one of the three who died that day? Are their ghosts still living down here? Do they know they're dead? It happens sometimes.

This isn't a great place for a claustrophobic. I tap Helen's leg twice. She turns and shines her light on me. I calmly motion that we should head for the exit. She nods. We swim through another door, then float up a metal ladder, overgrown with orange and purple coral. As I rise through the rusty hatch at the top I remember Jack's warning that everyone seems to scrape their ankles on hatch openings the first time. Not me. Finally I'm out into the welcome light of the open deck.

Toward the middle of the ship, I see the machine gun still on its mount. It's encrusted with coral that turns into brilliant oranges and reds when I shine my dive light on it. There's a rusted metal ammo box still sitting on the deck. Its cover is open. I peer in and can see a jumble of .50 caliber shells. The belt that fed them into the machine gun probably rotted away decades ago. Did this gun ever shoot at another ship? Fish swim all around the length of the gun barrel. Their brilliant colors and their peaceful gliding contrasts against the once deadly weapon.

At first their air bubbles precede them, then Jack and Sarah emerge through an open hatch further down the deck and fin toward us. My bottom timer says we've been down here for thirty-four minutes. I raise my instrument console up for Helen to see. She nods and gives the okay sign. Then she does the same to Jack and Sarah. We all raise the air hose of our buoyancy compensators. I press the button to give mine a shot of air from my tank. I slowly—reluctantly—feel myself lift off and rise from *Merryweather's* deck. I can't wait to return.

As I ascend I keep releasing air from my buoyancy compensator. Just like Aunt Helen warned us about air in our lungs expanding, so too does the air I put into my buoyancy compensator. You don't want to pop up uncontrolled like a cork. We slowly ascend, stopping at ten feet for five minutes of decompression, hanging onto a plastic bar that Jack attached to the swim platform above *Merryweather's* grave. The time creeps by as I look down on my ghost ship. Finally I see Jack check his super cool dive watch one last time, then he signals us to surface.

“What did you two learn today?” asks Jack. It is end of day and we're out on the veranda having our family gathering and watching the cruise ships leave St. Thomas. “Bri, you first.”

Today was a big day—huge. I take a breath. I don't want to sound like some excited kid gushing stupid. “A few things,” I begin. “For starters, I learned that I can do an emergency out of air ascent with no problem. That is, thanks to Aunt Helen.”

“Were you scared?” asks Jack.

I think for a second, then decide on the truth. “Yes, sir. I was scared, but—”

“But you overcame your fear. That's the definition of bravery, Brian—being scared but pressing on anyway because you know it's the right thing.”

“Yes, sir, I guess I did overcome my fear.”

“So, what’s the larger lesson here, sweetie,” asks Aunt Helen.

I think for a minute. Got it. “That we can train our minds and bodies to do things that we never thought we could do.”

Jack says, “I think you just nailed the whole point of what we’re doing here. The diet and weight loss, losing the pissy attitude, and the physical conditioning. Those were just minor irritants. Easily overcome and now in your past. You see how fast you did it. The bigger lesson is that people impose their own limitations on themselves. They *think* they can’t do something, so they never do. Or they try and fail just to prove themselves right. They say, ‘see, I told you I couldn’t do it.’ What you just learned is that you can do anything, *anything* you want to do. Just so long as you believe down deep in your gut that you will succeed.”

I see Uncle Jack turn his head to Sarah. “Your turn, hon. What’d you learn today?”

“Well, I don’t have anything so big as Brian conquering his fear of asphyxiation. But I do finally understand underwater navigation.”

“How so?” asks Aunt Helen.

“I didn’t want to get lost down there. I mean there are no familiar landmarks to guide me. So when we were on the bottom taking off our masks and tanks, I took a compass bearing on the dock. It was due north—360 degrees. Then at the end of our dive on *Merryweather*, I knew that all I had to do to get back to the dock was swim on a course of 360, north.”

Jack said, “That, my brilliant niece is a lesson that just may save your life one day. Outstanding. Now, what about your cell phone?”

Sarah laughs. She does that a lot here on the island. “What’s a cell phone?”

“Want yours back?” asks Aunt Helen.

“No thank you, Ma’am. Even if you gave it back, I probably wouldn’t use it. I don’t have time with the training runs and swims, all the stuff you’re teaching us each day and the cooking. Besides, what we’re doing here beats the gossip of my friends about boys and going to the mall. I’d be bored. You can keep it ‘til we leave.”

Aunt Helen says, “So it seems we have made huge progress here. You came to us seven weeks ago as spoiled brats. Weak, fat, disrespectful and untrained. Now look at you.”

“Fit and strong,” says Uncle Jack. “You look people in the eye with respect and you insist they give you the same in return. And you know some things. Not much compared to what you’ll learn in the next six weeks, but I can see the progress.”

Helen pulls out the canvas bag she had brought out onto the veranda. “We have a small gift for both of you. It is a token of your achievements. It is a tool that we hope you will keep with you always and maybe hand down to your own children when they deserve it as you now do.”

My sweet Aunt Helen reaches over, pulls me into her and kisses my cheek. Then she hands me a box with wrapping paper and a bow on it. Uncle Jack does the same with Sarah.

“What’s this?” asks Sarah.

“You’ll just have to open it to find out,” says Uncle Jack.

I tear the paper and bow off my box. I pull the lid off. Then I can see another box inside. This one is beautiful—made of black carbon fiber. I lift the lid. “Whoa. It’s the same dive watch that you both wear. The IWC Aquatimer 2000.”

“The very same, sweetie. It is indestructible and water proof down past 6000 feet, not that you’ll ever go that deep. We hope that every time you look at it you’ll remember how far you’ve come and how proud of you both we are.”

I lift the most fantastic thing I have ever held. It’s heavy. The black rubber strap wraps around my wrist and fastens in the next to last hole. I can see the luminous hands and hour markers glowing blue in the darkness here on the veranda.

Jack says, “I’ve had mine for fifteen years now. Been diving in most parts of the world with it. I know where every ding and scratch came from. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I suspect in another 10 years or so you’ll say the same thing.”

Jack could not know—none of us could know—how true his words were about to become. And it wouldn’t take ten years.

* * *

Chapter 6

“I can’t even imagine what Mom would say,” says Sarah. She lifts the Glock 17, 9 mm pistol off the shooting bench, expertly racks the slide, ejects the magazine and hooks a finger into the breach to be sure it isn’t loaded, then lays it in the gun box.

Among the other things, Jack and Helen teach marksmanship with live ammunition. They have a shooting range down valley. It backs up into a hill that acts as a natural backstop. It’s now the seventh week of our summer vacation. Both of us are in shape, we swim like sharks, run like the wind, dive in the ocean, and can drop an attacker with just our bare hands and feet. Oh, and yes, we both can hit the X-ring at 50 yards with any pistol or rifle in Jack’s arsenal.

“Mom wouldn’t understand,” I say. “She’s into insulating her kids.”

“But Dad would,” says Sarah. “He’s said what a tough world it is and that we need to learn how to deal with it.” Sarah gives that joyful laugh of hers that’s come since we arrived on St. Croix. “Let’s clean these guns, then go diving.”

Jack and Helen were already in the Land Cruiser. We bring up the rear with the two heavy duffles full of guns and ammo. Jack is strict about cleaning the guns after each shooting lesson. He always supervises Sarah and me. By now, though, it is less supervising and more just chatting away while we disassemble, clean, oil, run clean patches through the barrels and slides, then put everything back together. He inspects each gun after we finish. Jack twists them back and forth, looking for dirt, racks the slides listening for friction, then finally nods his head. He wipes down each gun one more time with an oily cloth and puts it back in its case.

I like these times. There’s the unforgettable heavy smell of Hoppe’s gun oil in the workshop, our favorite aunt and uncle are relaxed and sitting on stools while Sarah and I work on the guns. “Uncle Jack,” I break the silence except for the sound of gun slides racking back and forth as we work, “you know how scared I was when we were doing the out of air ascents. Is there anything you’re afraid of—or were before you conquered it?”

Sitting on her stool to my left, next to the just cleaned Mossberg tactical shotgun, Helen coughs. “Want to answer the young man, sweetie?”

I watch as Jack sits looking at Helen silently. Then he says, “Sure. Why not? There are no secrets here among the family.” He sits there for another few seconds.

“Yes. I’ve seen my share of ugliness. Some of it during the seven years while I was in the Navy working in the teams. Then for another five years afterwards.”

“While you were with the CIA,” says Helen. “Let’s get out the full story.”

“Yes, while I was a state department cultural attaché.”

“A black operator,” corrects Helen.

“They called me a case officer. But the fact was, a group of us from the Navy put to use our very specialized training on certain ops deemed vital to the national security interests of the United States.”

“You were assassins,” Helen politely clarifies.

“You need to understand, guys. Every country has people who do the work necessary for preserving their way of life. I happened to draw assignments in the Middle East, the Korean Peninsula, and most of the countries in South America we associate with drug manufacturing and distribution.”

Sarah asks, “So you killed people that our government thought were dangerous?”

“I was with a team of professionals. Yes, we carried out sanctions against some of the most corrupt military dictators on the planet, drug dealers and their henchmen. We took out the top five drug kingpins in the world. It was my job. I and my team were damn good at it. And I am proud of the contribution we made.”

I say, “We’re not judging you. So if you’ve seen all that, I guess there’s not much that scares you.”

“Your very bright nephew is right,” says Helen, “but you haven’t answered his question. *Is there anything that really scares you?*”

“Ghosts,” mutters my Uncle Jack.

“What’s that, sweetie? I don’t think we all heard you.”

Jack raises his head and clearly says the word, “Ghosts. Ghosts scare the hell out of me.”

Really? This huge man who can swim and run faster than any human I’ve ever seen. My uncle who can shoot with laser accuracy and whose bare hands and feet can lay you out before you even know you’re in a fight? This man is afraid of ghosts? “What part about ghosts scare you?” I ask.

Jack slides off of his stool and begins walking around the shady cool of the workshop in the mid day of St. Croix.

“What part? You mean *parts*. There are many parts associated with supernatural apparitions.”

Here’s the flaw in Uncle Jack’s armor. I want to know how deep it goes. “Well, yeah. Ghosts can float through walls. They can read minds. Ghosts are the undead—”

Jack whirls around. “That’s it exactly. They are the undead. In what used to be my line of work before I joined the SEC Enforcement Division, I was the one who created the undead. When you suddenly kill someone their body dies. But their aura or their spirit doesn’t know that they’ve been killed. They linger between the real world and the dead. They don’t know where to go. So they become ghosts. And they are pissed. They look for the one who caused their pain.”

“You?” I ask, suddenly understanding.

“Yes, me. Of course me. I am not afraid of anything earthly. But how do you fight or protect yourself and your family from something that appears, then disappears. An undead being who can attack you without you even knowing he’s there?”

Sarah asks, “Have you ever actually seen a ghost, Uncle Jack?”

His answer is immediate, “Yes. I have seen a ghost.”

“Where?” I ask.

“Where have I seen the ghost? Here. Right here.”

“In the workshop?” asks Sarah. She takes people too literally. No ghost would ever enter the workshop. Not with all the guns and ammunition Uncle Jack keeps here.

Jack sits back down on his stool. He rests one boot on the support and clasps his hands behind his head. “No. Never in any of the buildings. Always underwater. In and around *Merryweather*.” He wipes his forehead even in the coolness of the workshop.

“You mean you let us dive on a haunted ship?” I’m pulling his leg.

“Just a minute,” interrupts Helen. “I have never seen Jack’s ghost. And I have been his partner on every dive. Only Jack claims to have seen him. Whether or not our sunken ship is haunted is up for debate. I say no.” Helen stands. “And I think we should table this discussion for another time. It’s getting late and you two want to go diving. Would you mind picking up dinner while you’re down there?”

Sarah answers, “Sure, Aunt Helen. What do you want us to get?”

“How about a nice chubby lobster from the toilet bowls and a good sized halibut. They like to bury themselves in the sand next to *Merryweather*’s rudder.”

“Sure thing, Aunt Helen,” I promise.

Now that we’re certified Advanced Open Water Divers Sarah and I can dive by ourselves. So far, though, Jack has only let us out in our lagoon where it’s safe and no going inside *Merryweather* without him. He goes over our dive plan before we jump off the dock. Carrie and Dove lay on the lounges in the shade on the dock while we’re down. If we don’t surface when they think we should, Aunt Helen says they’ll start barking. The three times we’ve been out by ourselves, we ended up coming in early. The two dogs wagged their tails, then jumped into the lagoon and swam out to greet us.

We’re half way through our allotted bottom time. The lobster and halibut Helen asked for weighs down my game bag attached to my weight belt. The lobster was easy. Jack sank four old toilet bowls at 40 feet next to *Merryweather*’s stern. The curve of the porcelain drain is the perfect size for a lobster to make a home. All you have to do is reach in, grab him and yank him out. Then you flip him over on his back and shake him. He instantly goes limp and you put him in your game bag.

Now we’re hunting for the halibut. Sarah has the spear gun—actually just a fiberglass pole with a sharp, barbed prong on one end and surgical tubing to launch it from your hand like a slingshot. We find Mr. Halibut right where Helen said he’d be—lying in the sand near *Merryweather*’s rudder. His two black eyes poke out of the sand. Sara spears him in the head, dispatching him instantly, I put him in my game bag and we have our dinner.

Then something shiny catches my eye. It’s the corner of a box—about the size of a shoebox—sticking out from the sand. I point to it for Sarah to see. Straight lines don’t

occur naturally. This must be manmade. We both kneel on the sandy bottom. I sweep the sand off the top with my hand. Sarah digs the sides out using her diver's knife as a shovel. This is one old box. It has seen some wear, that's for sure. It's metal is all corroded and dented. I take out my dive knife to pry it off the bottom sand that's holding it fast. It's like a tug of war. I pull part of it out, but suction from the sea bottom yanks it back.

Then I see it. There's a flash out of the corner of my eye. The once clear water around us suddenly becomes cloudy and cold. Super cold. Usually our lagoon is at least 80 degrees. Right now, between me and the box in front of me, the water couldn't be more than 40 degrees. I shiver. And I can't lever my dive knife to break the suction of the sand holding the box in place. It's like something is holding it down, fighting me for it.

Sarah grabs the box too. Together we pry and twist and finally the box comes free. The cold cloud seems to move off the bottom and surrounds my upper back. Then I feel it.

The next breath I take is hard. I only get half the air I need. I know what an out of air emergency feels like. I grab my instrument console to check my air pressure. I still have 1400 pounds of air in my tank. But none of it is getting to me. I spit out my regulator, tap Sarah on her leg and make the slashing motion at my throat. Instantly she grabs her spare reg, presses the button to purge it of water and puts it in my mouth. I spit out what little air I have left in my lungs to make sure the reg is free of water, then suck in. Air. Cold, fresh air fills my lungs. I flash Sarah the okay sign and hold up my instrument console. I point to the air pressure gauge. I hold my hands palms up and shrug my shoulders, saying I have no clue what happened.

Sarah nods her head, then turns me around. I can feel her working on the knob that turns my air on and off. Then Sarah turns me back around so I'm facing her. She grabs my regulator now floating between us and presses the water purge button. A torrent of bubbles escapes from the mouthpiece. Now there's air flowing through just fine. She hands my regulator back to me. I try it and get the flow of air I'm used to. Emergency over.

The cloudy water surrounding us suddenly disappears and the water warms to its normal 80 degrees. Weird. Our allotted bottom time is gone. I grab the box and we surface, then swim to the dock. Our two canine companions jump into the lagoon and escort us to the swim ladder.

“Great lobster salad,” Jack compliments Aunt Helen and Sarah. In this house you compliment the chef if you want to keep eating. Uncle Jack is the master, “The lobster was grilled perfectly and you blanched the spinach and kale just the way the best French chefs do it.”

I speak up too, “You sautéed the halibut with rosemary and thyme, didn't you?”

Sarah nods between bites. Dinnertime here on the island with our favorite aunt and uncle is relaxing and fun. Not like at home.

“Thought so,” I say. “A really imaginative pairing.” I read about food pairing in Uncle Jack's copy of *Wine Spectator*. I figure I can't go wrong if it was in a magazine. Sarah's smile grows huge.

“Aunt Helen taught me how to combine the flour, breadcrumbs and herbs before I coated the fish with it. You really like it?”

Jack says, “Absolutely.”

I say, “It’s perfect.”

“What about Sarah’s broccoli casserole?” asks Helen.

This is tougher. Complete honesty is the rule here. I look across the table to Uncle Jack. He says, “Broccoli is something only the most seasoned chefs even attempt,” he begins. Everyone knows he’s BS-ing. “Cook it too long, it becomes limp. Not enough time or too low a temp and it’s too crunchy. The cheese and breadcrumbs were an insightful idea. I’d give it a solid B, but might raise it to a B+ since it was your first time. Brian?”

Oh, oh. Three sets of eyes fix on me. “I think Uncle Jack is a little too tough. I’d give it an A. Especially since broccoli completes the three green vegetables—”

Aunt Helen interrupts me. “What three green vegetables might those be, sweetie?”

In her own sweet way, Aunt Helen can drop the hammer when she wants. “Ah, the US Surgeon General’s office just released a study? Yeah, all Americans need to eat at least three green vegetables every day.” Who can argue with that?

“Is that so?” asks Sarah. “Well, since you give it an A and you cite the Surgeon General, I think you should have another helping. Hand me your plate, please.”

“Ah, no. No thank you, Sarah. I’m full—”

“Hand me your plate, Brian.” Sarah gloms another spoon full of limp broccoli casserole on my plate. The third rule at the dinner table is that everyone stays until the last person finishes.

Jack pours he and Aunt Helen another glass of wine. I guess he figures we might be here awhile. “How was your dive this afternoon?”

I look up from my plate at Sarah. Our eyes meet.

“It was a good dive, Uncle Jack,” she says while I still have my mouth full. “We planned our dive and dived our plan, just like you taught us. We found something.”

“Do we just stand here watching it?” asks Jack.

Helen says, “You two brought it to the surface. You do the honors.”

“Whatever it contained probably rotted away underwater centuries ago,” I say.

“Or it’s just full of sand from being buried on the bottom,” says Sarah.

The old metal box sits on the counter here in the outdoor kitchen on the dock.

“It’s sure beaten up and all dented,” I say.

Uncle Jack runs his hand over the rough surface, “From the pressure down there at sixty feet.”

“Can you open that padlock?” asks Helen.

“Huh. Sarah and I hadn’t paid much attention to it.”



Jack reaches over and flips on the lights. “Looks like you brought up a mystery. See the skull and crossed bones? This be a pirate’s strong box, Mattie argh, argh.”

“Or,” replies Helen, “it might be a prop from one of the movies they shoot around here.”

“Use these, but don’t damage the lock,” says Jack, handing me a pair of pliers.

I set the teeth of the pliers in a dishtowel to provide a barrier with the ancient lock. I gently pull. Nothing.

“Here,” says Jack. “I’ll hold the box. You pull. A little more force this time and give it a jerk.”

The lock suddenly comes apart. I pry open the lid with the screwdriver and putty knife we use to open scallops and look inside.

“It’s an animal skin,” I say.

Jack looks at the yellowed material, “That dates it. They preserved important documents by writing on animal skin—parchment—back in the 19th century.”

I reach into the box.

“Careful, sweetie, you don’t want it to fall apart in your hands when you lift it.” Aunt Helen hands me a spatula. “Use this to support all of its weight evenly, then put it on the towel.”

I carefully open the parchment at the folds.

“Pretty small for a book,” says Sarah.

“But perfect for a treasure map,” I say.



Helen points to a corner and says, “This might be the US Virgin Islands. The shape of this island could be St. Croix—our island. Then over here, this might be St. Thomas.”

Jack says, “What’s this writing?”

“Bartholomew,” I mutter. My heart pounds and my breath comes faster.

“What?” asks Helen.

“The box. It’s Bartholomew’s—Black Bart.”

Uncle Jack turns to me. “Something you want to tell me about your dive, Brian?”

“Hmmm, let me think.” Sarah smirks at my anxiety. “Ah, come to think of it there was a little something. Hardly worth mentioning.” Sarah rolls her eyes.

Helen says, “Oh?” Her suddenly flat voice has lost that pleasant, uplifting tone I remember so well. “And what might that be?”

“Aye,” says Jack in his pirate’s voice. “Out with it straightaway, laddie. Arg, arg.”

Uncle Jack speaks pretty good Pirate. But he has no idea how close he is to what happened to Sarah and I kneeling at *Merryweather*’s keel sixty feet down.

* * *

Chapter 7

“**Come now, laddie,**” continues Jack in that guttural pirate’s voice, “out with it boy. Argh, argh.”

Then Sarah blurts, “Brian had an out of air emergency.”

She just couldn’t hold it, could she. All eyes focus on me and stick there. Helen says, “What? You ran out of air? And you did not think it was important enough to tell us until now? Brian? Are you insane?”

Uncle Jack is less alarmed. “Well, Bri, you seem to be fine. What happened?”

“Ah, yes, Sir. I didn’t exactly run out of air. I had 1400 pounds of air left when suddenly I couldn’t draw a breath.” Then I turned and looked right into Aunt Helen’s beautiful blue eyes, “There was a time I might have panicked. But not anymore. I knew I was safe. I knew I could hold my breath for at least 30 seconds. I tapped Sarah and gave her the ol’ throat slash.”

Sarah breaks in, “From there we did everything perfect. I purged my spare reg and put it into Brian’s mouth. We sat there on the bottom just breathing and relaxing a bit. He showed me his air pressure gauge. There was still plenty of air in his tank. So I reached back for his air valve—”

“And?” asks Aunt Helen too quickly.

“It was turned off. Sarah turned back on my air. I felt my air hose fill again. Then I was breathing fine with my own regulator.”

Uncle Jack just sits there. He finally asks, “Did this happen before you found the box?”

“Sarah and I were trying to pry the box off the bottom. When we finally got it free, that’s when my air turned off.”

Uncle Jack nods his head. “What did you feel?”

“The water suddenly got really, really cold. It turned cloudy too. Inside the cloudy water is where it was so cold. Outside it was warm, normal.”

Jack asks, “Did the cloud of cold water move with you?”

“I was holding the box we had just pried loose and when I straightened up, the cloud came with me. Then it was all around me—front and back. Then my air turned off.”

Uncle Jack sits there, quiet. He looks at me, then at the map and the box. Finally, Helen says, “You have a theory, don’t you hon?”

“I do,” says Jack. “But before I go any further with it, I need an expert.” Jack lifts the landline telephone receiver off its cradle. He speaks briefly and hangs up. I swear Uncle Jack was using his pirate’s voice. “Bill will be over in a few minutes,” he says.

“Who is Bill?” Sarah asks.

Uncle Jack jerks his thumb across the lagoon at the house that shares Bartholomew’s Cove with us. “Dr. William Lama. Bill. After he got out of the navy, Bill went back to school—NYU, I think—and got his doctorate in Caribbean history. He’s now the foremost expert on the pirates who sailed these waters between 1700 and 1900.” Then Jack focuses those piercing green eyes on me, “You said earlier that you thought the box belonged to Bartholomew Roberts—Black Bart. Bill can tell us for sure.”

“**Avast me hearties,**” the voice comes from a Boston Whaler in the lagoon approaching our dock in the darkness. The engine cuts out and the little boat coasts into the dock. “Permission to come aboard, Captain,” growls the voice again.

“Granted,” calls Jack.

“Hi Bill,” Aunt Helen calls to him. “Watch your step when you land on the dock.” Helen is busy in the outdoor kitchen taking out plates, knives and forks. Then she reaches into the refrigerator and takes out a pie. All we ever get after dinner is fruit and nuts. Sometimes cheese. But never pie. Then she reaches into the freezer. “It’s passion fruit sherbet,” she says. “I made it yesterday while you all were running.”

Carrie and Dove both leap from the rugs they’re snoozing on and run down to the dock to greet the new arrival. He walks up to the kitchen with the dogs in tow and carrying a brown leather satchel.

“How are ya’, darlin’,” he asks Aunt Helen as he kisses both her cheeks.

“Glad to see you, Bill. Where’s Marie?”

“Aye, left her in the living room reading *God’s Banker*. Sends her apologies for not coming over, but she can’t seem to put that suspense-thriller down.”

Jack says, “Meet Sarah and Brian, our niece and nephew. Guys, say hello to Dr. William Lama.”

Sarah and I both stand and extend our hands. “Pleased to meet you, Sir,” we both say.

“Well, well. I see what Jack and Helen meant about your impeccable manners. But sir will never do. And please don’t call me doctor. I might think you’re students of mine. Bill will do just fine.”

We eat Helen’s pie and sherbet. After six weeks of not having anything but fruit for desert, this key lime pie is awesome. The first bite is sharp, a little bitter and sweet at the same time. The pie is cool from the refrigerator. I eat my piece slowly and in small pieces. I’m going to remember every bite. Who knows when I’ll see pie again?

“So,” begins Bill Lama, “what’s so important that you insist I come right over?”

“He’s back,” answers Jack.

A frown turns Bill’s mouth downward. “Back? When?”

“Late this afternoon. He attacked Brian at *Merryweather*’s stern in sixty feet of water.”

He turns to me and says, “You okay, Brian? You look fine. Tell me what happened and don’t skip anything.”

I spend the next fifteen minutes going over what happened this afternoon at *Merryweather*’s stern. Bill asks more questions than either Jack or Helen. He sure sounds like an expert.

“That’s some encounter,” says Bill after I finish. “I’ll see that box and the leather map now, please.”

He pulls on white cotton gloves and removes a magnifying glass from his satchel. He reaches under the bar and plugs the cord from the magnifying glass into the electrical outlet so its light shows on the map. We sit there, silent except for Bill’s mutterings to himself as he first examines the map, then the box.

“You got yourselves a genuine artifact,” says Bill, turning off the magnifying glass light and pulling off his cotton gloves. “I believe chemical analysis will show the parchment is from Bart’s era. I know right now that the silver smith’s stamp on the box came from a shop in London that was in business in the mid-1700s. I’ve seen it once before. That was when they found *Royal Fortune*, the wreck of Black Bart’s ship. That particular box contained \$2.2 million in diamonds.”

“Really?” asks Aunt Helen. Her voice says she doesn’t believe Bill. “So Brian and Sarah found a real pirate’s map? On their fourth solo dive? In our little lagoon? Bill Lama and Jack Schilling, you both are up to something. I know it. Speaking in those ridiculous pirate accents to one another. Don’t believe a word they’re saying, kids.”

But this is exciting. An adventure. “If I only found the box and map, then I’d be skeptical too. But—”

“But what, my young and naïve nephew?” asks Helen.

Sarah speaks up for me, “But that’s not all that happened. I was there too. I saw the cloud envelop us both. I felt the water turn suddenly cold. And there’s no doubt that Brian’s air was turned off for no reason.”

Jack says, “Oh there’s a reason. Sure as I’m sitting here, there’s a reason.”

“You’re scaring the kids,” says Helen.

“I’m not scared,” I quickly reply. “I’m really not.”

Bill Lama says, “Bartholomew Roberts was a pirate. That’s true. But he was also a manager and a charismatic leader. He died in the battle between his ship, *Royal Fortune*, and the British Royal Navy frigate, *Swallow*. Just imagine what Bart must have looked like leading his men. Bart’s battle dress was an ornately patterned red Waistcoat with knee-britches, black leather boots and a red feather in his hat. He wore a gold chain with a diamond pendent around his neck. And he was armed with a cutlass in one hand and two pistols that hung from a sling. He was a fearsome sight.”

“So? Do you think I met Black Bart’s ghost this afternoon?”

Bill looks at me for a few seconds. “I do, Brian. Bart, the pirate, was not one to give up his booty without a fight. He first tried to tear the box from your hands. That was probably the hard time you and Sarah had prying the box from the sand. What you thought was suction may have been the ghost of Bart himself holding onto his treasure map. Then when that didn’t work, he tried to scare you away with that cloud and the cold water inside it. Finally, when you still hung on to his box, he turned off your air.”

“He’s a crafty bastard,” says Jack.

Sarah asks, “How do you know? Have you met him?”

“Oh he’s met him,” answers Helen. “Just ask him about his encounter with Black Bart the pirate.”

My Uncle Jack who is just two feet away from me actually met a ghost. “What’d he do?” I ask. “What’d he say to you?”

Jack takes his time. I watch as he takes another forkful of key lime pie, slowly chews then swallows. The darkness of the night closes in on us. The moon and the stars are out. The dock lights and the lights in the outdoor kitchen are the only illumination around. The only sound is the sea gently lapping at the dock pilings and further away, the water slewing up on the sandy beach, then receding. When Jack speaks again, it’s in an eerie, low voice, “I’ve actually encountered Bart’s ghost twice. Both times it was on *Merryweather*. Both times it was around the stern. Right near where you both had your visit today.”

“Did he turn off your air like he did Brian’s?”

Hmmm. Up until now I wasn’t sure what happened to my air. Now all of a sudden, the ghost of a dead pirate turned it off?

“Not the first time,” begins Uncle Jack. “The first time was right after a hurricane hit this part of the Virgin Islands. Our little cove with the currents and the shape of our beaches traps some of the debris from these storms.”

“Then there’s Bartholomew’s Cove itself,” interrupts Bill. “I did the research. This cove has carried some form of Black Bart’s name since the mid-1700’s. This area was his base of operations for the last five years of his reign of terror on the high seas. Oh sure, Bart ventured way out—South America, the coast of Africa, Senegal. But he always came back here to rest and repair his ships. It was here in the Virgin Islands where he rested his crews and divided up the treasure they captured on their adventures.”

Jack takes up the story, “That day after the hurricane I was diving on *Merryweather*. I was fanning my hand back and forth along the sandy bottom near the rudder. It was early afternoon and the sun was high. The bottom was well lit. Suddenly I began seeing shiny objects in the seabed. Within maybe a three-foot area I gather up 23 pieces of eight; five, six ounce gold bars; and a silver bar. I stuff everything in my game bag.”

Here’s what the gold bars look like.”



“Suddenly the water around both me and the treasure area turned cold. Really cold. Then a current—the strongest current I’ve ever felt here in the cove—sweeps in. It knocks me hard against that rusty old rudder. Gave my shoulder a nasty cut that took 12 stitches to close. And it completely covered the hole I was digging.”

“Did you stop searching?” I ask, urgently waiting for him to continue the story.

“The current shifted some of the rusty equipment on *Merryweather*’s deck. A ten-foot piece of railing came loose and fell over the side 30 feet down right onto my leg. I was lucky that the sandy bottom cushioned the shock of the steel against my leg otherwise it would have been crushed. Then Bill swam up to me, saw that I was pinned and helped me lift it off.”

Sarah says, “So Black Bart’s ghost threw that railing over the side and onto your leg?”

Bill says in his guttural pirate’s voice, “Aye, lassie. That’s what we be thinkin’. Argh, argh.”

Jack says, “What else could it have been? I escaped with just a minor cut and \$150,000 in gold and silver. I believe it was a small part of what’s down there.”

Helen speaks up, “Let’s put this into prospective. These two geniuses think they just met the ghost of Bartholomew Roberts, the most notorious pirate who sailed these waters. So what do they do? They go right back down there to see what else they can find.”

I look at Jack, sitting there at the bar. He is tan. His chest and arms bulge with muscle. His bald head glistens under the ceiling lights of the outdoor kitchen. I don’t think he’s an idiot. I say, “I think you got lucky the first time. I’m not in any hurry to go back down there.”

Jack says, “I was scared. I’m not ashamed to admit it. The supernatural is something I cannot fight. If that was Bart’s ghost who attacked me, I sure didn’t see it. But I felt it—his cold breath, the current where no current ever was before and the railing that suddenly after all this time decided to come lose and fall on top of me.”

“But you went right back down again,” says Sarah.

“We both went back down again,” says Bill.

Jack adds, “I didn’t really want to go down to *Merryweather* again, but I certainly wanted to confront my fear and to get over it.”

“What happened, then on the second dive?” I ask.

“It was another warm, sunny St. Croix day. I clipped my game bag to my weight belt. Helen had given me a shopping list to bring back for dinner. So I had my spear with me. We were looking for halibut at the stern where they go to sun themselves—the same hunting you two were doing today. Within the first few minutes of reaching the bottom I speared a nice chubby one. At the time I wasn’t even looking for Bart’s treasure. But he didn’t know that. Suddenly a barracuda comes zooming for my head. How many barracuda have you seen around here?”

Both Sarah and I say at the same time, “None.”

“Right. None. *Nada*. But here comes this barracuda. They’re fast and have a mouth full of teeth. Before I can duck he’s on me. He bites my air hose right in two with those razor teeth. I grabbed my spear and ran him through. But my severed hose is bleeding air from my tank like there was no tomorrow. My safe second stage was of no use with a now dry tank.”

“Luckily I was within arms reach,” says Bill. “Once again I jumped into the breach to save Jack’s life.”

“What about getting the rest of Aunt Helen’s shopping list?” asks Sarah.

“Bill had plenty of air left for the both of us. I breathed off his spare regulator. I grabbed two claws and four legs off of two king crabs, then we high tailed it for the surface.”

“So you’re sure it was Black Bart whose ghost morphed itself into a barracuda?” I ask. I studied ghosts last year for my class project. I know that they can morph themselves into any animal body they want. Or, like Sarah and I saw this afternoon, they can just chuck the body and become a cold wind or a cloudy ocean current and envelop their victim.

Bill Lama says, “T’was Bart, for sure.”

“All right you two with your Pirate-speak and all,” says Aunt Helen. “So you have encountered the ghost of Black Bart, the most feared Pirate in the Caribbean. So what? My resourceful niece and nephew brought back his treasure map. That’s more than you got. *Their* map is sitting right in front of you. All you have to do is follow the map to his treasure.”

All of us, me, Sara, Uncle Jack and Bill Lama sit there and just stare at Aunt Helen.

“What?” Helen asks. She is surprised at suddenly being the center of attention. She shifts in her seat there at the bar in the outdoor kitchen on the dock overlooking our little lagoon that just yesterday had seemed so safe. But now it houses a ghost who is royally pissed off at all of us for stealing something he had stolen himself. And he wants it back. “What?” Helen asks again.

Bill starts, “The ghost of Black Bart is nothing to trifle with. So far four of us sitting here at this table have experienced his bad attitude toward intruders aiming to rob him.”

“Spare me the lecture on ghostly beings,” Aunt Helen interrupts “I don’t believe a word of it. Am I the only sane person at this table? Ghosts? Serious? Jack, you of all people, should know better. Telling our niece and nephew ghost stories? And you enlist your cohort here? Really Jack?”

“There is one thing that maybe you’re overlooking, Ma’am,” I say.

“Oh? And what might that be, *laddy*?” She’s mocking the existence of a supernatural being. Dumb. Very dumb. And risky.

“Well, there are four of us who have seen Black Bart’s ghost. He scared Sarah and me out of our minds—well me anyway.”

“Me too,” Sarah raises her right hand as if taking an oath of honesty.

Aunt Helen begins laughing and laughing—she has totally lost it. Uncle Jack has to catch her before she falls off her bar stool, giggling and laughing until tears roll from her blue eyes. Laughing is contagious.

Sarah catches Aunt Helen’s laughing attack first. Soon they are both laughing at the rest of us. Then Jack starts—he can’t help it. A minute later Bill breaks into uncontrollable laughter. The four of them are giggling like fools at the idea of the ghost of Black Bart. Right here in our little cove.

When there’s something people don’t understand or maybe they’re afraid, they build a defense. Laughing at Bart is their defense.

Not me. I remember feeling my lungs starving for air and sucking an empty air hose sixty feet under water. Not funny. Sitting there at the kitchen bar and watching them laugh, I remember that cloud of icy water throwing itself over Sarah and I like a suffocating blanket. Then feeling Bart’s real strength as I grabbed the metal box and struggled to pull it from the sand. I know it was Black Bart himself trying to pull it away from me.

Enough. I slam my hand flat onto the bar top. The empty plates and forks and the adult's coffee cups all jump and clatter. The laughing suddenly stops and all four of them—still with tears in their eyes—look at me.

Since we arrived, Uncle Jack and Aunt Helen drilled into us two mottos. We eat, drink and sleep them. The first is, *The only easy day was yesterday*. That one toughened us up. The second one is, *Ready to lead, ready to follow, never give up*. So far Sarah and I have both taken the lead on our chores, cooking and catching fish—stuff that didn't much matter. This matters. I'm stepping up.

"I know what to do," I say. "I know the way. Follow me."

Jack looks steadily at me. He's no longer grinning or smiling. "Okay," he says, "I trust you. I'm in. Show me the way."

"Me too," says Bill Lama. "Marie will just have to finish *God's Banker* without me."

Sarah says, "You're not doing anything without your partner. That would be me, argh, argh."

Helen says, "Am I missing something here? Did you four start speaking a new language when I wasn't listening?" She turns to me and says, "What is it you're going to do, Brian? Where is it you want us to follow you?"

Aunt Helen hasn't had the experience with Black Bart the rest of us have. She'll get it. Eventually. First she has to believe. I know something else: The deadliest contest has just begun. But what none of us know is that our enemy is not who we think.

* * *

Chapter 8

"**Nice job, Jack,**" says Helen as she pulls back the fluffy white summer comforter on her side of their bed. Then she pulls Jack's T-shirt—the one with US Navy stenciled in gold on the front—over her head, sets it on the bed-side table and climbs in beside her husband. She sinks into bed with a comfortable sigh after a long day.

"What do you mean?"

Helen turns on her side, facing her husband, "I mean how you concocted your legend of Black Bart the pirate." She chuckles as she squirms in up against Jack. "Planting that antique metal box with an animal skin treasure map inside. Then bringing Bill in for credibility. Priceless."

"Bill *is* an expert on Caribbean pirates," says Jack.

"That's what is so perfect about casting him. What I don't understand is how you managed to get Brian's air turned off this afternoon. Sara's in on it, right?"

Out the open window the full moon casts a silvery shine like a ribbon-straight road on the water as it leads straight into Bart's Cove. "Hon, the legend of Black Bart is historical fact. Neither Bill nor I are cast members and nobody planted the metal box that Brian and Sarah found this afternoon."

Helen lies there and says, "I checked on the kids. Right now Brian and Sarah are both sitting at the kitchen table mapping out how they're going to get Bart's treasure. Can you imagine?" But she is talking to an empty bed. Jack has already left for the kitchen.

“What might you be havin’ in mind there, laddy?” asks Jack in his guttural pirate’s voice.

I lay down my pencil. “Well, I’m thinking, what does Bart want?”

“He wants to kill us,” says Jack, “he’s tried twice already.”

“If he wanted us dead he’d have done it by now,” says Sarah. “Underwater is a dangerous place. He could have done it any number of ways.”

“Then what?” asks Jack.

We’re sitting under the soft light of the lamp hanging over the kitchen table. Sounds of splashes from the fish jumping in the lagoon come through the open window. A warm breeze comes in off the ocean. “Bart is just scaring us. He really wants us to just leave him alone. But now we have something that belongs to him—”

“The metal box with his treasure map,” says Jack.

“Exactly. And he wants it back. So let’s give it to him.”

“But don’t you want to find his treasure?”

“Brian thinks we can get Bart to help us find it if we ask politely—”

“The map may not be accurate,” I say. “Back then pirates were not map makers.”

“Cartographers,” corrects Jack.

“Right. Look here, Bart’s map only shows three islands out there and he didn’t name them.”

“He buried his treasure on three islands to spread his risk,” says Jack.

Sara says, “Yes, but there are other islands in this part of the Caribbean. We checked the naval charts. There’s St. Thomas and St. John, of course. Then there are Saba, Anguilla, St. Martin, St. Barts, St. Eustatius, St. Kits, Martinique, St. Lucia—”

“Got it,” says Jack. He scans the map again. “Bart’s three islands all could be about the same distance from our cove as any of the closer islands. We don’t know.”

“Right,” I say. “But we three know someone who does.”

“Black Bart. So we need him to interpret his own map?”

“Listen to my theory: Bart made this map for himself in case he forgot. He probably figured he would never forget which islands he used so he didn’t label them on the map. Once we find the correct islands, his notes of direction and distance from shore look pretty good. It’s just finding the right islands that’s the problem.”

Jack asks, “So how are you going to enlist the late Bartholomew Roberts’ help? What’s in it for him?”

“Brian and I thought we’d just ask him.”

“Sarah is right. What’s in it for him is a chance to spend his treasure.”

“He’s a ghost. How can he spend his treasure?”

“We’ll do it for him. We’ll take his share and spend it on something really good. He can’t use a fancy car or a boat or any earthly possession really. But maybe we’ll use his share to build a school or a hospital if we find enough of his loot. It’ll give him a new place to hang out.”

My Uncle Jack sits there staring at the map, then at both Sarah and me. For a long time no one speaks. The two dogs, Carrie and Dove, suddenly jump up from their dog beds. The knock makes all three of us jump. Then the back door creaks open. Both dogs stand there wagging their tails in greeting.

“I saw your light from across the cove,” says Bill Lama. “I was too agitated to sleep. Figured you were too. So I thought I’d come over. What’s up?”

I run through my idea of enlisting Bart’s help to find his treasure and what we might do with it once we find it.

Bill sits there listening. When we finish he asks, “How do you intend communicating with Bart?”

“Ah, we haven’t got that far.” Then I ask, “How do you talk to a pirate ghost?”

The air from my tank hisses into the air hose. I glance down at my dive watch—midnight. The full moon lights up the dock and the lagoon before us in a silvery glimmer. Still, it’s creepy. Uncle Jack turns on the underwater lights. Suddenly I can see the bottom stretch out into the lagoon. There is *Merryweather*, sitting upright and bathed in a white glow. All of her corals look like brightly colored overgrown decorations—orange, purple, red, blue. What must she look like from the air, all lit up at night? We are four divers doing a night dive to talk with a ghost.

Bill already has his tank and fins on. He’s sitting there on the edge of the dock, fins hanging over the side into the water and his mask resting on his forehead. “Here’s what we’re out to accomplish,” he says. “First, as young Brian said, we’re returning Bart’s metal box with his treasure map back to where we found it. Since Brian took it, he’s the one returning it.

“Then, we’re going to try communicating with Bart’s ghost. It may not work. Probably won’t. But we’re going to give it a try.

“I need you to believe, really believe that Bart’s ghost exists. Our intentions are pure—we’re returning something we should not have taken in the first place. Keep thinking that way. There must be kindness in your heart. We are here on a mission to help Bart’s ghost. Notice any cold or warm places when we’re down there on *Merryweather*. Let me know if you get tingles or prickles on the back of your neck. If you get scared or apprehensive, let me know that too. Above all, listen. It’ll be noisy down there with your bubbles and the fish making their sounds. But listen for anything out of the ordinary.”

“Like what?” Sarah asks.

Bill shrugs his shoulders. “Don’t know. I’ve never talked to a ghost before. If Bart is down there, he just may want to chat. Ready?”

Uncle Jack, Sarah and I all nod our heads. I reach behind Sarah’s tank and make sure her air is on. She does the same for me. I check my pressure gauge to be sure my tank is full to the max of 3,000 pounds. All three of us lean over the dock and just fall into the warm water, leaving Carrie and Dove laying on the dock watching us leave.

A night dive is much different than in the day. First, some of the fish are just hanging there in the water, asleep. Some—like the king crabs—are out walking around looking for something to eat. Bill takes the lead. I’ve made this trip enough times that I know some of the landmarks down here. Our swim takes just a few minutes. Soon *Merryweather* looms into view. She’s lit up from bow to stern with the underwater lights Uncle Jack installed. The old lady is a riot of color.

Merryweather’s rudder glows, buried in the sandy seabed beneath the glare of Uncle Jack’s underwater lights. It towers upward, rising up out of the light and into the darkness overhead. The only sounds are popping noises the fish make and the rush of air

from our tanks followed by the explosion of bubbles as we exhale. Uncle Jack, Bill, Sarah and I form a circle, kneeling in the soft sand near *Merryweather's* rudder. Sarah grabs Bill's hand on one side and mine on the other as if we're at a séance.

Imagine, midnight, sixty feet underwater. We've been waiting down here for fifty minutes already to *maybe* see the ghost of Black Bart, the pirate. My tank was full when I submerged—3,000 pounds of pressure. Now my air gauge shows 550 pounds of pressure—near where I should think about surfacing.

Then the current shoves me. Goose bumps rise on my arms and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. All of us look at one another.

Bill is the famous expert on the supernatural. He uses a grease pencil to write on the waterproof white board—about the size of an iPad—he brought down here for just this purpose:

“Don't move”

Then, “Welcome Capt. Roberts”

My air gauge now shows just 350 pounds of pressure left in my tank. Past time to surface. A few big breaths would exhaust my tank. If that happens I'll run out of air down here.

Another minute passes. I look again at my air gauge—well in the red, just 219 pounds now. My heart beats faster; breathing accelerates. Still, Bill told us not to move. And I'm not leaving without returning Black Bart's box and treasure map. He's plenty pissed off that I took it. The next visit he just might actually kill someone rather than just scare us. I try taking slow, shallow breaths. Impossible. I want a huge gulp of air. I can see Uncle Jack's air gauge beside me. He has over 1,000 pounds of pressure left. Plenty for us both. He's a more experience diver who doesn't over breathe getting excited. Unlike me.

Then it happens. At first it's just letters in the sandy bottom. If it really is Black Bart, he's staying invisible for now. Then entire words appear:

Why ye be botherin' me?

Bill writes: “Returning box & map”

Bart's earlier words suddenly sink into the sand. They're replaced with:

I be upset. The map be mine. The box too. Why'd ye take them?

“Didn't know”

Ye shouldn't take what don't belong to ye.

“Sorry”

If I didn't see this with my own two eyes I wouldn't have believed it. I set the old, dented metal box containing the treasure map in the center of our circle. The sandy bottom opens up, immediately swallows it without a trace.

No harm done, I guess. Hearty thanks for returnin' me property.

Little dots explode before my eyes from the shallow breaths. I slowly tap Uncle Jack's leg and hold up my air gauge for him to see. I don't want to spook the spook. Jack nods, then reaches into the pocket of his buoyancy compensator and hands me his spare safety regulator. Problem solved. I take my first deep breath in minutes and immediately feel better. I flash a quick OK sign to Jack. He nods. We keep kneeling there in the sand, unmoving.

"We want to help you"

And how might ye go about doin' that?

"Spend your treasure wisely"

That be mighty considerate. Meet up with ye on the dock.

Black Bart's ghost is amphibian? Of course he is. He's a ghost. What's this 250-year-old pirate ghost look like? Seems we're about to find out.

When we surface Jack whispers in my ear, "Good job on the air management, Brian. We were down a long time. That's why you ran low. Don't mention your little air problem to Helen. She'll gut both of us with the fish boning knife. We good?" Then Uncle Jack raises his hand up out of the water for me to shake, sealing our secret pact.

* * *

Chapter 9

We swim up to the dock. Jack is always first up on deck to help everyone else out of the water. We hand our tanks, weight belts and fins up to him then climb out onto the deck ourselves. Then I hear it—honest-to-god Pirate.

"Avast me hearties. I be'en waitin' for ye to arrive. Be'en playin' with yer fine animals here. They like fetchin' this here...this...thing," he says referring to Carrie and Dove's favorite frisbee.

Bart is completely dry. He's wearing a costume. Maroon velvet vest with a long-sleeved white shirt beneath. His black pants meet black leather boots below his knees. A red feather sticks out of his triangular hat. From beneath, scraggly black hair tumbles down his face. Then there's the beard. It's black and bushy. Like he never trims it. A

cutlass hangs from his belt. Two flintlock pistols hang from a sling around his neck—probably worth a fortune to an antique dealer..

He waives me over, “Aye, laddie, come sit yer self down. Sorry about turnin’ off yer air. No hard feelin’s eh, mate?” He slaps a meaty hand on my back.

Sarah says, “My partner knows how to handle an out of air emergency. No thanks to you, mister.”

“Aye, lassie, that he does. I was watchin’ close. I’d not have let it go too long before puttin’ his air back on.”

Bill Lama takes the stool opposite Bart. “We have much to discuss. So many questions. I don’t know where to start—”

“I always tell me men to start anywheres near the beginnin’ ‘til they figure out where the tale starts.”

Bill says, “Okay. I want to know about you being a ghost. Then about your days as the most feared pirate in the Caribbean.”

“Aye, I am a ghost and a pirate,” says Bart. “I’ve been a ghost a few hundred years longer than I was ever a pirate. S’pose we start there, laddie.”

All of us lean toward Bart.

“So there’s my family,” Helen says as she walks onto the dock. “I looked in every room of the house for you. Deserted. And now I find you out here at 2:00 a.m. talking to a homeless man?” She stops and looks at Bart. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you. Or is he an actor from a movie they’re shooting?”

Helen can see him? What’s changed?

Bart slides off of his stool, steps around the bar and bows. “Madam, I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

For a minute Helen just stands there taking in his velvet jacket, knee britches, cutlass and the two pistols. Not to mention the scraggly beard and long, ratty hair. “Is this Halloween? You’re on your way to a party, right?”

Bill steps in, “Helen, this is Captain Bartholomew Roberts—Black Bart—of the privateer ship *Royal Fortune*.”

“Madam, I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” he repeats. “Bartholomew Roberts, Admiral of the Leeward Islands, at your service.”

“Aren’t you guys pulling my leg? Jack’s encounter with the ghost of Black Bart that cost him twelve stitches? Then today, my favorite nephew getting his air turned off? This is the ghost of a pirate who caused all that?”

We all nod—even Bart.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Prove it.”

“Prove what, madam?”

“Do something that only a real pirate ghost could do.”

Bart’s bushy, black eyebrows rise in surprise. His left hand tugs at the unkempt beard as if deep in thought. Then he lifts his first finger to point toward the opening of our cove. Way out there in the dark a shower of silver sparkles falls into the sea where Bart is pointing.

“Oh my god,” says Sarah.